

Reflection for Christmas 2020

The beautiful custom of setting up a crib at Christmas to commemorate the birth of the Infant Jesus was started by St. Francis of Assisi.

It was the year 1223. St. Francis went to Rome to obtain from Pope Honorius III authorisation to celebrate Christmas in a totally new way. St. Francis chose a forest in the vicinity of the village of Greccio, in the region of Umbria, not too far from Rome, where a good friend of his lived, the noble Giovanni Velita.

About 15 days before Christmas, St. Francis said to Giovanni: 'If you want to celebrate the feast of Our Lord's birth in Greccio we need to recreate the nativity scene. So that we can properly picture in our minds the circumstances in which Jesus was born and all the inconveniences he endured as he lay in the manger on straw between an ox and an ass, I would like to re-create this in a visual way, as if I had seen it with my own eyes.'

Many religious and the residents of Greccio and the surrounding area were all invited for this special event. Just before midnight, the Franciscan friars went in procession to the spot chanting the antiphons of Advent. They were accompanied by the villagers who carried flaming torches.

The wind blew strongly and the light of the torches projected their flickering shadows on the dense forest. However, in the clearance where the crib had been set up all was calm, sacred and peaceful; Only the cold was a nuisance.

When the village bell of Greccio began to toll midnight, a priest began to celebrate Mass. The altar had been placed in front of the crib with the ox and ass on either side. A beautiful full-size statue of the Child Jesus rested on the straw.

As is well known, St. Francis never wanted to be ordained a priest out of humility. Because of this, as a deacon, it was his duty to solemnly sing the Gospel of that Christmas Mass.

After the reading of the Gospel, all waited attentively to hear the sermon that St. Francis himself gave on the love and mercy of God sending his son as the Saviour of the human race, who that night was made flesh and dwelt among us.

At the end of his sermon, St. Francis bent over to kiss the statue of the Divine Child. At this moment a miracle took place that only he and Giovanni Velita saw. The statue became alive. It was as if it had been woken from a profound sleep with St. Francis's kiss, and then the Child Jesus smiled at St. Francis.

At the consecration, when the bread and wine truly become the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, St. Francis was able to contemplate the Messiah in two ways: in the form of the Holy Eucharist and lying in the manger. At the end of the solemn Midnight Mass, and after having incensed the manger, the friars returned to Greccio and the villagers to their homes. Everyone was full of supernatural joy.

This miraculous event can be certified by the one who experienced it, as well as by the miracles that happened afterwards. The straw from the manger was carefully kept by the people and was an efficacious remedy to miraculously cure sick animals and an antidote against many other diseases.

This wonderful idea of setting up the Christmas crib was enthusiastically received by the faithful. St. Clare of Assisi, a disciple of St. Francis, established it in her convents. Every year she set up the manger herself.

The Franciscan friars also spread this custom far and wide. Whether composed of figurines artistically carved from clay, porcelain, or wood, the crib became the very symbol of Christmas.

From the majestic cathedral to the simplest rural chapel, from the palace or mansion to the humblest abode, Catholics throughout the whole world, since that time, have had the pious custom of setting up a manger. In this way they repeat the custom divinely inspired from the seraphic St. Francis of Assisi in the year 1223 and we have been doing it ever since.

Deacon Kevin

(Adapted from an article in catholicismpure.wordpress.com)