

Midnight Mass Christmas Homily 2023
8th Centenary (1223-2023) of St. Francis of Assisi's
First Christmas in Greccio, Italy

Bishop John Barres

St. Agnes Cathedral

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At this Christmas Midnight Mass, we celebrate the 800th anniversary of that glorious and historic night when St. Francis of Assisi arranged the first Nativity creche scene in a small cave outside the Italian village of Greccio which is located about half-way between Rome and Assisi.

St. Francis was inspired to do this after visiting the historical place of Christ's birth on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land – the humble stable in a Bethlehem cave.

The large creche set in St. Peter's Square this year commemorates this 800th anniversary by having the figure of St. Francis of Assisi expressing adoration, awe and wonder across the Crib from Mary and Joseph.

As we contemplate the unity of worship and belief expressed in Christmas creches in Bethlehem, in St. Peter's Square in Rome, in St. Agnes Cathedral here in Rockville Centre and on every continent as well as the treasured creche sets in our family homes and parishes, we realize that the entire universe is a cosmic Nativity scene, lovingly designed by God from all eternity for his Incarnation to take place in Salvation history.

Each one of us is a unique and providential character in that cosmic Nativity scene with our own unique ecclesial mission and personal part to play in Salvation history.

Our baptismal call to holiness and mission, our vocations, our marriages and families, the sanctification of our daily work are all meant as part of the Divine

design to welcome Emmanuel into this world and to lead us to Heaven and Eternal Life.¹

In his 2019 Apostolic Letter *Admirabile Signum: On the Meaning and Importance of the Nativity Scene*, Pope Francis emphasizes St. Francis of Assisi's foundational role in our celebration of Christmas.

The Holy Father recalls the origins of the crèche and the first Nativity scene inspired by the holy friar in the year 1223, by which the saint sought “to bring to life the memory of that babe born in Bethlehem.”

Importantly, the remembrance of Christ's birth that St. Francis desired to convey was brought alive in Greccio not by statues but by people from the surrounding towns and countryside.

Pope Francis describes the scene: “On December 25, (Franciscan) friars came to Greccio from various parts, together with people from the farms in the area, who brought flowers and torches to light up that holy night. When (St.) Francis arrived, he found a manger full of hay, an ox and a donkey. All those present experienced a new and indescribable joy in the presence of the Christmas scene. The priest then solemnly celebrated the Eucharist over the manger, showing the bond between the Incarnation of the Son of God and the Eucharist.”(2)

And so as we experience the spiritual rebirth at Christmas of meditating on the Nativity manger scene, we also experience a rekindling of Eucharistic amazement and an even deeper love of the cosmic power flowing through us at every Catholic Mass.

As we remember that Christmas night in Greccio, 800 years ago, Pope Francis reminds us, “the nativity scene was enacted and experienced by all who were present.” That night, there was “no distance between the original event and those sharing in its mystery.” (2)

And Pope Francis states: “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.” (3)

¹ I am indebted to philosopher Fr. Robert Gahl for this insight drawn from Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

The Christmas manger scene invites us to give thanks for our families and to meditate with Charles Dickens and Ebenezer Scrooge on the Christmases past, present and future with our families.

Pope Francis also recognizes the powerful connection between the Manger Crib and the Golgotha Cross of our Savior.

He says: “Indeed, the place where this first nativity scene was enacted expresses and evokes these sentiments...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 great need (cf. Matthew 25:31-46).” (3)

As we spiritually draw near to Bethlehem at the end of this difficult year, we pray for those who suffer in the Holy Land, Ukraine and all war-torn areas of the world.

We pray too for the persecuted Church around the world and we pray for religious liberty in our country and in all countries.

St. Francis of Assisi understood the problems of the world and 800 years later, after he created the first creche, he is still close to the Church and to the world.

Many of you have seen the bronze statue of Atlas directly across from St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City.

It was created by the sculptor Lee Lawrie and installed in 1937. The sculpture portrays the mythical ancient Greek Titan Atlas holding the burden of the heavens on his shoulder.

St. Francis of Assisi is no myth, but at times he has been compared with Atlas in how, through the centuries, he carried the burdens of the Church on his shoulders with his radical and pure Gospel witness.

In fact, Pope Innocent III, after meeting St. Francis, had a dream that St. Francis was holding up St. John Lateran Basilica, the visible sign and symbol of the universal Church, amidst the storms and earthquakes of history and crisis.²

² I am indebted to Fr. Roger Landry, the Catholic Chaplain of Columbia University, for his insights on this connection. Fr. Landry’s article, “Contemplate Jesus’ This Christmas: A New Bethlehem and the Lessons of Greccio,” in the

Configured to Christ crucified and having lived daily with the stigmatic wounds of Christ, St. Francis helps to animate and inspire the mission of mercy of the Catholic Church through the centuries.

St. Francis intercedes for each of us at every moment to help rebuild the evangelizing mission of the Church that Jesus Himself founded.

St. Francis of Assisi was present to the various voices in his life – the voice of God, the voice of his neighbor, the voice of the poor, the voice of the sick, the voice of nature – and by truly hearing them, he was an instrument of peace, healing, and understanding that inspires us to this day.

This Christmas, when we approach the crib, let us ask for the grace to be attentive listeners – listeners who hear the cry of the poor, the sick, the unborn, the elderly and the victims and refugees of war.

Let us ask for the grace to be like St. Francis, so that we may hear the voice of God and the voice of our neighbor and respond with a charity that transforms the world and history.³

Pope Francis says: “By being born in a manger, God himself launches the only true revolution that can give hope and dignity to the disinherited and the outcast: the revolution of love, the revolution of tenderness. From the manger, Jesus proclaims in a meek yet powerful way, the need for sharing with the poor as the path to a more human and fraternal world in which no one is excluded or marginalized.” (*Admirabile Signum* 6)

In his book *St. Francis of Assisi*, G.K. Chesterton speaks of something similar – “the building of the great (Franciscan) brotherhood which was the beginning of so merciful a revolution.”⁴

Then in his book *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton grounds all revolutions of grace in the Risen Christ. He writes: “Christendom has had a series of revolutions and in

December 17-30, 2023 edition of the *National Catholic Register* (page 9) was also extremely helpful and provided focus for this homily. I’m also grateful for the Christmas cards of the Franciscan Brothers at St. Anthony’s High School on Long Island and the Marianists who highlighted the 800th Anniversary of St. Francis of Assisi in Greccio. A few aspects of this 2023 Christmas homily are drawn from my 2020 Christmas homily.

³ Cf. Bishop John O. Barres October 8, 2020 Statement, “The Compelling Figure of St. Francis of Assisi in the Pontificate of Pope Francis and his New Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*.”

⁴ See G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, Chapter VI “The Little Poor Man.”

each one of them Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.”⁵

Every revolution of the Gospel of Jesus Christ moves from Crib to Cross to Empty Tomb.

That’s what we celebrate on every Christmas day, every Good Friday and every Easter Sunday.

On this 800th Anniversary of St. Francis of Assisi arranging the first Nativity Creche scene in Greccio, Italy, may St. Francis’ love for the Mystery of the Nativity, his ecstatic mysticism, his love for the poor, and his spirit of universal fraternity animate our celebration of Christmas this year.

And thank you for following the path of St. Francis of Assisi in living this “revolution of love” expressed in the joyful way you and your families live and proclaim the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ to the entire human family!

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 250.