




THE CHRISTMAS CRIB: AN EXAMPLE OF AN “OUTGOING CHURCH”

by Bro FRANCESCO DILEO OFMCap

This Christmas that we are about to celebrate as believers, but above all as Franciscans, will be special. The few days that still separate us from the coming commemoration of Jesus' birth, bring us also closer to the 800th Jubilee Anniversary of the institution of the Christmas crib. In 1223, Saint Francis had returned from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He had visited Bethlehem and was enraptured by the mystery of the birth of Jesus and he wanted to share this with his people. Deeply moved by the mystery of the Incarnation, he thought of making a visible reproduction set in a place similar to the original. The landscape that seemed most appropriate to him was that of Greccio, a small mountain village (today with 1,500 inhabitants, in the province of Rieti), known to Saint Francis. Thanks to his friendship with the nobleman John Velita, the lord of that region, he was able to find a place, immersed in nature that was suitable as a setting for this reproduction. It was an ancient and suggestive grotto and here he brought a cradle, an ox and a donkey. And at midnight on December 24,

1223, the inhabitants of Greccio and the surrounding areas admired, for the first time in history, a scenic reproduction of the birthday of Jesus. It was an original and effective way of “communicating the Gospel in a changing world,” through the use of images and testified by Francis of Assisi's vital, radical and unwavering love for the Incarnate Word. Pope Francis' continuous appeals to us to come out from our splendid sacred but always increasingly empty churches and parishes to become an “outgoing Church,” that goes out to the faithful, that seeks to encounter them with the appropriate, eloquent language that can communicate the Gospel message, is exactly what Saint Francis did when he “invented” the Christmas crib. This approaching Christmas and its celebration, with its special significance because of the 800th anniversary, is an excellent opportunity to announce the “good news” of God's love for all mankind that still in part has not yet heard Jesus' call to salvation, or that in part it has forgotten or refuses, because irreconcilable with the secular world's selfish and hedonistic culture. In fact, we may commence and respond to this appeal by

praying before our Christmas cribs, contemplating Almighty God who, in the fullness of time, manifests Himself to us as a fragile child, inviting and drawing us to His infinite love. This image melted Padre Pio's heart too. Father Ignazio Testa da Ielsi, the Father Guardian of the San Giovanni Rotondo friary, tells us in his diary, exactly one hundred years ago, how Padre Pio celebrated Christmas with “fervent love.” He would “count the days that separated him from one Christmas to the next. He was drawn to the Child Jesus in a very special way. Just the sound of a Christmas carol was enough for his spirit to soar, it seemed as if he was in ecstasy.” During the days approaching December 25, the holy friar, would greet the faithful with words such as the following: “May the Child of Bethlehem inflame your heart with the fire of heavenly love, and adorn your soul with the most select virtues” (Letters I). These words and wishes of the Capuchin mystic I wish to make my own. I wish each and every one of our readers of the “Voice of Padre Pio” a holy Christmas and a happy new year filled with every blessing. 

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