



CHRISTMAS AT GRECCIO (Bodo) 1223

Someone to love, someone to care for. It was that thought which gripped his heart at Greccio that Christmas he had decided to celebrate the Birth of Jesus in a new way. He had brought a real ox and ass to the altar so that they, too, could share in this rebirth of Christ in the bread and wine of the Christmas Eucharist.

At Christmas it was the infant Christ who was born again in human hearts, and it struck Francis that God came to earth as a baby so that we would have someone to care for. Christmas was the dearest of feasts because it meant that God was now one of us. Flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, this child we could approach without fear. We could be silly and uninhibited as we sought to make Him laugh. We could be totally ourselves because a child accepts us just as we are and screams with delight at our little performances in his or her behalf. Someone to care for, someone to try to please, someone to love. God, a helpless babe; God, a piece of Bread. How much trust God had in creatures! In the Eucharist and in the Nativity, we grow up because God places Himself in our care. We come out of ourselves if we are aware because we now have responsibilities for God. Not only the earth to till and creation to care for, but now God to care for.

And so strong was Francis' desire to love, that at that Christmas Mass at Greccio the babe of Bethlehem appeared to him alive and smiling on the cold rock. And he took the babe into his arms and held it to his heart, and the child was warm and soft. Francis' virginity was made fruitful in this child he held to his breast. He had no child but Jesus Himself. His Lord had reversed the roles for him and for all who need someone to love, someone to care for.

The peasants at that Mass had witnessed Francis' fatherhood, and the child became theirs as well. They had brought torches for their midnight journey from the village on the hill opposite the brothers' hermitage. But they did not need them for the journey home that night, so brightly did their own hearts burn that God had truly been enfleshed in the baby at the altar. Francis was so happy for them. These simple folk from Greccio were like children themselves, and God had once again been revealed to little ones.

Someone to love. That was Greccio; that was Christmas. He prayed for all the lonely people of the world that they would understand what God's enfleshment meant to them personally. God was like us now in everything but sin. And He let Himself be touched and handled by everyone who would come to Him. Someone to care for, someone to touch. That was Greccio; that was God become a man.

Francis left Greccio that year with a new heart, for the brothers would keep alive the custom of celebrating Christmas in that fashion. And the people of Greccio would spread the word to the next village, and from there it would cover the whole of Italy and maybe the world. Someday, perhaps, all people could look into the altar crèche at Christmas and know they had someone special to love, someone divine to care for. And they would begin anew to love.

[Bodo OFM, Murray (2011-07-20). Francis: The Journey and the Dream (Kindle Locations 1402-1428). St. Anthony Messenger Press. Kindle Edition.]