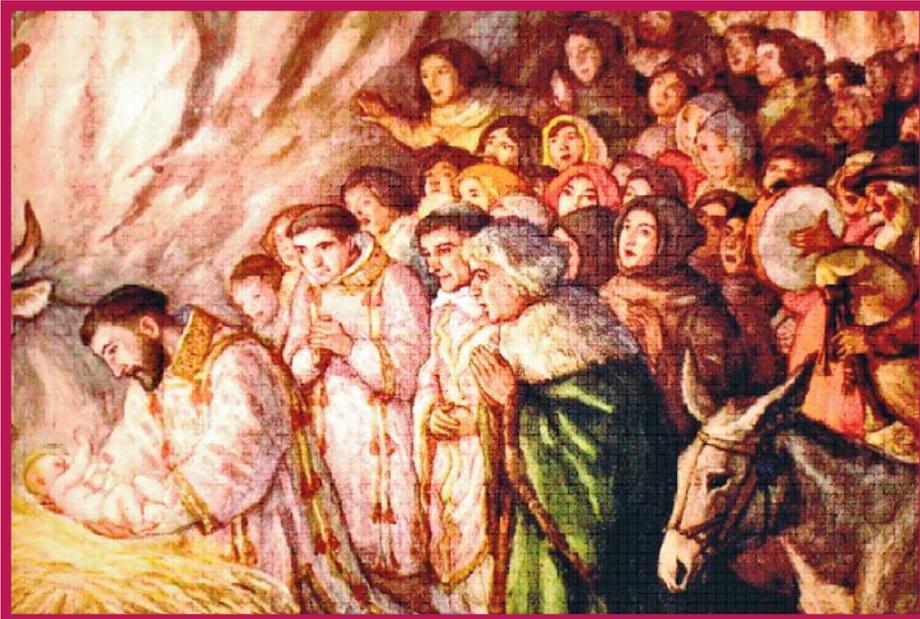


# The Spirit of Secular Franciscan Life

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Francis, the Brothers and local inhabitants, Greccio, Christmas, 1223  
(P. Subercaseaux Errazuriz Engraving)

## Christmas at Greccio

# Why?

## Consequences for Christian Spirituality

## Why Greccio

The key to understanding Francis and what he did at Greccio in 1223 is his experience of God's love. The Feast that captured this mystery was Christmas. The way this feast was being celebrated, however, was not working. The liturgical celebrations of the time failed to touch hearts and awaken the wonder of God's love.

**SFO RULE 4:**  
**Christ, the gift of the Father's love, is the way to him, the truth into which the Holy Spirit leads us, and the life which he has come to give abundantly.**

What did Francis do? We know the story well. It was December of 1223. About 15 days before Christmas, he called upon his friend, John, and gave him instructions. In an empty cave he had a manger prepared, hay carried in and an ox and an ass led to the spot. The brothers and local villagers were summoned. The hills echoed with their songs, and that special night was rendered brilliant and solemn by bright torches and sounds of joy. A solemn Mass was celebrated over the manger. Francis preached to

the people about the birth of the poor King. Francis's friend, John, claimed that he saw a beautiful little child asleep in that manger whom Francis embraced in both of his arms and seemed to wake it from sleep. This vision

was most appropriate for as Bonaventure said: "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."

Francis also had an altar placed over the manger for he wished to show the connection between the coming of Jesus 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.

It was solely the ardor of faith and love which warmed the night, and this is what distinguished Greccio's celebration from those of cathedrals and abbeys. Francis knew instinctively that if the place and the people were properly prepared, Christ would come alive in their hearts.

### Consequences of Greccio for Christian Spirituality

The Franciscan contribution to Christian spirituality which flows out of the Greccio story touches human hearts with wonder and surprise. Note the following reflections.

