

MARTÍN CARBAJO NÚÑEZ

# Celebrare la vita

The  
Nativity  
Scene of  
St. Francis  
in  
Greccio

Its  
relevance  
800 years  
later  
(1223-  
2023)

Martín Carbajo-Núñez

*Celebrating Life.*

*The Rule and  
Christmas at Greccio*  
(1223-2023)

2nd edition

La Scuola  
e il Natale di Greccio  
(1223-2023)

Mayra D'Amico

EDI

Martin Carbajo Núñez  
Wolna i braterska ekonomia  
Perspektywa franciszkańska

Núñez

a vida  
(1223-2023)

efaranizazu

## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- **1.1. Some precedents**
- **1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)**
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- **1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)**

## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

- **2.1. The nearness of God**
- **2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, "hearers of the Word"**

## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- **3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem**
- **3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family**
- **3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures**

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion

Today we have turned Christmas into an excuse for consumerism.

Between lights, shopping, and gifts we are losing the ability to contemplate the humility and poverty of the Child Jesus,

who calls us to follow in his footsteps by faithfully observing the Gospel

Pope Francis invites us to “encourage” in our society the enchanting tradition “of the Christmas crèche.”

He recognizes that it originated in the living nativity scene of Saint Francis in Greccio. AdS 1.

**This papal recognition** does not negate the obvious similarities of that celebration **with the medieval tradition of staging the Christmas mysteries.**

**Saint Francis' crèche was not the first staging of the nativity**



**but its connection to the Eucharist, the way people present felt involved, and the charism of the Saint of Assisi may explain**



**why the popular belief has considered Saint Francis as the initiator and propagator of the nativity scenes.**

**Benedict XVI confirms that**



**“the special, intense spiritual atmosphere that surrounds Christmas**



**developed in the Middle Ages, thanks to St Francis of Assisi.”**

**Francis' representation did not include images, but only living beings.**



**He wanted the real protagonists to be those present, including the ox and the donkey**



**which, according to patristic exegesis, represented the Hebrews (ox) and the pagans (donkey).**

**Therefore, all peoples and all creatures were included.**



**Thomas of Celano states that even "the forest amplifies the cries**



**and the boulders echo back the joyful crowd" (1Cel 85).**



## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- **1.1. Some precedents**
- **1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)**
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- **1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)**

## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

- **2.1. The nearness of God**
- **2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, "hearers of the Word"**

## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- **3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem**
- **3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family**
- **3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures**

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion

Our study is based on Thomas of Celano's account (1Cel 84-87),

Additionally, the Greccio celebration is documented in other Franciscan sources, notably in

which is put in relation to that of Bonaventure (LM 10,7).

chapter 19 of Thomas of Celano's "Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis",

in his recently discovered "*Vita brevior*",

in Julian of Speyer's "Life of Saint Francis" (*Vita sancti Francisci*),

and in Henry of Avranches's "Poem on the Life of Saint Francis" (1232-1234).



**The Greccio celebration shows Francis' predilection for the mystery of the Nativity,**

**something he had already expressed on several occasions.**

**For example, in Psalm 15 of the "Office of the Passion", authored by himself, he writes:**

**"The Most Holy Child has been given to us and has been born for us on the way and placed in a manger because he did not have a place in the inn" (OfP 15,7)**

**In this way, he underlines the humility and poverty of the newborn**

**who, despite being rich, chose "poverty in the world" (2LtF 5)**

**This celebration has been immortalized in various pictorial representations.**



**Some scholars suggest that Saint Francis of Assisi may have influenced the emergence of modern Renaissance art,**



**which departed from the stylized rigidity of earlier periods in favor of a more tangible, vibrant, and vital approach.**

**Saint Francis's simple religiosity is believed**



**to have contributed to recover the sense of individuality**



**and would have reconciled humanity with nature.**

## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- **1.1. Some precedents**
- **1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)**
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- **1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)**

## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

- **2.1. The nearness of God**
- **2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, "hearers of the Word"**

## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- **3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem**
- **3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family**
- **3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures**

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion

**“Hippolytus of Rome,**

**in his commentary on the Book of the Prophet Daniel, written in about a.d. 204,**

**was the first person to say clearly that Jesus was born on 25 December.”**

**In 354, Pope Liberius officially confirmed**

**the celebration of the birth of Jesus on that date,**

**which was also the day of the Roman feast of the invincible sun.**

**The nativity scene,  
with the ox and the  
donkey next to the  
child,**

already appears in a  
fourth-century Christian  
sarcophagus,

even though the Gospel  
of Luke does not  
mention these animals.

