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**The Feast of Feasts**  
*Greccio*



Christmas was Francis' favorite feast. It was for him the Feast of Feasts, and he wanted to celebrate it in a special way. Why? Because the all Good God chose to be born in human flesh. Because the Word was conceived in the womb of the Virgin. Because our all Good God was born each day in the eucharistic bread of the altar. But most of all because of God's *great love*, revealed to us in the Incarnation. For Francis the way this love was being celebrated at Christmas fell short. He felt that the traditional liturgical celebration of the time failed to awaken and touch hearts.

So what did Francis do? It was December of 1223. Francis had recently returned from Rome where Pope Honorius III approved his Rule of Life, November 29, 1223. Celano and Bonaventure described what happened and the preparation that took place about fifteen days before the feast of Christmas near the little village of Greccio in the Rieti Valley. This is Celano's account:

We should note then, as a 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* and an even better manner of life. Blessed Francis loved him with special affection....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' words, he ran quickly and prepared in that place all the things that the holy man had requested.<sup>1</sup>

In this dramatic reenactment of the events of Bethlehem, Francis wished to recall the simplicity and poverty, the inconveniences and humility of the Christ Child's birth.

Most of all he wanted to celebrate the mystery of God's great love, a love that God made concrete in a little child wrapped in swaddling clothes, a love that had the power to remake the world, a love that invited one to become a new creature, a love that invited people to believe in the impossible, a love that asked all to forget their sin and darkness and trust God's goodness. This love was reenacted by Francis through the visual picture of Bethlehem placed before the eyes of the people in Greccio's cave.

One of Francis' and the friars' greatest difficulties with the renewing of the church was that the people they were addressing were already Christians. The people knew the basic stories and teaching, as we do. They had seen other visual images of the nativity. But their hearts needed to be reached again. How does one preach the Word of God to those who think that they already understand it? How does one listen and feel as if though one were hearing and witnessing the stories of the Gospels for a first time? How did Francis reach people with a message they have heard again and again? He decided to concretize God's great love through a visual picture of Bethlehem, placing it before the eyes of the people.

At Midnight Mass, Francis used words in his sermon, but he also made the Incarnation real and immediate through props: an ox, an ass, a manger, a cave, singing and the warmth of love. The setting helped people not only celebrate an event that happened twelve hundred years before, but it also helped to open their hearts to God's love and the coming of Christ into them again. Greccio was made, as it were, a new Bethlehem.

Bonaventure says,

Francis' example,  
 when considered by the world,  
 is capable of arousing  
 the hearts of those who are sluggish in the faith of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

The faith had grown cold. Celano describes a vision of John of Velita, "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."<sup>3</sup>

Francis also had an altar placed over the manger because he wanted to show the connection between the coming of Jesus in the flesh in the manger and the sacramental coming of Jesus on the eucharistic altar. A lifeless baby appeared in the manger and when Francis reached down to pick it up, the baby came alive in the arms of Francis. This was symbolic of Christ coming to life in the hands of the priest at the altar. Scholars point out that this is a most appropriate interpretation for the event that happened at Greccio: the manifestation of the human birth of Jesus in the manger and his sacramental birth each day upon the altar.

Francis' focus on Christmas as the Feast of Feasts and the manifestation of God's love gave birth to a new understanding of the Incarnation. Most of us have learned that God sent his Son to be born as one like us to make right the first sin of Adam and Eve. So without sin there would have been no need for the Incarnation. Because of Francis, the Franciscans have developed an alternate interpretation. God's plan for having his Son become one like us

was part of God's original design for all creation from the very beginning. It was not an afterthought on God's part, something God decided to do to make up for original sin and human sinfulness. God longed for all eternity to become human, and God's Son accomplished that through his birth at Bethlehem. The Incarnation of the Son of God is the means by which God shares most fully his life and love for humanity, and the means by which human beings can share in divine life.

This can dramatically alter our image of God and the way we celebrate Christmas.

We learn from the great Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus that the whole purpose of creation on God's part was to come to a point in time for the Incarnation of God's Son to take place as the most resplendent creative act of God. When God decided to create, the Incarnation had to be first and foremost in God's mind, and not dependent on any action of humans, especially sin. This was a natural outflow of love, and God, above all, wished to communicate to us the fullness of divine love. What better way than to send the Son.

This image helps us to appreciate the depth and beauty of our humanness. Our human nature is good. This also gives us a new and transformed image of God, not as someone who is vindictive and waiting to punish us for sin or someone who is constrained to react to our manipulations. The God we see in this image is a God of such overflowing love that it spills over into all of creation and into our hearts.

Francis obviously did not express these truths in his own words. The Greccio event, however, provided the impetus for a refreshing new way to understand the Incarnation. Francis intuited this majestic truth because he was so convinced of it through his

experience of God's overwhelming love. There was no better moment of the year than Christmas to celebrate that love. And so Greccio happened.

The crib scene responded perfectly to the need humanity always has, and that the Middle Ages had with a particular intensity, namely to see visibly that which they believe. Francis undoubtedly gave new impetus to devotion to the humanity of Christ and impetus to devotion to the place of the Christmas crèche. It was the humility, simplicity and purity of the faith of Francis that made Greccio the prototype of the crib as we know it. To attribute the invention of the crib to Francis does not square away with history as archival documents portray. The merit of Francis has not been in inventing a Christmas setting that all can reproduce, but in having shown to all the kind of heart one must have to welcome the Child Jesus and thereby welcome God's great and tender love. God became a child, that we might have someone to love. Francis reenacted the Christmas story so that, again, the hearts of all might be roused knowing how much they are loved.

The sanctuary of Greccio is difficult to access, but it can be done. It is my hope that in your lifetime you may be blessed with an opportunity to journey up this mountain in the Rieti Valley that will take you to this holy place where, in one sense, Christmas is celebrated 365 days of the year. While there, read Luke's account of the birth of Jesus. Sing some Christmas carols, at least in your heart. Spend time in the cave chapel, called *Grotta del Presepio*; let the scene of Bethlehem rouse your heart to knowing that God loves you.

You are someone special to the Lord. You are someone God has called to a newness you cannot even imagine, a newness made visible and possible by the Incarnation of God's beloved Son.

During Advent time a frequent emotion is that of *waiting* for

the Lord to come. I think, however, that it makes more sense to consider this sentiment from the opposite perspective. Namely, it is God who is waiting on us; it is God who is waiting on us to believe that we can become someone we have never yet been, and to believe that we truly are lovable and loved. After all, God has given us a babe in swaddling clothes to help us realize we need not be overwhelmed by what often seems to be a truth beyond our imagining.