

National Minister's Occasional Message



The Joy and Mystery of the Incarnation

To what extent may we Franciscans justly claim that our St. Francis himself helped to highlight and deepen the joy and mystery of Christmas?

No less an authority than our current Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, spoke in great detail about this at his General Audience on December 23, 2009. He said:

the special, intense spiritual atmosphere that surrounds Christmas developed in the Middle Ages, thanks to St Francis of Assisi who was profoundly in love with the man Jesus, God-with-us. The Saint's first biographer, Thomas of Celano, recounts in his *Vita Secunda* that St Francis "Over and above all the other Solemnities, celebrated with ineffable tenderness the Nativity of the Child Jesus, and called 'the Feast of Feasts' the day on which God, having become a tiny child, suckled at a human breast" (cf. *Fonti Francescane*, n. 199, p. 492). This particular devotion to the mystery of the Incarnation gave rise to the famous celebration of Christmas at Greccio. Francis probably drew the inspiration for this from his pilgrimage to the Holy Land and from the manger at St Mary Major in Rome. What motivated the *Poverello* of Assisi was the wish to experience as real, living and actual the humble grandeur of the event of the Child Jesus' Birth, and to communicate the joy of it to all.

In his first biography Thomas of Celano speaks of the night of the nativity scene at Greccio in a lively and moving way, making a crucial contribution to spreading the most beautiful Christmas tradition, that of the crib. Indeed, the night at Greccio restored to Christianity the intensity and beauty of the Feast of Christmas and taught the People of God to perceive its most authentic message, its special warmth, and to love and worship the humanity of Christ. This particular approach to Christmas gave the Christian faith a new dimension. Easter had focused attention on the power of God who triumphs over death, inaugurates new life and teaches us to hope in the world to come. St Francis with his crib highlighted the defenceless love of God, his humanity and his kindness; God manifested himself to humanity in the Incarnation of the Word to teach people a new way of living and loving.

In that Child, in fact, God-Love is manifest: God comes without weapons, without force, because he does not want to conquer, so to speak, from the outside, but rather wants to be freely received by the human being. God makes himself a defenceless Child to overcome pride, violence and the human desire to possess. In Jesus God took on this poor, disarming

condition to win us with love and lead us to our true identity. We must not forget that the most important title of Jesus Christ is, precisely, that of "Son", Son of God; the divine dignity is indicated with a term that extends the reference to the humble condition of the manger in Bethlehem, although it corresponds uniquely to his divinity, which is the divinity of the "Son".

His condition as a Child also points out to us how we may encounter God and enjoy his presence. It is in the light of Christmas that we may understand Jesus' words: "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 18: 3). Those who have not understood the mystery of Christmas, have not understood the crucial element of Christian life. Those who do not welcome Jesus with a child's heart, cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven: this is what Francis wished to remind the Christians of his time and of all times, until today. Let us pray the Father to grant us that simplicity of heart which recognizes the Lord in the Child, just as Francis did in Greccio. Then what Thomas of Celano recounts referring to the experience of the shepherds on the Holy Night (cf. Lk 2: 20) with regard to those who were present at the event in Greccio might happen to us: "each one went home full of ineffable joy" (cf. *Vita Prima, op. cit.*, n. 86, p. 479)

(http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20091223_en.html)

Let us pray that the tender love, profound peace and "ineffable joy" that St. Francis felt in the presence of the child Jesus may stay in our hearts all through this still New Year 2011.