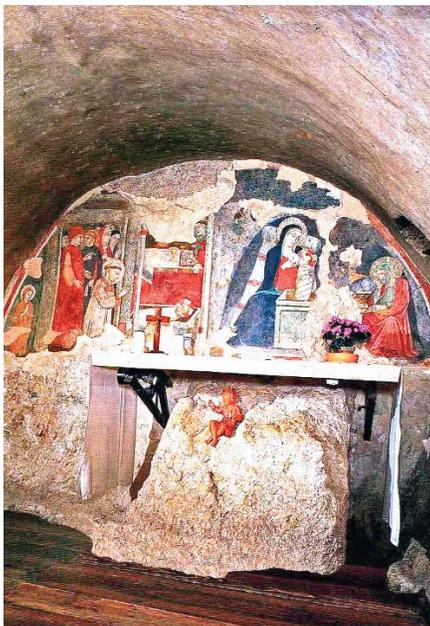
#### A gentle, warm, human tenderness towards God.

The following words from St. Bonaventure evoke a touching, tender, almost childlike response to the mystery of Christmas, even for us who might approach spirituality in a sophisticated and "adult" manner. His sentiments had to come from the inspiration Francis bequeathed to us at Greccio.

He writes in *THE FIVE FEASTS OF THE CHILD JESUS*, "Once this birth has taken place, the devout soul knows and tastes how good the Lord Jesus is. In truth we find how good he is when we nourish him with our prayers, bathe him in the waters of our warm and loving tears, wrap him in the spotless swaddling clothes of our desires, carry him in an embrace of holy love, kiss him over and over again with heart-felt longings (see Christmas Card) and cherish him in the bosom of our inmost heart."

Can you imagine yourself kissing the feet of the Child Jesus, embracing him tenderly in your arms, cherishing him in the depths of your heart. Yet, that is what Christmas is all about. Francis shows us this image of our God.

### The Humility of God.



The cave at Greccio where Christmas happened.

What Francis experienced in the Incarnation was the Humility of God, God bending down, bending low to become one with us. That gesture was the most profound deed of love humankind will ever know.

St. Francis didn't have the words to frame this mystery into a theological teaching, but he intuited its truth. He knew in his deepest center that this was the meaning of

Christmas. He gave us a visual image of that truth at Greccio: A cave, animals, hay, smells. No Mary, no Joseph, no bambino. Only God's love. (See: *Ilia Delio, The Humility of God, St. Anthony Messenger Press.*)

Years later, the great Franciscan scholar, St. Bonaventure, would draw upon the inspiration of Francis. He developed a theology of the heart out of which he wrote eloquently of the Humility of God. Other scholars favored a theology of the head, believing that we come to know God through the use of reason. The Franciscan approach, however, begins with love, a love made visible in God's bending low to become one like us.

### Why Christmas?

If asked: Why did God become flesh? We might answer: "Jesus came to redeem us." Or, "Jesus came to die for our sins." Without sin, then, there would be no need for the Incarnation.

Francis's focus on Christmas as the Feast of Feasts and the mark of God's love gives birth to a new understanding of the Incarnation. God wanted to become like us from the very beginning, even before sin happened. Why? To reveal how profoundly God loves us and validate the wonder of human nature created in God's image. Bethlehem fulfilled God's longing from all eternity to do just that.

Does this remarkable belief make any difference in our lives? Absolutely.

**First**, it highlights the rich meaning of Jesus. He is not Plan B, an afterthought on God's part to make up for original sin. **Second**, this view helps us appreciate the depth and beauty of our humanness. It gives richer meaning and understanding to the biblical phrase "created in God's image." **Third** and most important, this understanding offers a new and transformed image of God, not as Someone demanding the suffering and death of Jesus as atonement for sin. Rather, this view allows us to focus on God's overflowing love, a love that is the very life of the Trinity. What a difference this makes for our relationship with God! We are invited into life and love, not suffering and death.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR SFO:

**As God bends low to love us where we are, we must be open to welcome God in our lives, to embrace this God of humble love and to allow God to live in us in every way. Every breath of life must be the breath of God. It is the role of Christians to publicly witness to the humility of God's faithful love, and this is nothing short of making Christ live anew, namely, attentiveness to the presence of God in the details of the fragile human person, openness to the ways God is both hidden and revealed in creation, and relationship to the God incarnated in our neighbors, family and community members.**

*Sisters and Brothers,  
It's all about Love.  
A Blessed Christmas to All.  
Fr. Roch*

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