

Christmas at Greccio

The Incarnation, Greccio, and St. Francis (Bret Thoman, O.F.S.)



“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:1-7)

In 1223, just three years before he died, St. Francis recreated the nativity of Jesus in Greccio, a small village in the Rieti valley in the same region as Rome. With the assistance of a local nobleman named John, they assembled some animals including an ox and donkey, a young couple with a newborn baby, and some hay in a cave on a cliff about one mile from the town of Greccio. Francis, as a deacon, sang and preached to the people and to the brothers gathered there about the humility, poverty, and simplicity of God who came in the form of a babe. No one had ever done this before. He began a tradition called the crèche, which name comes from the town of Greccio through the French.

Francis’s desire was to reflect on and re-live the historical, concrete, human dimensions of the life of Christ – in this case his birth. Through the nativity scene, Francis created the possibility of entering into the place. Through the presence of the characters – Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the Magi, and the Christ-child himself – together with the animals, the hay, the manger, Francis enhanced the possibility of entering into the mystery of the Incarnation.

Today, we have many more opportunities to experience the Gospel stories; for example, through hearing the Scriptures in our own language, movies, paintings, pictures, etc. But in Francis’s day, religion tended to be loftier; earlier medieval liturgies were often difficult for laypersons to understand, as they were in Latin and preaching more theological.

Let's listen to the story from Thomas of Celano. "The Manger he made in Celebration of the Lord's Birthday" by Thomas of Celano: His highest aim, foremost desire, and greatest intention was to pay heed to the holy gospel in all things and through all things, to follow the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and to retrace His footsteps completely with all vigilance and all zeal, all the desire of his soul and all the fervor of his heart.

Francis used to recall with regular meditation the words of Christ and recollect His deeds with most attentive perception. Indeed, so thoroughly did the humility of the Incarnation and the charity of the Passion occupy his memory that he scarcely wanted to think of anything else.

We should note then, as matter worthy of memory and something to be recalled with reverence, what he did, three years prior to his death, at the town of Greccio, on the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ. There was a certain man in that area named John who had a good reputation but an even better manner of life. Blessed Francis loved him with special affection, since, despite being a noble in the land and very honored in human society, he had trampled the nobility of the flesh under his feet and pursued instead the nobility of the spirit. As usual, blessed Francis had John summoned to him some fifteen days prior to the birthday of the Lord. "If you desire to celebrate the coming feast of the Lord together at Greccio," he said to him, "hurry before me and carefully make ready the things I tell you. For I wish to enact the memory of that babe who was born in Bethlehem: to see as much as is possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, and how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he rested on hay." Once the good and faithful man had heard Francis's words, he ran quickly and prepared in that place all the things that the holy man had requested.

Finally, the day of joy has drawn near, the time of exultation has come. From many different places the brethren have been called. As they could, the men and women of that land with exultant hearts prepare candles and torches to light up that night whose shining star has enlightened every day and year. Finally, the holy man of God comes and, finding all things prepared, he saw them and was glad. Indeed, the manger is prepared, the hay is carried in, and the ox and the ass are led to the spot. There simplicity is given a place of honor, poverty is exalted, humility is commended, and out of Greccio is made a new Bethlehem.

The night is lit up like day, delighting both man and beast. The people arrive, ecstatic at this new mystery of new joy. The forest amplifies the cries and the boulders echo back the joyful crowd. The brothers sing, giving God due praise, and the whole night abounds with jubilation. The holy man of God stands before the manger, filled with heartfelt sighs, contrite in his piety, and overcome with wondrous joy. Over the manger the solemnities of the Mass are celebrated and the priest enjoys a new consolation.

The holy man of God is dressed in the vestments of the Levites, since he was a Levite [i.e. deacon], and with full voice sings the holy gospel. Here is his voice: a powerful voice, a pleasant voice, a clear voice, a musical voice, inviting all to the highest of gifts. Then he preaches to the people standing around him and pours forth sweet honey about the birth of the poor King and the poor city of Bethlehem. Moreover, burning with excessive love, he often calls Christ the "babe from Bethlehem" whenever he means to call Him Jesus.

Saying the word “Bethlehem” in the manner of a bleating sheep, he fills his whole mouth with sound but even more with sweet affection. He seems to lick his lips whenever he uses the expressions “Jesus” or “babe from Bethlehem,” tasting the word on his happy palate and savoring the sweetness of the word. The gifts of the Almighty are multiplied there and a virtuous man sees a wondrous vision. For the man saw a little child lying lifeless in the manger and he saw the holy man of God approach the child and waken him from a deep sleep. Nor is this vision unfitting, since in the hearts of many the child Jesus has been given over to oblivion. Now he is awakened and impressed on their loving memory by His own grace through His holy servant Francis. At length, the night’s solemnities draw to a close and everyone went home with joy.

