

“AND THEY LAID HIM IN A MANGER”: LESSONS FROM THE SCHOOL OF THE CRIB

Nestled in the **Appenine** mountains sixty miles from Rome and home to 1500 souls today, may be found **Greccio**, the village in which the drama of Christmas was **portrayed** in a new way for the first time. In 1223, three years before his death, a humble friar from Assisi named **Francesco** had an idea. The story is preserved by Francis’ biographer, Brother Thomas of Celano, who relates that Francis instructed a dear friend, Giovanni: “If you desire that we should celebrate this year’s Christmas together at Greccio, go quickly and prepare what I tell you; for I want to **enact the memory** of the infant who was born at Bethlehem, and how He was deprived of all the comforts babies enjoy; how He was bedded in the manger on hay, between an ass and an ox. For once I want to see all this with **my own eyes.**” (Thomas of Celano, *First Life* 84-85)

Francis desired to call to mind the birth of the Christ Child on Christmas night, to have “set before our bodily eyes in some way the inconveniences of his infant needs, how he lay in manger, how, with an ox and donkey standing by, he lay upon the hay where he had been placed.” Our English word “manger” comes from the Latin *praesepe* and was little more than the trough where animal feed was placed. Saint Augustine played off this symbolism, seeing **Eucharistic overtones**. He exhorted in one Christmas homily: “Let us understand; let us draw near to the manger; let us eat of this food.” (Sermon 190, 3). In another (189,4) he states even more clearly, “placed in a manger, he was **made** our food.” (in praesepe positus, cibaria nostra **factus est.**) The creedal comparison (et homo factus est—“and **became man**”) is evident, the symbolism both stark and rich.

In 2019, Pope Francis issued the Apostolic Letter “Admirabile Signum,” wherein he discussed the meaning and importance of the Nativity scene. He paid due homage to St. Francis, as documented in the historical sources. On 29 November 1223, Saint Francis had received papal approval of his Rule. It was most likely on his return journey from Rome that Saint Francis had visited Greccio. The **caves** of Greccio reminded him of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, specifically Bethlehem. This may have been the genesis of the idea. If there is any Christmas tradition more **universally endearing** to young and old alike than the Nativity Creche, I would be hard pressed to name it. Brother Thomas of Celano further recalled that Francis stood before the manger, **overwhelmed with love** and filled with a wonderful happiness. “Finally, the day of joy has drawn near...” adding, “In its simplicity, poverty and humility Greccio was a new Bethlehem.”

We all equally **hurry** to see the Crib, to kneel, to pray and offer homage to the Christ Child, and gaze at the magnificent scene of peace and joy. Even at my age, after first seeing the Holy Family, I still gaze at all the **animals** before turning my attention to the three Kings or shepherds! It is well documented that stained glass windows and frescoes served the **dual** purposes of **decoration and education** in medieval Cathedrals. To a largely illiterate populace, priests could explain the mysteries of the faith while the people gazed upon the images. Pope Francis went beyond merely recommending that Nativity cribs be placed in homes; he also referred positively to “the custom of setting it up in the workplace, in schools, hospitals, prisons and town squares.” Such public displays have engendered **strong opposition** from some groups in the U.S., with endless legal battles having ensued.

For Francis, the simple celebration was meant to recall the **hardships** Jesus suffered even as an infant, a savior who **chose** to become **poor** for our sake. Five years later, the friars built a chapel there. Later a monastery would follow, perched precipitously in the side of the mountain. St. Francis surely did not envision this as a **quaint display** for children. He did this as a reminder to

himself and others of the stark humility, poverty and simplicity of the birth of the Christ Child. And the Nativity crib has certainly withstood the test of time. A decade before the above-mentioned letter, **Pope Benedict XVI** employed a most helpful image when speaking to the children in St. Peter's Square who had come with their Nativity figurines for blessing, noting that "the crib is a school of life where we can learn the secret of true joy." (13 December 2009). Indeed, it is a school in this best sense of learning the deepest mysteries of our faith.

It is more eloquent than even the most **meticulously** prepared homily, it is more profound than the most sonorous motet ever sung by a choir, and more eagerly anticipated than even the largest **gift-wrapped** present under the tree. Why is this? The crib represents the birth of our very salvation, the source of our life and joy, our reconciliation and peace. I urge all members of our parish to make a **special effort** to honor the Christ-child by means of a visit to our beautiful Manger scene in front of the altar of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Or **drive by** the outdoor creche on John Ireland Blvd.! May these **special days** of Christmas bring about true and lasting peace and joy in your hearts, in your families and indeed the whole world. Blessed Christmas and Feast of the Holy Family to all.

- **BOGO!** Today's bulletin is "two for the price of one." The liturgy guide for Sunday's Feast of the Holy Family may be found on page 7. Make note the **times** for Masses/confessions in the days ahead; they are **slightly different** than usual, given that Christmas and New year's fall on a Saturday. While January 1 is not a holyday of obligation in 2022, it remains a special solemnity.
- It's hard to fathom, but 40 years have passed since, in response to the Solidarity Movement, the **Polish communist** government declared martial law in December 1981. I was a freshman in college, just entering the seminary. That declaration resulted in the death of 100 people and the **imprisonment of 11,000** opposition activists. Contact with the West was effectively cut off for the better part of a decade. The role of St. John Paul II in the fall of Polish communism was significant.
- **Our Lady of Resilience!** Following the recent tornadoes in nine states, **Resurrection** Catholic Church in Dawson Springs, KY was a **total loss**. And yet, the outdoor bronze statue of Mary and the infant Jesus was spared. The bulk of the damage occurred within the Diocese of Owensboro in western Kentucky. Pope Francis even mentioned Kentucky by name in his Angelus Address of December 12, praying for all the victims of the horrific tornadoes.
- A Bloomberg News summary of **census data** shows that "the share of the U.S.'s 130 million households headed by **married parents** with children under age 18 fell to **17.8%** in 2021 from 18.6% last year." "That's **down** from more than **40% in 1970**...By absolute numbers, there are just 23.1 million homes with nuclear families, the fewest since 1959." Holy Family, pray for us!
- Your response to our year-end **Christmas Appeal** has been most heartening. If you still desire to make a gift, please make sure that the gift is dated by **December 31** for the purposes of your charitable contributions for 2021.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector