

800 Years of the Nativity at Greccio

Nativity scenes have become a common symbol of our Christmas celebration each year. Around the world, many Christians place a nativity scene under their Christmas Tree, on the family table, and you may even see them taking centre place in Westfield shopping centres!

But have you ever stopped to think about where the Christmas nativity scene originated? Has it always been around since after the birth of Jesus?

In fact, the earliest image of a nativity scene can be traced back to the Catacombs in Rome, around the year 380. However, it wasn't until exactly 800 years ago this month, in December 1223, that in a small Italian town called Greccio, the tradition of the nativity scene was popularised with a live re-enactment, by none other than Saint Francis of Assisi.

To set the scene we'll take you through some of the events in Francis' life leading up to this historic moment.

Life for Francis at that point

was in fact not all that easy. Leading up to 1223, Francis faced many disputes and disappointments among the brothers of his order, which by this point numbered over 5000 friars. The brothers were seeking to institutionalize the Order, which forced Francis to write a new Rule. Wanting to live a simple life had now become complicated. With failing eyesight and the general deterioration of his body due to many harsh penances, Francis travelled to Rome to seek approval of his new Rule from the Pope, which the Holy Father did in fact grant on November 29 that year.

Two weeks later on his journey back to Assisi, Francis stopped over in the small village of Greccio, where lived a community of devout faithful Christians. Being remote and isolated, Greccio became a favourite place where Francis would often retreat and spend time in prayer and solitude.

One can imagine Francis' physical and emotional exhaustion on his arrival in Greccio. Perhaps, having arrived at his place of retreat,

it would have been easiest to simply lay low, disappear from the crowds and recover from all the dramas of his life.

Yet, the mystery of Jesus' birth was so central to Francis, that any thought of diminishing the celebration would have been furthest from his mind. Francis loved Christmas so much that he referred to it as the 'feast of feasts' and celebrated this day with inexpressible love over all other feast days. Being only two weeks from Christmas, Francis must have seen in this small isolated village, with its rugged terrain and community of holy residents, a resemblance to Bethlehem.

In Greccio, Francis envisaged a new Bethlehem where he was to bring into the world a great devotion to the Nativity of our Lord. What Francis had created that magical night filled the people with such an incredible love for the birth of Jesus, that by the following Christmas, the significance of this legendary event had spread throughout all of Italy, and soon after to the rest of the world, to become one of the favourite traditions in Christianity to this day.

Greccio, the New Bethlehem

Adapted from "The Life of Saint Francis" by Thomas of Celano

So it happened, three years before his death, Francis arrived in the town of Greccio two weeks before the birthday of Jesus. There he called upon a man named John, who had a good reputation for his holiness.

"We will celebrate the feast of Christmas together at Greccio," said Francis. "Hurry before me and carefully make ready the things I tell you. For I wish to present the memory of that babe who was born in Bethlehem: to see as much as is possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, and how, with a cow and a donkey standing by, he rested on hay." Once John heard Francis' words, he ran quickly and prepared all as requested.

Finally, the day of joy and jubilation had arrived. From many different villages and towns, the faithful citizens had come. The people, filled with incredible joy in their hearts, prepare candles and torches to light up the night like stars.

Finally, Francis, the holy man of God came, and finding all things prepared, was filled with inexpressible joy. The manger was prepared, the hay carried in, and the cow and donkey were led to the spot.

There in that cave simplicity was honoured, poverty was exalted, and humility was

commended. Out of Greccio was made a new Bethlehem.

The night was lit up like day, delighting both man and animals. The people arrived ecstatic at this new mystery of joy. The forest shouted the cries of joy, and the boulders echoed back the sounds of the jubilant crowd. The brothers and sisters sang, giving God his due praise, and that holy night was filled with triumphant rejoicing.

The holy man of God, Francis, stood before the manger bathed in tears, heartfelt sighs, devotion and wondrous joy.

Over the manger was celebrated Holy Mass, where the priest praised this new consolation. During Mass, Francis, who was also a deacon, sang with full voice the holy gospel and preached words of the poverty of the Infant Jesus and the poor city of Bethlehem which seemed to drip from his lips like sweet honey. With an excessive love, he often called Christ the "Babe of Bethlehem," licking his lips whenever recalling the sweet name of Jesus, and saying the word "Bethlehem" in the manner of a bleating sheep.

Then, from among the crowd was witnessed something extraordinary; a child appeared lying in the manger whom Francis approached and tenderly woke from his



deep sleep. This awakening was significant, for up until this moment the love for the nativity of Jesus was not common among the people, but now, the Infant King was awake and impressed in the hearts of all, thanks to this gift given to them by the holy Francis.

The night's solemnities then drew to a close and everyone went home joyfully. The hay from the manger was preserved and afterwards found to have miraculous healing effects on people with sickness, granting women easy childbirth, and even healing animals who ate it of disease.

In honour of the most blessed father Francis, an altar was constructed over the manger, and a church was dedicated, which remains to this day.

The Feast of Feasts

St Francis referred to Christmas as “the feast of feasts”—above all other feasts—and he celebrated it with “unutterable devotion” (2 Celano 199). Such devotion towards Christmas must have seemed a bit unusual at the time as the Church considered Easter to be the most significant feast in the liturgical year, as it celebrated of the Resurrection of Jesus and our eternal salvation. By the Medieval period, Christmas in fact was a time of anxiety and fear where people reflected on their year and the reality of final judgment.

Yet, Francis’ celebration of Christmas as the ‘feast of feasts’ did not undermine the significance of Easter, but rather, linked the two feasts as the one eternal sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who was born to redeem humanity. The birth of Jesus at Christmas was the beginning of our redemption which climaxed at Easter with his Resurrection. In Francis’ mind, the two feasts could not be separated, they were both part of the one Paschal Mystery, from the crib to the cross.

This Paschal Mystery of Jesus, as the sacrificial Lamb of God, was revealed at his birth. The gospel of Luke tells us that Mary “wrapped the baby Jesus in swaddling (tight fitting) clothes and laid him in a manger.”

In Jewish tradition, shepherds would take the firstborn lamb and wrap it in tight (swaddling) clothes to limit its movements and protect it from injury, as only an unblemished lamb was suitable for sacrifice. The shepherds would then take the newborn lamb and lay it in the animal manger where it would be protected from harm.

Just imagine how the shepherds must have felt when they went to their stables on that first Christmas night, and on seeing the place where they laid their sacrifice, instead of a lamb, there was the unblemished (sinless) firstborn Son of Mary, the Lamb of God, whom she had wrapped tightly and placed in the manger in preparation for their eternal sacrifice.

Mass in the Manger

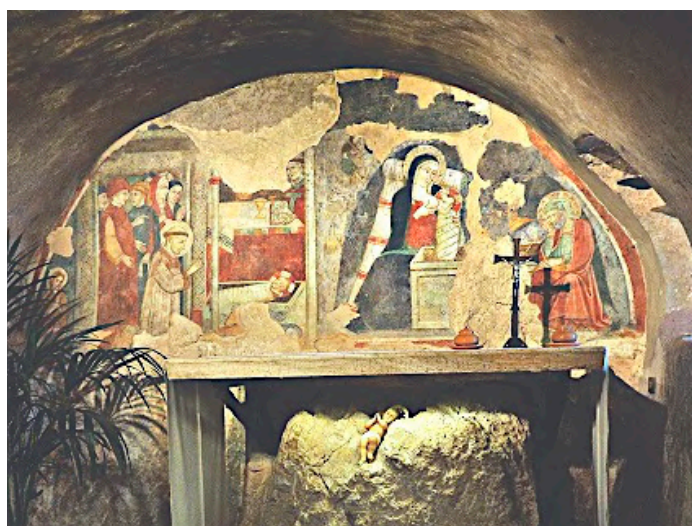
The popularity of the Greccio story has been significantly boosted in our time by the sentimental factor associated with a newborn baby at Christmas. Many people love this story because of the feel-good sensation they get when hearing it.

