



*The Cave at Greccio where Francis re-created Bethlehem.*

# The Spirit of Secular Franciscan Life

Newsletter for Secular Franciscans,  
Assumption BVM Province

We are fast approaching Christmas, the celebration of the Incarnation of our God. For St. Francis this was the Feast of Feasts. I offer, therefore, some reflections on Greccio as a way of wishing all of you a Blessed Christmas and a peace-filled New Year.

*Roch Niemier OFM, Provincial Spiritual Assistant  
Assumption BVM Province*

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

May the Lord give you peace.

I greet you at this Christmas season and pray that the blessings of God fill you to overflowing.

I continue to learn the ins and outs of being a Provincial Spiritual Assistant. I think I've gotten past first grade. What I can offer at this point are reflections for spiritual enrichment, which is the goal of this second newsletter.

I'm aware of the need to help friars across the board understand better the SFO calling, and that as regards the vocation to Franciscan life we are all on equal footing. At the end of January 2006 Fr. Tod Laverty OFM and I will work together in offering a day of reflection to our Provinces' formation students and directors on the relationship between First Order Friars and Secular Franciscans. It's a step forward.

One of my concerns is: what can I do to help nurture and promote Franciscan life for Seculars. One way might be in writing on Franciscan spirituality. I've just completed a text on Spirituality and Franciscan Places, based on 30 years of pilgrimage work at the places of Francis and Clare in central Italy. The book is expected to be out in June-July 2006, published by St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, Ohio. I'm not informing you of this to encourage sales. Rather to let you know the focus of the book is on Franciscan spirituality, and that it may contain helpful inspirations.

## GRECCIO

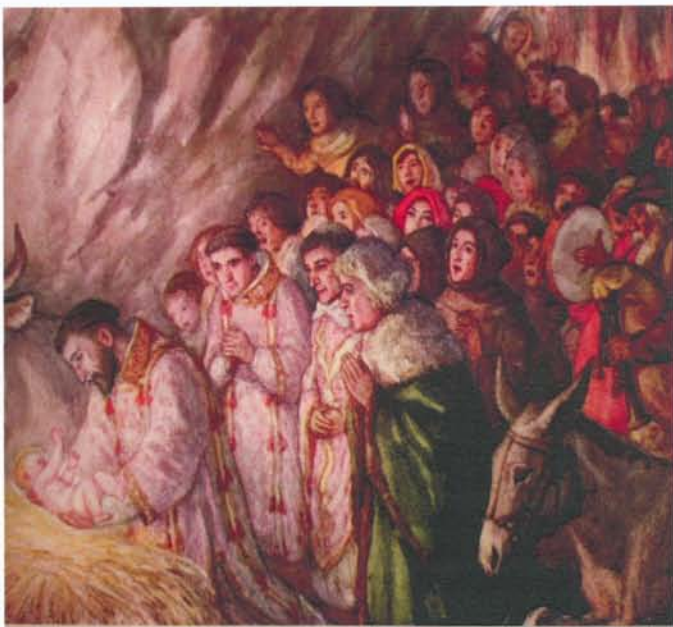
Francis loved Christmas above all other feasts and he wanted to celebrate it in a special way. Why? Because our Good God chose to be born in human flesh. Because the Word was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Because our God was born each day in the Eucharistic bread on the altar. But most of all because of God's *great love*, revealed to us in the Incarnation. The way this love was experienced and celebrated at Christmas was not working. The traditional liturgical celebration of the time failed to awaken and touch hearts.

What did Francis do? It was December of 1223. He recently returned from Rome where Pope Honorius III approved the Franciscan Rule of Life, November 29, 1223. Thomas of Celano and St. Bonaventure described what happened and the preparation that took place near the little village of Greccio in the Rieti Valley. This is Celano's account.

We should note then, as a matter worthy of memory and something to be recalled with reverence, what he did three years prior to his death, at the town of Greccio, on the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ. There was a certain man in that area named John who had a good reputation and an even better manner of life. Blessed Francis loved him with special affection. ... Francis had John summoned to him some fifteen days prior to

the birthday of the Lord. "If you desire to celebrate the coming feast of the Lord together at Greccio," he said to him, "hurry before me and carefully make ready the things I tell you. For I wish to enact 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 an ox and an ass standing by, he rested on hay." Once the good and faithful man had heard Francis's words, he ran quickly and prepared in that place all the things that the holy man had requested. (Early Documents I, 254-255)

One of Francis's and the friars most difficult problems in the renewal of the Church was that the people they were addressing were already Christians. The people knew the basic stories and teaching, as we do. They had seen other visual images of the nativity. But their hearts needed to be reached again. How does one preach the Word of God to those who think that they already understand it? How does one listen and feel as if though one were hearing and witnessing the stories of the Gospel for a first time? How do we reach people with a message they've heard again and again? Francis decided to concretize God's great love through a visual picture of Bethlehem placed before the eyes of the people.



*St. Francis at Greccio, December 24-25, 1223*

Francis used words in his sermon at the Midnight Mass, but he also made the Incarnation real and immediate through props: an ox, an ass, a manger, a cave, singing and the warmth of love. The setting helped people celebrate an event 1200 years ago, and opened their hearts to God's love and the coming of Christ into them. "Greccio was made, as it were, a new Bethlehem."

Bonaventure says: "The example which Francis put before the world was calculated to rouse the hearts of those weak in the faith" ... because faith had grown cold. Celano describes a vision of John of Velita: *He saw a little child lying in the manger lifeless, and he saw the holy man of God go up to it and rouse the child as from a deep sleep. This vision was not unfitting, for the Child Jesus had been forgotten in the hearts of many; but, by the working of his grace, he was brought to life again through his servant St. Francis and stamped upon their fervent memory* (Early Documents I, 256).

Francis also had an altar placed over the manger for he wished to show the connection between the coming of Jesus in the flesh in the manger and the sacramental coming of Jesus on the Eucharistic altar. The baby, picked up from the manger and coming alive in the arms of Francis, was symbolic of Christ coming to life in the hands of the priest at the altar. Scholars point out that this is a most appropriate interpretation for the event that happened at Greccio.

Francis's focus on Christmas as the Feast of Feasts and the manifestation of God's love gave birth to a new understanding of the Incarnation. Most of us have learned that God sent his Son to be born as one like us to make right the first sin of Adam and Eve. So without sin there would have been no need for the Incarnation. Because of Francis, the Franciscans have developed an alternate interpretation. God's plan for having his Son become one like us was part of God's original design for all creation from the very beginning. It was not an afterthought on God's part, something God decided to do to make up for original sin and human sinfulness. God longed for all eternity to become human, and God's Son accomplished that through his birth at Bethlehem. The Incarnation of the Son of God was the means by which God could share most fully his life and love for humanity.

The crib scene responded perfectly to the need human beings always have to see visibly that which they believe. Francis undoubtedly gave new impetus in devotion to the humanity of Christ and impetus in devotion to the place of the crèche. To attribute the invention of the crib to Francis does not square away with history. The merit of Francis has been in showing to all the kind of heart one must have to welcome the Child Jesus and God's tender love. It is humility, simplicity and purity of faith that made Greccio the prototype of the crib as we know it. God became a child that we might have someone to love. Francis re-enacted the Christmas story that again the hearts of all might be roused to know how much they are loved.