



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 20 December 2023

[Multimedia]

Catechesis. The Greccio Nativity, school of simplicity and joy

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Eight hundred years ago, at Christmas in 1223, Saint Francis organized the living Nativity scene in Greccio. While Nativity scenes are being prepared or completed in homes and other places, it is good for us to rediscover their origins.

How did the crib come about? What was Saint Francis' intention? He said: "I want to depict the Child born in Bethlehem, and in some way see with the eyes of the body the hardships in which He found Himself for want of the things necessary for an infant, how He was laid in a manger and how He lay on the straw between the ox and the donkey" (cf. Tommaso da Celano, *Vita prima*, xxx, 84: FF 468). Francis does not want to create a beautiful work of art, but rather to arouse amazement through the Nativity scene, at the extreme humility of the Lord, at the hardships he suffered in the poor grotto of Bethlehem for love of us. In fact, the biographer of the Saint of Assisi notes, "In that moving scene, evangelical simplicity shines forth, poverty is praised, humility is related. And Greccio has become like a new Bethlehem" (ibid., 85).

I've emphasized one word, "amazement". And this is important. If we Christians look at the crib as a beautiful thing, as something historical, even religious, and pray, this is not enough. Before the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word, before the birth of Jesus, we need this religious attitude of

amazement. If in the face of the mysteries, I do not come to this amazement, my faith is simply superficial, a “computational faith”. Do not forget this.

And one characteristic of the Nativity scene [is that it] was conceived as a school of simplicity [Translator’s note: “sobrietà”, literally, “sobriety”]. And this has a great deal to say to us. In fact, the risk of losing sight of what counts in life is great today. Paradoxically, it increases precisely at Christmas — the mentality of Christmas changes: [we are] immersed in a consumerism that corrodes its meaning. The consumerism of Christmas. It is true that you want to give presents, that’s fine. That is one way, but that frenzy of shopping that draws the attention elsewhere, and that sobriety of Christmas is lost. Let us look at the crib — that awe before the crib. Sometimes there is no inner space for astonishment, but only for organising parties, for having parties.

And the Nativity scene was created to bring us back to what matters: to God who comes to dwell among us. This is why it is important to look at the Nativity scene, because it helps us understand what matters and also the social relationships of Jesus at that time, the family, Joseph and Mary, and loved ones, the shepherds. People before things. And we often put things ahead of people. This doesn’t work.

In addition to sobriety, which makes us see, the Nativity scene of Greccio also speaks of *joy* because joy is different from having fun. But having fun is not a bad thing if it is done on the right path. It is not a bad thing, it is a human thing. But joy is deeper still. More human. And sometimes there is a temptation to have fun without joy; to have fun by making noise, but there is no joy. It is a bit like the figure of the clown, who laughs and laughs and makes people laugh, but the heart is sad. Joy is the root of good Christmas fun.

And about sobriety, the chronicle from back in the day says, “And the day of gladness comes, the time of rejoicing! [...] Francis [...] is radiant [...]. The people flocked and rejoiced with a joy they had never tasted before [...]. Everyone returned home full of ineffable joy” (Vita prima, XXX, 85-86: FF 469-470). Sobriety, amazement, leads you to joy, *true* joy, not artificial joy.

But where did this Christmas joy come from? Certainly not from having brought home presents or having experienced lavish celebrations. No, it was the joy that overflows from the heart when one tangibly touches the nearness of Jesus, the tenderness of God, who does not leave us alone, but consoles us [translator’s note: stands with (*con*) those who are alone (*solii*)]. Closeness, tenderness, and compassion are the three attitudes of God. And looking at the Nativity scene, praying before the Nativity scene, we can experience these things of the Lord that help us in every day life.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Nativity scene is like a small well from which to draw the nearness of God, the source of hope and joy. The Nativity scene is like a living Gospel, a domestic Gospel. Like the well in the Bible, it is the place of encounter where we bring to Jesus the expectations and

worries of life, just as the shepherds of Bethlehem and the people of Greccio did. Bringing to Jesus the expectations and the worries of life.

If, before the Nativity scene, we entrust to Jesus all we hold dear, we too will experience “great joy” (*Mt 2:10*), a joy that comes precisely from contemplation, from the spirit of amazement with which I go to contemplate these mysteries.

Let us go before the Nativity scene. Everyone, look, and allow your heart to feel something within.

Special Greetings

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those coming from Malaysia and Nigeria. In these final days before our celebration of the Lord’s birth at Christmas, I invoke upon you and your families the joy and peace of the Lord Jesus, Son of God and Prince of Peace. God bless you!

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to the elderly, to the sick, to newlyweds and to young people, especially the students from San Benedetto del Tronto and from Roccarainola-Tufino. I also greet the people from Mediterranea Saving Humans who are here. They go out to sea to save these helpless people who flee from slavery in Africa. They do a great job. They save many people.

Let us not forget the people and peoples who are suffering from the evils of war. Wars are always a defeat. Let us not forget this. A defeat. The only ones who benefits are arms manufacturers. Please let us think of Palestine and Israel. Let us think of Ukraine — the Ambassador is here — martyred Ukraine that suffers greatly. And let us think of children in wars — the things they see. Let us go to the Nativity scene and ask Jesus for peace. He is the Prince of Peace.

I offer my blessing to all of you!

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APPEAL

I turn my thoughts to those who have died and those who were injured as a result of the devastating earthquake that struck the Chinese provinces of Gansu and Qinghai last Monday. With affection and prayer I am close to the suffering people; I encourage the relief services; and I invoke upon all the blessing of the Almighty, that he may bring comfort and relief in their sorrow.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear brothers and sisters: Eight hundred years ago this Christmas, in Greccio, Saint Francis of Assisi recreated the scene of our Lord's birth. The lovely tradition of setting up a Christmas Crib in our families and communities reminds us of the true meaning of Christ's nativity: the closeness of our God, who came among us in poverty to enrich us with the gift of his saving love. May our contemplation of the Crib inspire us to celebrate these holy days in simplicity, spiritual joy and gratitude for the gift of Christ's presence among us, the source of our hope, the light of our lives and the promise of peace for our troubled world.