The hay placed in the manger there was preserved afterwards so that, through it, the Lord might restore to health the pack animals and the other animals there, as He multiplied his holy mercy. It came to pass in the surrounding area that many of the animals, suffering from various diseases, were freed from their illnesses when they ate some of this hay. What is more, women who had been suffering with long and hard labor had an easy delivery after they placed some of this hay upon themselves. Finally, an entire group of people of both sexes obtained much-desired relief from an assortment of afflictions.

At last, the site of the manger was consecrated as a temple of the Lord. In honor of the most blessed father Francis, an altar was constructed over the manger, and a church was dedicated. This was done so that where animals once at the fodder of the hay, there humans henceforth for healing of body and soul would eat the flesh of the immaculate and spotless lamb, our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us with supreme and indescribable love, who lives and rules with the Father and the Holy Spirit as God, eternally glorious forever and ever. Amen. Alleluia, Alleluia.

So, what is the message of the Incarnation and Greccio? God has appeared – he has revealed himself. Previously, God had revealed himself to mankind only partially. “In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe” (Heb 1:1-2). In this, something new has happened: God has appeared and has revealed himself. He has emerged from the inaccessible light and has come into the world. He is no longer merely an idea, a hoped for promise, an article of faith; now he has appeared.

But how has he appeared? In what form did he appear? Who is this Christ child? “The kindness and love of God our Savior for mankind were revealed” (Tit 3:4). This was the real “epiphany,” that God appeared to us as kindness and love. In the Christ child, God is not a wrathful executioner of justice, nor is he an angry judge; rather, he is “kindness and love.” We recall the prophecies of Isaiah: “For a child is born to us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful” (Is 9:5f). This is the only text in the Old Testament that prophesies the coming of a child, which tradition has assigned to be the Christ child. The prophet describes how the Child will be: “Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.” Here, a child, in all its weakness, neediness, and dependence is the Mighty God, the Eternal Father. His peace “is forever.”

God has appeared as a child born in a stable in Bethlehem, not in the palaces of kings. This is the “epiphany” – the manifestation of God. The person that God assumes is a child; and this is striking in that it shows us who God is.

Saint Francis was very devoted to the Nativity of Christ and Christmas. He called Christmas “the feast of feasts,” the feast above all other feasts – and he celebrated it with “unutterable devotion” (2 Celano 199). He kissed images of the Christ-child with great devotion and he stammered tender words such as children say, according to Thomas of Celano (ibid.). For the early Church, the feast of feasts was Easter – since Christ saved mankind from sin through the Resurrection. Francis neither changed nor intended to change this order of precedence among the feasts, centered on the Paschal Mystery; in fact, the Resurrection presupposes the Incarnation. And yet, through Francis and the character of his faith, something new took place: Francis discovered Jesus’ humanity in an entirely new depth.

This human existence of God was most obvious to Francis at the moment when God’s Son, born of the Virgin Mary, was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. For God’s Son to take the form of a child, a truly human child, made a profound impression on the heart of the Saint of Assisi, transforming faith into love. In the child born in the stable at Bethlehem, we can as it were touch and caress God.

In this new experience of the reality of Jesus’ humanity, the great mystery of faith is revealed. Francis loved the child Jesus, because for him it was in this childish estate that God’s humility shone forth. God became poor. His Son was born in the poverty of the stable. In the child Jesus, God made himself dependent, in need of human love, he put himself in the position of asking for human love – our love. Today Christmas is often over-commercialized; its bright lights hide the mystery of God’s humility, which in turn calls us to humility and simplicity.

Questions to Consider:

1. Why was Francis so devoted to the crib? To the Christ child?
2. When you think of God, what does he look like? Is he the “mighty conqueror” or the humble, needy child? Or is he both?

Faith challenge: Now spend some time meditating and reflecting on the mystery of the Incarnation. St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order and writer of the great “Spiritual Exercises” described meditating on historical events. Find some time and a place to be quiet. Read slowly from the beginning of the Gospel of Luke and/or Matthew describing the birth of Christ. Now close your eyes and meditate on the event. Imagine yourself in the scene. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? What do you feel?

Spend 30-45 minutes with the Christ child each day during the Christmas Season.

[Compiled by Deacon Dave & Thérèse Ream, O.F.S., Revised July 2017]