

Story of the Christmas Creche

Have you ever seen a Christmas creche? Perhaps your family displays a Christmas nativity scene featuring the baby Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem each year. Do you know where this custom came from?

800 years ago, a little town was tormented with violence and power struggles. This little town was Assisi. Assisi was a violent place: there was violence through class struggles in Assisi itself, wars with a rival town, wars with Islam in the form of the Crusades. Travel was dangerous.

But despite the violence, there was also a hunger to follow Jesus Christ, not necessarily by living in a monastery but in day-to-day life in the real world. This was the radical life that Francis of Assisi had chosen after his conversion.

Like most Catholics, Francis was a lay person and received no formal training in philosophy or theology. For Francis, the relationship between God and humanity was holistic, involving not just the soul, but one's entire being. Francis understood the world in very concretely and really wanted to 'follow the teaching and footprints of Jesus Christ concretely, too.' In his life, he and his fellow friars did this by living in community, in voluntary poverty, chastity, and obedience. The friars ministered to people with leprosy and the poor. During a Crusade, Francis journeyed to the Holy Land to reach out the people of Islam in peace. Francis wanted to live the gospel life 'without gloss'.

Francis and his fellow friars were active in the world, but also contemplative. They frequently went on 'retreats' in isolated hermitages. In 1223, Francis had spent several weeks in prayer at the hermitage outside the beautiful village of Greccio, spiritually preparing for Christmas.

As Christmas of 1223 approached, Francis organized a living nativity scene with the help of the people of Greccio. Francis wanted to show the people in a very concrete and real way how Jesus actually entered into our everyday world with real people and real animals enacting all the roles of the first Christmas in faraway Bethlehem.

Francis wanted to demonstrate the *reality* of Jesus's birth. That reality was that not everything went perfectly, just like in our experience. The Inns were full, and Mary and Joseph had to figure something out. A kind innkeeper let them use his stable, a place for animals – that Joseph likely had to clean up and prepare for Mary's privacy and wellbeing. Greccio, with a climate similar to Bethlehem and even San Diego, would have been chilly at night. Did Joseph make a fire for his bride and soon-to-be newborn? Mary did not have other women of her extended family or village to help her with the birth. Mary and Joseph had to deal with what it means to be new parents. There were no angels there to change the diapers.

Francis, in creating his Nativity re-enactment in Greccio, communicated the humility of Jesus. Jesus was 'like us in all things but sin'. This was not a formal sermon or something out of a book. By using real animals and real people, the people were moved by the Holy Spirit to encounter Jesus in his humanity. That year, in 1223, the community of Greccio gathered to celebrate the Incarnation at Christmas midnight Mass while *enacting* the Jesus' birth at the first Christmas.

It was a night of human reality and such joy! So many people were involved with the Nativity celebration, carrying their torches that evening to the live Nativity scene enactment, that Greccio became a light in the darkness with 'torches and candles to light up that night.' It was a message of love,

of Jesus being born into the world. People received this message in their hearts, and it has resonated in people's hearts for 800 years.

Francis' biographer, Thomas of Celano, tells the story of how lovingly Francis preached that night. Unlike most medieval preaching which tended to be rather harsh, Francis spoke so tenderly that his 'mouth was filled more with sweet affection than with words.' Francis stood by the manger, overcome with love, and filled with a wonderful happiness.

In creating the scene of the Nativity at Greccio, Francis created something new. Bethlehem was no longer just a faraway location reached by traveling through dangerous lands. Francis allowed Jesus's ordinary birth to become a sacred place in the human heart. Bethlehem that night was in Greccio. Bethlehem can be wherever we set up a Nativity scene and recall the beautiful humility of God becoming one with humanity in the form of a little baby.

In that time of violence, war, and darkness – Francis showed the Light of Christ to all those assembled. Francis had used this beautiful Christmas scene to light not only that night, but to share the experience and understanding the Light that Christ brought to the world.

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