However, perhaps the most significant detail of what happened at Greccio in 1223 is also the most overlooked and forgotten—the fact that Francis arranged for Holy Mass to be celebrated in the manger that night.

The word ‘Christmas’ is derived from two words, ‘Christ’ and ‘Mass’. Christmas is simply Christ’s Mass, in which, as already mentioned, the sacrifice of Christ had begun.

Francis was not only leading people to contemplate the nativity, but also to worship and love the Infant Jesus through the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass. It was Francis’ deep desire to lead the people as a community to the Christ-Child, in the flesh.

For Francis, a nativity scene without Mass would not have made any sense. He recognised the inseparable connection between the Incarnation and the Eucharist. Possibly, for the first time in 1223 years, Jesus Incarnate, that night, entered into a manger—in flesh—just as he did in Bethlehem.



The Nativity Scene Chapel, Greccio

Secular Franciscan Saints



St Bernadette Soubirous 1844-1879

Within the Franciscan family belongs a pious society known as the 'Cordbearers of St Francis,' who, although not belonging to one of the three orders, are nevertheless regarded as spiritual children on St Francis. Laity, and even members of non-Franciscan religious orders are able to enrol in this society. In this regard the Franciscan family honours St Bernadette Soubirous as a member of the Cordbearers. Bernadette was born into a poverty-stricken family. She contracted cholera as a young child and suffered from asthma and other sicknesses throughout her life which impacted her education. At the age of fourteen Bernadette received a series of eighteen visits from the Blessed Virgin Mary at a grotto near Lourdes. On the feast of the Annunciation that year Our Lady told Bernadette, "I am the Immaculate Conception." Following the apparitions, Bernadette retreated to a boarding school run by the local nuns to escape public attention. In 1866 she entered a convent where she offered many penances through her suffering until her death at the age of thirty-five.

St Elizabeth, Queen of Portugal 1271-1336

Born into the royal house of Aragon, Elizabeth was named after her famous aunty, St Elizabeth of Hungary. Her birth was a blessing on the family, in which her arrival into the world was enough to bring peace to the long rivalry between her father and grandfather. As a young lady, Elizabeth displayed fine virtues of gentleness and charity, especially towards the poor. Her life of prayer and penance was highly admired by the royal court. At an early age Elizabeth married Denis, King of Portugal, with whom she had two children. As her son, Alphonse, grew older, he and his father, the king, became rivals. Alphonse built an army from among the king's enemies to fight the royal army. As war was about to break out, with father and son ready to kill one another, Elizabeth rode her mule in between the two camps, and through her powerful words reconciled the father and son, and brought peace to both armies. After the death of Denise, Elizabeth joined the Third Order of St Francis, moved to the convent of the Poor Clares, and continued to do works of charity.

Bl Hugolinus Magalotti d. 1373

Hugolinus was born sometime towards the end of the fourteenth century in Italy. After the death of his mother at a very young age, Hugolinus' father was left to bring up this lively boy and develop in him moral virtues to help overcome evil temptation. As he grew older, Hugolinus studied science, however his greater love was reading the lives of saints and applying their example to his own life. After the death of his father, he accepted our Lord's call "if you want to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor." Hugolinus did not waste a moment in selling all his possessions and giving the money to poor widows and orphans. He withdrew to a hermitage where he led a life of prayer, meditation and fasting. Despite severe temptations towards evil desires, and to return to the pleasures of the world, Hugolinus fought and won his spiritual battles through prayer and penance, but especially through his appeals to the Immaculate Virgin Mary. God rewarded Hugolinus with extraordinary miracles of healing, and the ability to offer spiritual support the faithful who visited him in large numbers.

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Facebook: www.facebook.com/ofsaustralia

Email: national@ofsaustralia.org.au



'Secular Franciscan Saints' are adapted from the Franciscan Book of Saints, by Marion A. Habig OFM