



**POPE FRANCIS ANNOUNCED A VIGIL OF PRAYER FOR PEACE IN SYRIA** and the Middle East during his Angelus message on September 1<sup>st</sup>. The Vigil took place in St. Peter's Square the following Saturday, September 7<sup>th</sup>. Because of the urgency of the cause and since we were only 1.5 hours away from Rome by train (near Orbetello, Italy), two other Bishops and I decided to travel to Rome to pray with the Holy Father – and with 300,000 other pilgrims.

The prayer was to begin at 7p.m. Pilgrims started gathering at 5p.m., even earlier -- young and old, families and members of Religious Communities, Priests, Bishops and Cardinals. The Square was packed and people filled the Via della Conciliazione. When the Pope calls people to pray, the faithful come – with the firm intention to pray fervently.

Pope Francis was greeted with applause. He walked to the altar with the Master of Ceremonies and greeted us with the familiar “Peace be with you!” The evening was all about peace. Alternating with the choir, we sang the *Veni Creator Spiritus*, a moving hymn which always signals that something important is going to happen under the direction of the Holy Spirit. The icon of Mary, Queen of Peace, *Salus populi Romani*, was carried in by four Swiss Guards. The familiar and popular Lourdes hymn, *Ave Maria*, was sung heartily – truly powerful. Then we settled in for profound prayer. We prayed the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary, interspersed with song, scripture readings and quiet time. “Queen of Peace, pray for us”, we prayed at the end of each mystery. We concluded the first hour by singing the *Salve Regina* and praying the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

**POPE FRANCIS THEN OFFERED A STIRRING REFLECTION** on the reason for this gathering. He invited us to “enter into God’s heart” in order to understand why God saw that creation “was good”.

“Our world, in the heart and mind of God, is the ‘house of harmony and peace’, and the space in which everyone is able to find their proper place and feel ‘at home’, because it is ‘good’.”

He explained that all of humanity, made in the likeness of God, is one family – all brothers and sisters.

He went on to show how we have broken this harmony and fallen into chaos – wherever there is war, violence, argument, conflict and fear.

He urged us to learn once again to walk and live in the ways of peace, with the help of Mary, Queen of Peace. With some emotion, he reminded us that violence and war are never the way to peace; that war marks the failure of peace. Using the words spoken by Pope Paul VI to the United Nations in 1965, he cried out: “*No more one against the other, no more, never! ... war never again, never again war!*”

He concluded by exhorting us to become men and women of reconciliation and peace. The applause of the gathered pilgrims signalled their accord!

The altar was prepared for Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament – including a large brazier of hot coals for incense. A Deacon carried in the Blessed Sacrament, inserted it into the Monstrance and our prayer continued. Long periods of silent personal prayer and adoration were interspersed with music, hymns, readings from Sacred Scripture, and reflections on peace from Popes Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. The entire four hours of prayer was concluded with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and the Pope’s now familiar wish for a good night’s rest. A final applause expressed the gratitude of those who gathered.

**TOMORROW, THE FAITHFUL IN CANADA ARE INVITED TO FAST AND PRAY** for peace in Syria and in the Middle East. We join our prayer to that of Pope Francis. Let us pray together, fervently.

Our Lady of the Annunciation, pray for us.

Ex corde, + *Douglas*, OMI