

LIVING FRATERNITY

Theme: The admirable sign of the crèche ...

For the month of January 2020, we are proposing a reflection on the text from Pope Francis' apostolic letter, given on December 1st 2019, at Greccio. We have chosen excerpts from this letter which presents the meaning and importance of the Nativity scene.

Good reflection and good sharing.

Recall: A spirit of prayer heralds a good encounter, and a good preparation promotes communal experience. At the meeting, having a copy of the Holy Scriptures, the Rule and General Constitutions, will provide clarity and depth for our edification and experience.

JANUARY 2020 MONTHLY MEETING

Opening prayer or song (according to the Ritual or a song chosen by the fraternity)

Introduction

With this Letter, I wish to encourage the beautiful family tradition of preparing the nativity scene in the days before Christmas, but also the custom of setting it up in the workplace, in schools, hospitals, prisons and town squares. Great imagination and creativity is always shown in employing the most diverse materials to create small masterpieces of beauty. As children, we learn from our parents and grandparents to carry on this joyful tradition, which encapsulates a wealth of popular piety. It is my hope that this custom will never be lost and that, wherever it has fallen into disuse, it can be rediscovered and revived.

Origin of the Christmas crèche

The origin of the Christmas crèche is found above all in certain details of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, as related in the Gospels. The evangelist Luke says simply that Mary "gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (2:7). Because Jesus was laid in a manger, known in Latin as *praeseptum*, meaning "manger".

Coming into this world, the Son of God was laid in the place where animals feed. Hay became the first bed of the One who would reveal himself as "the bread come down from heaven" (Jn 6:41). Saint Augustine, with other Church Fathers, was impressed by this symbolism: "Laid in a manger, he became our food" (Sermon 189, 4). Indeed, the nativity scene evokes a number of the mysteries of Jesus' life and brings them close to our own daily lives.

But let us go back to the origins of the Christmas crèche so familiar to us. We need to imagine ourselves in the little Italian town of Greccio, near Rieti. Saint Francis stopped there, most likely on his way back from Rome where on 29 November 1223 he had received the confirmation of his Rule from Pope Honorius III. Francis had earlier visited the Holy Land, and the caves in Greccio reminded him of the countryside of Bethlehem.

Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of Saint Francis, notes that this simple and moving scene was accompanied by the gift of a marvellous vision: one of those present saw the Baby Jesus himself lying in the manger. From the nativity scene of that Christmas in 1223, “everyone went home with joy”.

With the simplicity of that sign, Saint Francis carried out a great work of evangelization. His teaching touched the hearts of Christians and continues today to offer a simple yet authentic means of portraying the beauty of our faith. Indeed, the place where this first nativity scene was enacted expresses and evokes these sentiments. Greccio has become a refuge for the soul, a mountain fastness wrapped in silence.

Why does the Christmas crèche arouse such wonder and move us so deeply? First, because it shows God’s tender love: the Creator of the universe lowered himself to take up our littleness. The gift of life, in all its mystery, becomes all the more wondrous as we realize that the Son of Mary is the source and sustenance of all life. In Jesus, the Father has given us a brother who comes to seek us out whenever we are confused or lost, a loyal friend ever at our side. He gave us his Son who forgives us and frees us from our sins.

Sharing:

Share your comments/thoughts on this explanation of the meaning of the Nativity scene. Take the necessary time for this sharing.

Setting up the Christmas crèche ...

Setting up the Christmas crèche in our homes helps us to relive the history of what took place in Bethlehem. Naturally, the Gospels remain our source for understanding and reflecting on that event. At the same time, its portrayal in the crèche helps us to imagine the scene. It touches our hearts and makes us enter into salvation history as contemporaries of an event that is living and real in a broad gamut of historical and cultural contexts.

In a particular way, from the time of its Franciscan origins, the nativity scene has invited us to “feel” and “touch” the poverty that God’s Son took upon himself in the Incarnation. Implicitly, it summons us to follow him along the path of humility, poverty and self-denial that leads from the manger of Bethlehem to the cross. It asks us to meet him and serve him by showing mercy to those of our brothers and sisters in greatest need (cf. Mt 25:31-46).

