

Christmas Mass During the Night
December 25, 2010/ @ 10:00 p.m.

Lessons from the Creche in Greccio

Readings: Isaiah 9:1-6; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

Nestled in the Appenine mountains, sixty miles from Rome and home to 1500 souls today, is 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. He would 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.”¹

Word spread to all the townspeople. At the appointed time they arrived carrying torches and candles. A friar celebrated Mass while Francis, vested in a deacon’s dalmatic, himself preached the sermon.

His biographer, Brother Thomas of Celano, recalls 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.”²

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, and 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.

In the silence of the winter night, the lonely winter silence was broken by the voice of an angel speaking to the shepherds. The Good news is first proclaimed to the poor, a fact never lost to St. Francis. The shepherds

¹ Thomas of Celano, *First Life* 84-85

² *Ibid*, (1C 84-86).

were the chosen guests of honor for this manifestation of God's glory, just as the faithful townspeople of Greccio would experience 1200 years later. What does it mean to bring Bethlehem to life right here, right now?

For Saint Francis and for all faithful Christians, the Creche is a reminder of the utter simplicity of this Feast and of the Incarnation. Our celebrations, subdued this year out of necessity, may just call to mind the simplicity and even starkness of the Nativity. God saw fit to bring forth a Savior, born of a woman, in utter poverty.

Could this choice of God have mirrored the poverty of humanity, being both a sign and a reminder to all who may forget? We are confronted with an important question raised by Thomas of Celano's description: Are we "overwhelmed with love and filled with a wonderful happiness"?

We honor this feast most fittingly, not in our child-like faith, but by imitating and bowing before the mystery of the Incarnation, allowing His love to overwhelm us. In our Gospel we heard, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." Tonight, Bethlehem has come to us. The wonder of Greccio transforms our churches, homes and most importantly our own hearts.

It is found again in the passage drawn from the prophecy of Isaiah: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Is 9:1). History will judge 2020 harshly, a year of great challenge. Our eyes gaze upon a helpless baby in the manger, yet the eyes of faith recognize a Savior. The shepherds made known the message. Without fear or shame, we proclaim that we are in need of a Savior, before Whom we may place our concerns and disappointments as well as our hopes and aspirations.

Our mighty God ventured into this reverent silence and profound simplicity, and he ventured there to find and save you and me. The Light of Divine Love has come into our world anew. May the silence and peace of this dark and cold Christmas night abide in your hearts forever.