Christmas at Greccio (Celano & Bonaventure)


His highest aim, foremost desire, and greatest intention was to pay heed to the holy gospel in all things and through all things, to follow the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and to retrace His footsteps completely with all vigilance and all zeal, all the desire of his soul and all the fervor of his heart.

Francis used to recall with regular meditation the words of Christ and recollect His deeds with most attentive perception. Indeed, so thoroughly did the humility of the Incarnation and the charity of the Passion occupy his memory that he scarcely wanted to think of anything else.

We should note then, as 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 but an even better manner of life. Blessed Francis loved him with special affection, since, despite being a noble in the land and very honored in human society, he had trampled the nobility of the flesh under his feet and pursued instead the nobility of the spirit. As usual, blessed 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.

Finally, the day of joy has drawn near, the time of exultation has come. From many different places the brethren have been called. As they could, the men and women of that land with exultant hearts prepare candles and torches to light up that night whose shining star has enlightened every day and year. Finally, the holy man of God comes and, finding all things prepared, he saw them and was glad. Indeed, the manger is prepared, the hay is carried in, and the ox and the ass are led to the spot. There simplicity is given a place of honor, poverty is exalted, humility is commended, and out of Greccio is made a new Bethlehem.

The night is lit up like day, delighting both man and beast. The people arrive, ecstatic at this new mystery of new joy. The forest amplifies the cries and the boulders echo back the joyful crowd. The brothers sing, giving God due praise, and the whole night abounds with jubilation. The holy man of God stands before the manger, filled with heartfelt sighs, contrite in his piety, and overcome with wondrous joy. Over the manger the solemnities of the Mass are celebrated and the priest enjoys a new consolation.

The holy man of God is dressed in the vestments of the Levites, since he was a Levite, and with full voice sings the holy gospel. [Thomas is the first to suggest that Francis was a deacon.] Here is his voice: a powerful voice, a pleasant voice, a clear voice, a musical voice, inviting all to the highest of gifts. Then he preaches to the people standing around him and pours forth sweet honey about the birth of the poor King and the poor city of Bethlehem. Moreover, burning with excessive love, he often calls Christ the “babe from Bethlehem” whenever he means to call Him Jesus.
Saying the word “Bethlehem” in the manner of a bleating sheep, he fills his whole mouth with sound but even more with sweet affection. He seems to lick his lips whenever he uses the expressions “Jesus” or “babe from Bethlehem,” tasting the word on his happy palate and savoring the sweetness of the word. The gifts of the Almighty are multiplied there and a virtuous man sees a wondrous vision. For the man saw a little child lying lifeless in the manger and he saw the holy man of God approach the child and waken him from a deep sleep. Nor is this vision unfitting, since in the hearts of many the child Jesus has been given over to oblivion. Now he is awakened and impressed on their loving memory by His own grace through His holy servant Francis. At length, the night’s solemnities draw to a close and everyone went home with joy.


It happened, three years prior to his death, that he decided to celebrate at the town of Greccio the memory of the birth of the Child Jesus with the greatest solemnity, in order to arouse devotion. So that this would not be considered a type of novelty, he petitioned for and obtained permission from the Supreme Pontiff.

He had a manger prepared, hay carried in and an ox and an ass led to the spot. The brethren are summoned, the people arrive, the forest amplifies with their cries, and that venerable night is rendered brilliant and solemn by a multitude of bright lights and by resonant and harmonious hymns of praise. The man of God stands before the manger, filled with piety, bathed in tears, and overcome with joy. A solemn Mass is celebrated over the manger, with Francis, a levite of Christ, chanting the holy Gospel. Then he preaches to the people standing around him about the birth of the poor King, whom, whenever he means to call him, he called in his tender love, the Babe from Bethlehem. A certain virtuous and truthful knight, Sir John of Greccio, who had abandoned worldly military activity out of love of Christ and had become an intimate friend of the man of God, claimed that he saw a beautiful little child asleep in that manger whom the blessed father Francis embraced in both of his arms and seemed to wake it from sleep. Not only does the holiness of the witness make credible the vision of the devout knight, but also the truth it expresses proves its validity and the subsequent miracles confirm it. For Francis’s example, when considered by the world, is capable of arousing the hearts of those who are sluggish in the faith of Christ. The hay from the crib was kept by the people and miraculously cured sick animals and drove away different kinds of pestilence. Thus God glorified his servant in every way and demonstrated the efficacy of his holy prayer by the evident signs of wonderful miracles.

Questions for consideration:

1. What are the similarities of the two accounts?
2. What are the differences between the two accounts?
3. Which account do you prefer? Why?

[Compiled by Deacon Dave & Thérèse Ream, O.F.S., Revised July 2017]