

Homily for Christmas Eve 2019
Midnight

The Enchanting Image

St Francis of Assisi was born in 1181. Around 1219-20 he visited Egypt and the Holy Land. Upon his return to Italy he passed through the town of Greccio on November 29, 1223. The caves at Greccio reminded St Francis of the topography of Bethlehem. It was there that he began establishing the first Christmas Nativity. He would die three years later, on October 3rd 1226 at the age of 44.

The Franciscan Sources describe in detail what took place in Greccio. Fifteen days before Christmas, Francis asked a local man named Giovanni to help him realize his desire. I am now quoting St Francis:

“to bring to life the memory of that babe born in Bethlehem, to see as much as 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 was laid upon a bed of hay”.

At this, his faithful friend went immediately to prepare all that the Saint had asked. On 25 December, friars came to Greccio from various parts of Italy together with people from the farmsteads in the area, who brought flowers and torches to light up that holy night. When Francis arrived, he found a manger full of hay, an ox and a donkey. All those present experienced a new and indescribable joy in the presence of the Christmas scene. The priest then solemnly celebrated the Eucharist over the manger, showing the bond between the Incarnation of the Son of God and the Eucharist. As Pope Francis commented in his December 1st Apostolic Letter *Admirabile Signum (the Enchanting Image)*

At Greccio there were no statues; the nativity scene was enacted and experienced by all who were present. With the simplicity of that sign, Saint Francis carried out a great work of evangelization. His teaching touched the hearts of Christians and continues today to offer a simple yet authentic means of portraying the beauty of our faith. Indeed, the place where this first nativity scene was enacted expresses and evokes these sentiments. Greccio has become a refuge for the soul, a mountain fastness wrapped in silence.¹

I want to ponder with you this on this Holy Night how the Enchanting Image of the Christmas Creche can become in the Holy Father’s evocative phrase:

a refuge for the soul, this mountain fastness wrapped in silence.

We can discover the nativity scene as a refuge for the soul as we ponder the historicity of the scene; the characters of the scene and then, as we then find our place in the scene.

1. The Historicity of the Scene:

¹ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20191201_admirabile-signum.html

In Luke 2:1 we have the phrase: ‘all the world’. The word in Greek for “world” is *ecumēnē*.

Ecumene means that which is pertaining to all, so it is more than just a geographical definition, world – *ecumene* is also speaking of a sociological reality. Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI in his book of the Infancy Narratives make the following observation about St Luke’s use of the word: “Eceumene”.

The context in world history is important for Luke. For the first time, “all the world,” the ecumēnē in its entirety, is to be enrolled. For the first time there is a government and an empire that spans the globe. For the first time, there is a great expanse of peace in which everyone’s property can be registered and placed at the service of the wider community. Only now, when there is a commonality of law and property on a large scale, and when a universal language has made it possible for a cultural community to trade in ideas and goods, only now can a message of universal salvation, a universal Saviour, enter the world: it is indeed the “fullness of time.”²

Every year we ponder how this event that happened so long ago has had such a universal influence that indeed touches the whole world. As a result of what happened in that Bethlehem manger and what St Francis did to remember the Nativity, now in Churches everywhere, God breaking into history is remembered in a special way this night.

Pope Francis is commenting on the historicity of the Incarnation reflected:

Why does the Christmas crèche arouse such wonder and move us so deeply? First, because it shows God’s tender love: the Creator of the universe lowered himself to take up our littleness. The gift of life, in all its mystery, becomes all the more wondrous as we realize that the Son of Mary is the source and sustenance of all life. In Jesus, the Father has given us a brother who comes to seek us out whenever we are confused or lost, a loyal friend ever at our side. He gave us his Son who forgives us and frees us from our sins.³

Yes, when we ponder the historicity of the crèche it can become a refuge for our souls.

2. The Characters in the Scene:

Our reading from Isaiah gives us a sense of the characters who enter into the Enchanting Image of the Christmas Creche. “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.” Of this darkness, Pope Francis observed:

We can think of all those times in our lives when we have experienced the darkness of night. Yet even then, God does not abandon us, but is there to answer our crucial questions about the meaning of life. Who am I? Where do I come from? Why was I born at this time in history?

² Pope Benedict XVI. *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (pp. 58-59). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

³Admirabile signum

Why do I love? Why do I suffer? Why will I die? It was to answer these questions that God became man. His closeness brings light where there is darkness and shows the way to those dwelling in the shadow of suffering (cf. Lk 1:79).

And this brings us to pondering those who were at the birth of Jesus. The presence of the poor and the lowly in the nativity scene reminds us that God became man for the sake of those who feel most in need of his love and who ask him to draw near to them. Jesus, “gentle and humble in heart” (*Mt 11:29*), was born in poverty and led a simple life in order to teach us to recognize what is essential and to act accordingly. The nativity scene clearly teaches that we cannot let ourselves be fooled by wealth and fleeting promises of happiness. We see Herod’s palace in the background, closed and deaf to the tidings of joy. By being born in a manger, God himself launches the only true revolution that can give hope and dignity to the disinherited and the outcast: the revolution of love, the revolution of tenderness. From the manger, Jesus proclaims, in a meek yet powerful way, the need for sharing with the poor as the path to a more human and fraternal world in which no one is excluded or marginalized.

When we ponder the characters in the crèche like this it can become a refuge for our souls.

3. Our Entering the Scene:

We enter the scene at the same place the shepherds did. On hearing the news of the incarnation they are sung that hymn we sing at Mass, *The Gloria in Excelsis*

***Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”***

So often, especially at Christmas, it is through song that we enter the scene of the birth of Jesus. No Christian holiday is so closely associated with music, as is Christmas. And what is the content of the first Christmas Carol? It is that God really does look upon us with favour. His glory is manifested in all of its fullness in the highest heaven, but also on earth among those whom he favours. Who are they? Listen to Pope Emeritus Benedict:

This should cause us to reflect that Christmas points toward the reversal of values found in the figure of Jesus Christ and his message. From the moment of his birth, he belongs outside the realm of what is important and powerful in worldly terms. Yet it is this unimportant and powerless child that proves to be the truly powerful one, the one on whom ultimately everything depends. So one aspect of becoming a Christian is having to leave behind what everyone else thinks and wants, the prevailing standards, in order to enter the light of the truth of our being, and aided by that light to find the right path.⁴

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI. *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (pp. 66-67). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

We walk along that path this night as we carry on a tradition started in 1223 where the Mass of Christmas is celebrated above the Admirable Signum.

Enter into this story afresh and by renewed faith the Nativity of Jesus Christ it can become a refuge for your soul.