Gradually, we come to the cave, where we find the figures of Mary and Joseph. Mary is a mother who contemplates her child and shows him to every visitor. The figure of Mary makes us reflect on the great mystery that surrounded this young woman when God knocked on the door of her immaculate heart. Mary responded in complete obedience to the message of the angel who asked her to become the Mother of God. Her words, “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to

me according to your word” (Luke 1:38), show all of us how to abandon ourselves in faith to God’s will. By her “fiat”, Mary became the mother of God’s Son, not losing but, thanks to him, consecrating her virginity. In her, we see the Mother of God who does not keep her Son only to herself, but invites everyone to obey his word and to put it into practice (cf. John 2:5).

Let us go over to Bethlehem ...

“Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us” (Luke 2:15). So the shepherds tell one another after the proclamation of the angels. A beautiful lesson emerges from these simple words. Unlike so many other people, busy about many things, the shepherds become the first to see the most essential thing of all: the gift of salvation. It is the humble and the poor who greet the event of the Incarnation. The shepherds respond to God who comes to meet us in the Infant Jesus by setting out to meet him with love, gratitude and awe. Thanks to Jesus, this encounter between God and his children gives birth to our religion and accounts for its unique beauty, so wonderfully evident in the nativity scene.

Reflection and sharing:

What does setting up a Christmas crèche in our homes bring us? Share your thoughts.

Epiphany ...

As the feast of Epiphany approaches, we place the statues of the Three Kings in the Christmas crèche. Observing the star, those wise men from the East set out for Bethlehem, in order to find Jesus and to offer him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These costly gifts have an allegorical meaning: gold honours Jesus’ kingship, incense his divinity, myrrh his sacred humanity that was to experience death and burial.

As we contemplate this aspect of the nativity scene, we are called to reflect on the responsibility of every Christian to spread the Gospel. Each of us is called to bear glad tidings to all, testifying by our practical works of mercy to the joy of knowing Jesus and his love.

The Magi teach us that people can come to Christ by a very long route. Men of wealth, sages from afar, a thirst for the infinite, they set out on the long and perilous journey that would lead them to Bethlehem (cf. Mt 2:1-12). Great joy comes over them in the presence of the Infant King. They are not scandalized by the poor surroundings, but immediately fall to their knees to worship him. Kneeling before him, they understand that the God who with sovereign wisdom guides the course of the stars also guides the course of history, casting down the mighty and raising up the lowly. Upon their return home, they would certainly have told others of this amazing encounter with the Messiah, thus initiating the spread of the Gospel among the nations.

Sharing:

What does the arrival of the Magi tells us? Share your thoughts on this arrival.

Childhood Souvenirs

Standing before the Christmas crèche, we are reminded of the time when we were children, eagerly waiting to set it up. These memories make us all the more conscious of the precious gift received from those who passed on the faith to us. At the same time, they remind us of our duty

to share this same experience with our children and our grandchildren. It does not matter how the nativity scene is arranged: it can always be the same or it can change from year to year. What matters is that it speaks to our lives. Wherever it is, and whatever form it takes, the Christmas crèche speaks to us of the love of God, the God who became a child in order to make us know how close he is to every man, woman and child, regardless of their condition.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Christmas crèche is part of the precious yet demanding process of passing on the faith. Beginning in childhood, and at every stage of our lives, it teaches us to contemplate Jesus, to experience God's love for us, to feel and believe that God is with us and that we are with him, his children, brothers and sisters all, thanks to that Child who is the Son of God and the Son of the Virgin Mary. And to realize that in that knowledge we find true happiness. Like Saint Francis, may we open our hearts to this simple grace, so that from our wonderment a humble prayer may arise: a prayer of thanksgiving to God, who wished to share with us his all, and thus never to leave us alone.

Biblical Reflection:

Read the Gospel of Sunday following your meeting in order to be prepared to hear the celebrant's homily.

Share your thoughts on this gospel, using the following questions:

1. To whom does it speak? What does it teach us?
2. How does it reach us personally?
3. Is it a message of hope? Another kind of message? How and why?

Life-Objective

In this month of January, during our fraternal meetings, let us share our wishes/hopes for the New Year ...

Events and information from the Church and the Order

Recall the local and regional meetings and activities.

End of the meeting: (a song or a prayer chosen by the fraternity)

At home

Do a reading on the Magi's visit.

To everyone, we wish a Happy, Holy and Healthy Year 2020!