New Year’s Day and the traditional greetings we extend to one another on it look to the future and tend to do so with hope. More than most years, our hopes this year embrace some things which we would all like to see ended and others which we profoundly hope might be addressed.

From the perspective of the liturgy, today’s feast continues our Christmas celebration with its focus on Mary, the mother of Jesus, the mother of God.

This year marks the 55th World Day of Peace. Each year since Paul VI began the tradition in 1967, the pope has developed a theme related to the fostering and defending of peace and has issued a brief statement on it. The statement this year touches on three elements, “dialogue between generations, education, and labour.” He sees them as “paths for building lasting peace.”

The beginning of a new year provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the past, the present and the future. Although we come out of, and are profoundly influenced by, the past, we live in the present with our eyes turned toward the future. If we are to make our future what we want and know that it should be, we have to be honest in our analysis of both the past and the present.

The pope begins his reflections by looking briefly at our recent past and at the challenges that have been so much a part of it. “Despite numerous efforts aimed at constructive dialogue between nations,” he says, “the deafening noise of war and conflict is intensifying.” He goes on to speak of the continuing spread of the pandemic, the effects of climate change and environmental degradation, the tragedy of widespread hunger, and an economic model based on individualism rather than solidary sharing.

Since the beginning of his pontificate Pope Francis has emphasized the importance of dialogue in the church and beyond it, dialogue among individuals, groups, politicians and nations. Today he calls for dialogue between generations in all these areas. “All honest dialogue,” he says, “demands basic trust. We need to learn how to regain this mutual trust.”

Applying this to the generational divide that technological and other developments have tended to reinforce, he calls for a renewed effort to build a bridge of trust and mutual respect between the old and the young. “Young people,” he says, “need the wisdom and the experience of the elderly, while those who are older need the support, affection, creativity and dynamism of the young.”

Education at every level, from grade school to the university and beyond, is crucial for our well being and that of society. Educated men and women, especially those who have recognized and rejected extreme individualism and have learned to combine their technical and scientific knowledge with what the pope calls “a culture of care” are needed more than ever. He describes education of this kind as “a factor of freedom, responsibility and development.”

The pope briefly evokes the central place in our contemporary world of labour and of the economy. “Labour,” he says, “is an indispensable factor in building and keeping peace.” In this area, the pandemic has created challenges for many people world wide.

In today’s gospel, the shepherds have come to Bethlehem in response to the message of the angel. “I am bringing you good news of great joy,” he said. “To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Mary, we are told, “treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” In doing this, she has become a model for us. Like her, we need to ponder things in our hearts, to come back regularly to them, to reflect, for example, on the way we live, the nature of our hopes, the quality of our love, where we stand in regard to our responsibilities for family and for the broader community. We have much to ponder, to think about, and to relate to our deepest moral and religious convictions and values.

The final words of the Pope’s statement are addressed to “all men and women of good will.” “Let us walk together with courage and creativity on the path of intergenerational dialogue, education, and work,” he says. “May more and more men and women strive daily, with quiet humility and courage, to be artisans of peace. And may they be ever inspired and accompanied by the blessings of the God of peace.”