**Pope Sixtus III (432-  
440)**

ordered the  
construction of a replica  
of the Nativity's Grotto  
of Bethlehem in the  
Roman basilica of Santa  
Maria Maggiore,

which for this reason will  
also be known as  
"Sancta Maria ad  
Praesepe."

**Eventually, an altar  
and an oratory  
were added,**

as well as pieces of the  
wood of the Holy Cradle

brought from Bethlehem  
and today preserved in  
a reliquary.

**This place of devotion became more important after the year 638,**



**when the Muslims occupied Bethlehem, thus preventing Christian pilgrimages.**



**Since the XI century, the Pope celebrates Christmas there.**

**Francis of Assisi**



**was probably inspired by this celebration,**



**as well as by his own experience during his journey to the Holy Land.**

# Pope Nicholas IV commissioned Arnolfo di Cambio to build a Nativity scene

in the shape of a chapel to highlight the relics of the manger preserved there.

Between 1290 and 1292, Arnolfo sculpted life-size figures of the Virgin and Child,

together with Saint Joseph, the three Magi, the ox, and the donkey.

In doing so, he was probably inspired by the Christmas celebration of St. Francis at Greccio.

**These images were initially placed**



**in the crypt of the Sistine Chapel of Santa Maria Maggiore,**



**thus constituting the oldest Nativity scene with images.**

**However, the current way of making the crib,**



**with figures heading towards the Child Jesus lying in the manger,**



**would have become popular much later, in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries.**



## The celebration of St. Francis at Greccio

In fact, since the eleventh century, in addition to paintings and statues,

has similarities  
with the  
medieval  
scenography of  
the Christmas  
mysteries.

there were also  
theatrical  
representations  
of the Christmas  
mysteries

in which priests,  
deacons, and  
laymen  
incarnated the  
different  
characters:

Mary, Joseph,  
the Child, the  
shepherds, the  
Magi, etc.

**In 1207, Pope Innocent III**



**forbade priests and deacons  
to perform them at Christmas  
time,**



**because they sometimes fell  
into excesses.**

**Probably, for this reason  
Bonaventure emphasizes**



**that Francis of Assisi had  
previously requested**



**and obtained papal  
authorization.**

Francis links his representation to the Eucharist.

Moreover, the sobriety with which Francis represents the Nativity

This gives it a great originality.

contrasts with the exuberance of some of those liturgical dramas,

which seemed more a theatrical spectacle than a celebration.

## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- 1.1. Some precedents
- 1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- 1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)

## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

- 2.1. The nearness of God
- 2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, "hearers of the Word"

## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- 3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem
- 3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family
- 3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion

**In his first life of Saint Francis,  
written between 1228 and  
1229,**



**Thomas of Celano begins by explaining  
that, with the crib celebration, Francis  
sought**



**“to enact the memory” of the birth of  
the Child Jesus and “see” with his  
bodily eyes the discomfort and the  
poverty he endured (n. 84).**

**Consequently, Francis intends**



**that all people authentically engage  
with the mystery of the Incarnation**



**by involving their physical senses,  
meditation, and contemplation.**

**Francis, filled with  
indescribable joy, prepares  
for the celebration,**

**highlighting the  
poverty and  
simplicity  
surrounding  
Jesus' birth.**

**During this event, the priest  
celebrates "the Mass over  
the manger" (85)**

**and Francis  
preaches to the  
gathered crowd  
"with sweet  
affection."**

The deep joy experienced by those present

Additionally, the veracity of the event is also validated through the vision of a virtuous man,

the man was known as “John of Greccio” and had previously served as a soldier.

serves as confirmation that the Child Jesus had been reborn in their hearts (86).

who witnesses Francis cradling a beautiful child. According to Bonaventure,

Celano concludes the narrative by alluding to the miracles that happened in that very place (87).

## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- 1.1. Some precedents
- 1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- 1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)

## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

- 2.1. The nearness of God
- 2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, "hearers of the Word"

## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- 3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem
- 3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family
- 3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion



“Out of Greccio is made  
a new Bethlehem” (85),

where the faithful can  
participate without having to  
move to the physical place  
that the crusaders were  
trying to recapture.

In this way, Francis shows  
that the believer can  
venerate the holy places  
anywhere in the world,

because what really matters  
is the spiritual experience.

# The monastic tradition offered accounts about this human capacity of reliving biblical events and places:

“You have no need to go, because you can find those places here, in your homeland;

and although physically they do not look alike, their true meaning is the same. [...]

Christ the child in the manger is today the host of sacrifice on the altar; every altar is Bethlehem.”

In the celebration at Greccio, Francis presents a model of the Church in which all are protagonists.

Celano indicates that clergy-laymen, men-women, nobles-plebeians gathered in that cave

There are brethren "from many different places," "men and women of that land," rich and poor.

and participated together, without hierarchies or privileges,

thus overcoming the protocol rigidity of many liturgical ceremonies of the time.

Each one collaborates in the preparation and all share with joy.

Likewise, creation joyfully takes part in that cosmic celebration.

An atmosphere of happy harmony is created with animals and inanimate creatures.

Francis preaches “with sweet affection,” “in the manner of a bleating sheep.” (86)

The rocks “respond” and “the boulders echo back the joyful crowd” (85).

That celebration was made in full nature, “on the manger” (85).

Only later that site was consecrated as a temple” and “an altar was constructed over the manger” (87).

## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- 1.1. Some precedents
- 1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- 1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)



## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

- 2.1. The nearness of God
- 2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, “hearers of the Word”

## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- 3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem
- 3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family
- 3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion

**Celano emphasizes that Francis' celebration accomplishes more than just a symbolic restoration of the Church;**

**it also sows the seeds of a new humanity: peaceful, affectionate, and egalitarian.**

**All the participants join in celebrating together the presence of the newborn,**

**feeling fully engaged and free from divisions based on gender or social status.**

**Pope Francis elucidates the novel relationships established there, stating:**

**“everyone gathered in joy around the cave, with no distance between the original event and those sharing in its mystery” (AdS 2).**

Francis appears as an “alter Christus,”

Moreover, those present are moved to conversion upon witnessing “the discomfort of his infant needs” (84).

Thus, the infant Jesus, who “has been given over to oblivion,

breathing life into the seemingly inert Child.

This contemplative and transforming experience fills them with joy.

now is awakened and impressed on their loving memory by his own grace through his holy servant Francis” (86).

# Francis' prophetic novelty was not easy to understand and assimilate.

In fact, the successive pictorial representations of this event gradually remove the laity from the center of the scene

and place the celebration within a church, where the hierarchical norms of the time are meticulously observed.

These depictions also mirror the transitioning of the Franciscan Order towards a more clerical and conventual life.



**The Bardi table, painted in 1243, is the oldest representation.**



**It depicts twenty significant scenes of Francis' life,**



**nine of which will no longer appear in any artistic work between 1250 and 1450.**

**After analyzing fifteen paintings of the Greccio crèche created during that period,**



**Chiara Frugoni observes: "What remains of the Christmas night desired by Francis,**



**vibrant with songs and his intense words? A well-painted silence."**

## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- 1.1. Some precedents
- 1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- 1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)

## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

- 2.1. The nearness of God
- 2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, "hearers of the Word"

## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- 3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem
- 3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family
- 3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion

**In 1263, thirty-four years after the text of Celano (1Cel 84-87),**



**Bonaventure of Bagnoregio wrote his “Major Legend,”**



**including a new version of the Christmas celebration (LMj 10,7).**

**At the Franciscan General Chapter, celebrated in Paris in 1266,**



**it was decided that this should be the only official biography of Saint Francis,**



**and the previous biographies, including those by Celano, were ordered to be destroyed.**

**The new text aims to clarify that Francis**

**had acted in accordance with canonical norms**

**and ecclesiastical authorities.**

**For this reason, Bonaventure emphasizes that Francis,**

**wanting to prevent the celebration from being seen as “a type of novelty,”**

**“petitioned for and obtained permission from the Supreme Pontiff,” Honorius III.**

**This justification also extends to Francis preaching to the people during Mass,**

**a fact briefly mentioned by Bonaventure.**

**He makes no reference to the expressive body language Francis used.**

**After affirming that everything had been agreed upon with the Pope,**

**Bonaventure omits the specific instructions that, according to Celano,**

**Francis had given his friend John on how to prepare the location for the celebration.**

The motivation and purpose of the story also change.

In contrast, Bonaventure

In Celano's text, Francis seeks to illustrate the humility and poverty of the Incarnation

so that everyone can follow the footsteps of Christ and be moved to observe the Gospel without gloss.

narrows it down to "arousing devotion" (LMj 7,1).

**Bonaventure highlights Francis's virtues as a "man of God"**



**and the miraculous vision of "Sir John of Greccio," described as a "virtuous and truthful knight,"**



**whose "holiness make credible the vision."**

**Bonaventure does not mention the collective experience emphasized by Celano.**



**He merely states that "Francis's example, when considered by the world,**



**is capable of arousing the hearts of those who are sluggish in the faith of Christ."**

There is no explicit mention of the presence of women at the celebration in Bonaventure's account.

He also does not mention that women benefited from the hay's healing properties.

He concludes the story by attributing the true reason for what happened:

He likely deemed it inappropriate to mention women at night in that secluded place.

For Bonaventure, the miracles that would occur lend credibility to Sir John's vision.

“Thus God glorified his servant in every way and demonstrated the efficacy of his holy prayer.”



## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- **1.1. Some precedents**
- **1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)**
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- **1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)**



## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

- **2.1. The nearness of God**
- **2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, "hearers of the Word"**

## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- **3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem**
- **3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family**
- **3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures**

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion

In Bethlehem  
“the **kindness  
and generous  
love** of God our  
Savior  
appeared” (Tit  
**3:4**).

The Franciscan  
school has  
placed great  
emphasis on  
**the mystery of  
God as**  
generous love  
and pure  
goodness.

**The Child Jesus presents himself helpless, poor, moving, and vulnerable,**



**because he does not come to dominate, but to be welcomed.**



**The almighty Lord unveils himself in the destitution and dependence of an infant.**

**Through his incarnation,**



**he embraces poverty and humility,**



**identifying himself particularly with the poor, the humble, and the needy.**

## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- **1.1. Some precedents**
- **1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)**
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- **1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)**

## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

- 
- **2.1. The nearness of God**
  - **2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, "hearers of the Word"**

## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- **3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem**
- **3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family**
- **3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures**

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion

**In Greccio, Francis of Assisi beautifully portrays the closeness of the Incarnate God**

**who became one with humanity and walks alongside us.**

**“In the child Jesus, God made himself dependent, in need of human love.”**

In that  
humble  
manger,  
nestled  
between the  
ox and the  
donkey,

Francis invites  
us to “feel”  
and “touch”  
the nearness,  
poverty, and  
tenderness of  
the Child  
Jesus

who has  
placed “his  
dwelling  
among us”  
(Jn 1:14).

“God  
appears as a  
child, for us to  
take into our  
arms.

**Beneath weakness and frailty,  
he conceals his power” (AdS  
8).**



**“Thanks to St Francis, the Christian  
people were able to perceive that at  
Christmas**



**God truly became the “Emmanuel,”  
the God-with-us from whom no barrier  
nor any distance can separate us.**

**Thus, in that Child, God  
became close to each one of  
US,**



**so close that we are able to speak  
intimately to him**



**and engage in a trusting relationship of  
deep affection with him, just as we do  
with any**

**The Pope acknowledges the evocative power of the Nativity Scene,**

**which “helps us to imagine the scene. It touches our hearts and makes us enter into salvation history” (AdS 3).**

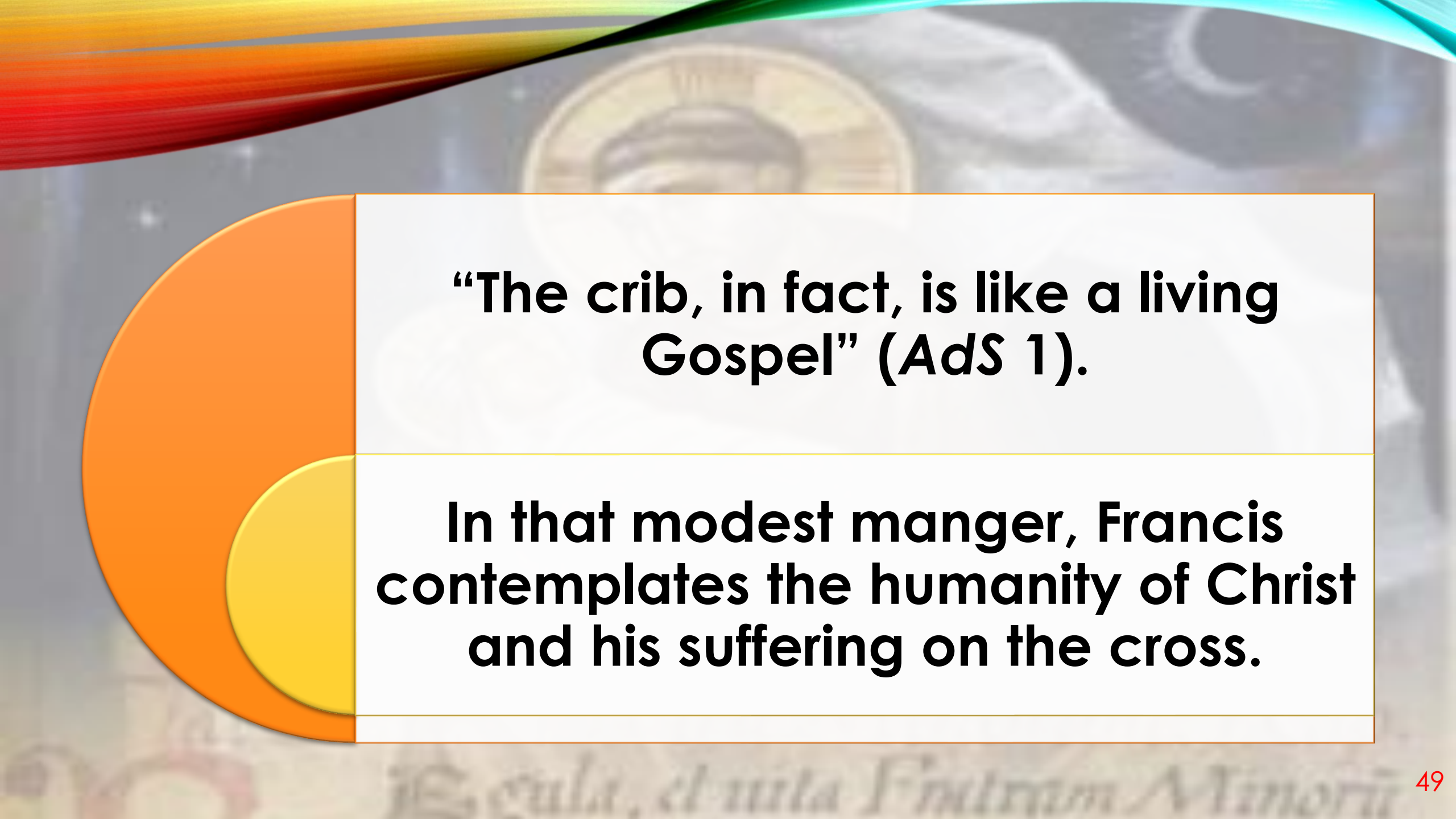
**Often, it incorporates characters and elements from various cultural contexts where it is displayed,**

**allowing observers to feel like “contemporaries of the event” and experience it as vivid and real.**

**Nevertheless, this should not exempt us from meditating on the Gospels,**

**as they “remain our source for understanding and reflecting on that event” (AdS 3).**





**“The crib, in fact, is like a living Gospel” (AdS 1).**

**In that modest manger, Francis contemplates the humanity of Christ and his suffering on the cross.**

**Benedict XVI acknowledges that Saint Francis,**



**through his Nativity scene, has revealed a crucial aspect of the Christian faith,**



**because he has “highlighted the defenseless love of God, his humanity and his kindness.”**

**In doing so, he enabled a better understanding of the power of the Risen One,**



**who conquers death. Divine action is just, peaceful, and loving: not due to weakness**



**but because God's strength surpasses all. He is even stronger than his own strength (cf. Wis 12:16).**

## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- **1.1. Some precedents**
- **1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)**
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- **1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)**

## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

- **2.1. The nearness of God**
- **2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, "hearers of the Word"**

## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- **3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem**
- **3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family**
- **3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures**

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion

**We are listeners of  
the Word,**



**through whom everything has  
come into existence,**



**and who, in the fullness of  
time, became incarnate in our  
world.**

**At the Christmas  
scene,**



**Francis of Assisi chose not to  
use images and, among the  
living characters,**



**he omitted key figures, such as  
Joseph, Mary, and the Child.**

**He thus created an empty,  
symbolic space that invited all  
present**



**to use their imagination, to  
listen to the Word,**



**to engage in the representation  
and to open themselves to the  
contemplation of the mystery.**

**“A child is born to us, a son is  
given to us” (Is 9:5).**



**The simplicity of the scene  
allowed each person to use  
their own eyes**



**to perceive the poverty and  
humility of the newborn**

**The Pope affirms that, on that occasion,**

**“the nativity scene was enacted and experienced by all who were present” (AdS 2).**

**Each of them became part of the representation,**

**mentally identifying with any character to personally experience the celebrated mystery.**

**In his letter to the faithful, Francis of Assisi had already stated that**

**we are “mothers [of Christ] when we carry Him in our heart and body through a holy activity,**

**which must shine before others by example” (2LtF 53).**

A "virtuous man," John Vellita, had a vision in which the Child Jesus was revived by Francis.

This vision expresses the revitalization experienced by participants within themselves.

The image of the Child-God, who "had been given over to oblivion,"

is now "impressed in their loving memory" and "everyone went home with joy" (1Cel 86)

**At that time, it was not uncommon to leave an empty space in artistic representations of Jesus**

**to signify that, after His death and resurrection,**

**His body was invisible to physical eyes and thus,**

**it was necessary to imagine and contemplate Him with the eyes of faith.**

**The entire scene was meant to be mentally relived while it was narrated and performed.**

**Eucharistic transubstantiation also presupposes that believers perceive Jesus in the consecrated bread and wine with the eyes of faith.**



## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- **1.1. Some precedents**
- **1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)**
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- **1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)**

## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

- **2.1. The nearness of God**
- **2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, "hearers of the Word"**



## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- **3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem**
- **3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family**
- **3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures**

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion

**The Franciscan theological tradition underlines that everything in existence is one big family.**



**The celebration at Greccio symbolizes the unity of hearts that characterized the early Church in Jerusalem,**



**where “the community of believers was of one heart and mind” (Acts 4:32).**

**In fact, those present, including men, animals, and inanimate things,**



**feel emotionally united in celebrating the arrival of the Incarnate Word**



**The joy they experience in that ritual celebration transcends all barriers and hierarchies**

### 3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem

**Today the representation of the Christmas crèche**



**also serves as a reminder that we constitute a vast cosmic family,**



**calling us to break down barriers and prejudices.**

**In doing the crib every year,**



**we utilize “the most diverse materials” (AdS 1),**



**thus showing that no one should be excluded.**

Often, we “include the ruins of ancient houses or buildings”

which serve as  
“visible signs of  
fallen humanity”  
(AdS 4)

and  
simultaneously  
encourage us to  
recognize Jesus  
as the Savior

who has come  
“to heal and  
rebuild, to restore  
the world and our  
lives” (AdS 4).

The presence of shepherds, beggars, and other humble individuals in nativity scenes

reminds us that “it is the humble and the poor who greet the event of the Incarnation” (AdS 5),

while “we see Herod’s palace in the background, closed and deaf to the tidings of joy” (AdS 6).

## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- **1.1. Some precedents**
- **1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)**
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- **1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)**

## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

- **2.1. The nearness of God**
- **2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, "hearers of the Word"**

## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- **3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem**
- **3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family**
- **3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures**

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion



**Francis of Assisi**



**sought to illustrate the profound significance of the nativity crèche**



**by celebrating it alongside the Eucharist,**

**even though he made it clear that these were distinct elements.**



**In fact, As described by Celano, Francis “stands before the manger (*coram praesepio*),**



**while the priest celebrates Mass “over the manger” (*supra praesepe*).**

**That child who is born saves us  
on the cross**



**and returns glorified on the Eucharistic  
altar.**



**Bethlehem, the cross, and the altar are  
inseparable.**

**This link between the  
Incarnation and the Eucharist,**



**which used to be emphasized at that  
time, is also highlighted by Francis.**



**The Child, lying on the hay that the  
animals eat, becomes for us “the bread  
that came down from heaven” (Jn  
6:41).**



Saint Augustine conveyed this symbolism by saying:

St Francis also underscores that, every day,

“Laid in a manger, he became our food.”

this mystery of the Incarnation is made present in the Eucharist,

where Christ reveals his sublime humility by concealing Himself “under an ordinary piece of bread” (LTO 27).

## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- **1.1. Some precedents**
- **1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)**
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- **1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)**

## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

- **2.1. The nearness of God**
- **2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, "hearers of the Word"**

## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- **3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem**
- **3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family**
- **3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures**

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion

**The inclusion of many natural elements in today's Nativity scenes,**

**such as mountains, streams, sheep, vegetation,**

**is a meaningful way to express our harmony with all sister creatures,**

**as they too participate in the feast of the Nativity.**

Celano vividly portrays the Greccio celebration as a joyful, visual, and emotional experience.

That night is pleasant and “is lit up like day” (1Cel 85)

There are many sensory expressions that are also used to describe the mystical experience:

tasting, savoring, honey, sweetness, resounding voices, jubilant hymns, songs of joy, tender affection, etc.

**These expressions emphasize that this experience engages the entire human being,**

**including his bodily senses: sight, hearing, taste...**

**Celano even likens the mellifluous voice of Francis to the bleating of a sheep,**

**possibly indicating his mystical union with the lamb of God.**

The assembly contemplates the mystery with their own eyes, both external and internal, and “touches” it.

When Francis pronounces “the babe from Bethlehem” or “Jesus,”

he “seems to lick his lips [...], tasting the word on his happy palate” (86).

His body language is so expressive that “he made of his whole body a tongue” (1Cel 97)

In his teachings,  
Francis prefers to focus  
on the concrete

He shies away from the  
symbolic language  
that was prevalent in  
medieval culture,

and typically avoids  
abstract terminology.

and steers clear of  
“excessive doctrinal  
mediations.”.

**When he wants to highlight the profound meaning of Christmas, he relies on straightforward narratives:**

**“I want even the walls to eat meat on that day,**

**and I they cannot, at least on the outside they be rubbed with grease!**

**He wanted the poor and hungry to be filled by the rich,**

**and oxen and asses to be spoiled with extra feed and hay” (2Cel 199-200).**



**Rather than engaging with abstract ontological concepts regarding the humanity of Christ**



**(such as hypostatic union or personhood), Francis is more focused on the experiential aspects**



**and is deeply moved by the humility and poverty of the Child born in Bethlehem.**

**According to Celano,**



**“he could not recall without tears the great want surrounding the little, poor Virgin on that day [...],**



**and reflected on the want of Christ her son” (2Cel 200).**

## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- **1.1. Some precedents**
- **1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)**
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- **1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)**

## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

- **2.1. The nearness of God**
- **2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, "hearers of the Word"**

## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- **3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem**
- **3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family**
- **3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures**

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion

St Clare draws inspiration from the mystery of the Incarnation to formulate her spirituality of poverty and to exhort her sisters to follow the Child of Bethlehem and his poor mother:

“Out of love of the most holy and beloved Child wrapped in poor little swaddling clothes and placed in a manger and of His most holy Mother,

I admonish, beg, and encourage my sisters always to wear poor garments” (RCI 2,24).

The contemplation of the poor Child-Jesus filled her with immense joy,

for he brought us salvation with all the riches of the Kingdom of heaven.

“So great and good Lord, then, on coming into the Virgin’s womb, wanted to appear despised, needy, and poor in this world (1LtCl 19-22).

**In the poor Child of Bethlehem,**



**Clare contemplates the crucified Christ.**



**His self-emptying (*Kenosis*) in Bethlehem finds its culmination in Easter and is inseparable from it.**

**Manger and cross, Bethlehem and Calvary, Greccio and La Verna**



**are the two focal points of Clare's contemplation.**



**She also sees Mary associated with that redemptive ministry of her Son, especially in the Incarnation**

Thus, the birth in Bethlehem, his earthly life and his death on the cross

We are all invited to follow in the footsteps of him

are the three stripes of that mirror that shows the poverty and humility of Christ.

“who placed poor in the crib, lived poor as in the world, and remained naked on the cross”  
(TestCI 45).

## 1. The narratives on the nativity scene at Greccio

- **1.1. Some precedents**
- **1.2. The version of Celano (1Cel 84-87)**
  - a) New Bethlehem, new Church, new creation
  - b) A new humanity
- **1.3. Bonaventure's narrative (LMj 10,7)**

## 2. The mystery of God as generous love

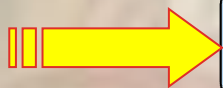
- **2.1. The nearness of God**
- **2.2. An invitation to be contemplatives, "hearers of the Word"**

## 3. Strengthening family relationships

- **3.1. Everyone has a place in Bethlehem**
- **3.2. The Incarnation and the Eucharist build the cosmic family**
- **3.3. Celebrating joyfully with sister creatures**

## 4. St. Clare and the Mystery of the Incarnation

## Conclusion



**In celebrating the nativity scene at Greccio, Francis conveys his profound beliefs**

**and invites everyone to personally experience the mystery of Christ's birth,**

**transcending any formal celebration of it.**

**His biographers tell us that “he used to observe the Nativity of the Child Jesus**

**with an immense eagerness above all other solemnities” (2Cel 199),**

**because “once He was born, it was certain that we would be saved” (CAss110).**

**He referred to it as “the Feast of feasts” and desired it to be celebrated with immense joy and united to all creation.**

**On this day, he wished that everyone including humans and animals, should enjoy meat,**

**and even the walls should partake in some way (2Cel 199).**



**Francis celebrated the  
Nativity at Greccio**



**a month after the Later Rule  
was approved (Nov. 29, 1223),**



**with which his Order was  
officially born.**

**Since his return from  
the Holy Land, in 1219,**



**he had been sick and  
disillusioned with the direction  
the Order was taking.**



**In fact, he had already  
delegated his functions as  
Minister General.**

In this difficult situation, Francis joyfully celebrates the birth of Christ.

Later, in the spring of 1225, when he was already blind,

He does not let sickness and suffering take away his joy and hope (cf. 1Cel 85).

he composed and sang his Canticle of Creatures, again showing that he knew well in whom he had believed (cf. 2Tim 1:12).

**Next year, we will celebrate  
the gift of Stigmata,**



**thus completing the celebration of  
Greccio.**



**By uniting the crib to the Eucharist,  
Francis showed that the incarnation is  
inseparable from the paschal mystery.**

**Celano tells us that, in the  
humble manger at Greccio,**



**Francis contemplates the humanity of  
Christ and his suffering on the cross.**



**In fact, there is no manger without  
stigmata, because “being Christian  
means living in a Paschal manner.”**

Francis continues to repeat to us: “I have done what is mine; may Christ teach you yours” (LMj 14:3).

In a consumerist and hyper-accelerated society, we need to return, metaphorically, to the refuge of Greccio,

To respond to this challenge, we need a deep faith that can help us see the starry sky in the darkness of night.

finding shelter in the rock, and allowing ourselves to be “wrapped in silence” (AdS 3).

