FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND THE INCARNATION. A FRANCISCAN CHRISTMAS STORY.

For those of us who have been a part of the Franciscan movement for any length of time the legend of St. Francis and the reenactment of the birth of Jesus is engrained in our minds. The image of the first Franciscan Christmas at Greccio is a gospel parallel for us to the accounts of the Nativity found in the writings of Luke and Matthew. I doubt if there are any of us who do not think of Francis as we hear the Gospel of Midnight Mass proclaimed. In the 1999 edition of Francis of Assisi, The Saint, Early Documents (New City Press) the translation of the account of Francis at Greccio provides us with the story. I had reason earlier this year to make use of the story while working with a group of Franciscan Sisters in New Jersey. What struck me so profoundly this year as I prayed with the words of Thomas of Celano was his account of how the memory of the Child Jesus had sunk into oblivion. With Francis’ mystical reenactment, the Child Jesus is awakened and impressed on the hearts of the people. In our present age, we can so busy ourselves with the details of our life and faith that we push the memory of the Incarnation to an obscure part of our life. Yet the Incarnation is one of the essential elements, if not the element, which defines us as Franciscans. Francis teaches us that once the Incarnation was put into place our salvation had begun. There was no turning back. The Incarnation of our God at Bethlehem assures us that we have been saved.

Contemporary Issue: Rights of Children

Emmanuel, God-is-with-us. What a concept! Our God comes to us in humility, born into the poverty of Bethlehem, born into time and history. The memory of the Bethlehem manger is indeed a dangerous memory. It awakens within us this sense of childhood. The National Center for Children in Poverty reports that 38% of the children in the United States live in low-income families, while 17% now live in poor families. (Based on the Federal Poverty Level) On a global level, Catholic Relief Services state that as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic 14 million children have been orphaned. Out of the 3 million HIV/AIDS deaths is 2003, 500,000 have been children. The year 2005 marks the 15th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a treaty that seeks to protect children the world over from hunger, violence, forced military service, torture, and exploitation. The government of the United States is one of two countries that have yet to sign the Convention (Somalia is the other).

REFLECTION

Our God comes to us and is born in the poverty of Bethlehem and into the richness of human history and time. Francis tells us that this is not only the beginning of our salvation, but once the Incarnation occurred, there was no going back, no stopping the process, our salvation was assured. With the birth of God into the human condition we see God as an infant, as a child, dependent upon others to feed him, care for him, guide and protect him. Perhaps that is why December is a month that seems to be filled with days reminding us to care for our children. We celebrate in December the Feast of St. Nicholas (December 6), Human Rights Day (December 10), Christmas, the Feast of the Holy Inno-
cents (December 28) and the Feast of the Holy Family (December 30). The opportunity is presented for us to reflect upon the needs of the children of the world and act upon our own gospel principles of compassionate care. We can honor the mystery of the Incarnation by honoring the needs of the children around us.

**ACTION**

It can be difficult to imagine God as a child without being enticed to remain in the Nativity set under our Christmas trees. The reenactment of the first Christmas was how Francis wanted to teach the world about the Child of Bethlehem and his holy mother. Francis wanted us to see, not the pristine beauty of empty lifeless figurines, but a reenactment at Greccio that would show the world what Jesus experienced. To remind us that our God is an incarnate God, not a God that lives only in the heavens, but a God who fills the world. Jesus entered human history as we all do, dependent upon others to care and nurture us. He matured in life and faith and grew into the mission given to him by the Father. All children need the same care and nurturing. Our action this month can be as obvious as the parish giving tree or an extra donation to one of the many charitable causes that promote the welfare of children. Learn about the current legislation in Congress that affects children in a very real way. Pending legislation includes the Immigrant Children’s Health Improvement Act, affordable and adequate housing legislation, food programs (both global and domestic). (see http://www.networklobby.org) Write to President Bush and express your concern with the “No Child Left Behind” program. Tell everyone that the best thing we can do for children the world over is to live in peace. Ask the President and your legislatures when they will bring American troops out of Iraq. Pray for children. In our age, we cannot hide our heads in the sand and say that the Church has not suffered with the children sexual abuse scandal. Pray for those who have been abused and for the ones who committed the abuse.

**PRAYER**

As we prepare to end the year 2005 and begin again, let us honor the roots of our faith and the festival of Lights (Hanukkah begins December 26) and close with a prayer from Rabbi Harold Kushner. (Author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*)

Let the rain come and wash away the ancient grudges, the bitter hatreds held and nurtured over generations. Let the rain wash away the memory of the hurt, the neglect. Then let the sun come out and fill the sky with rainbows. Let the warmth of the sun heal us wherever we are broken. Let it burn away the fog so that we can see each other clearly. So that we can see beyond labels, beyond accents, gender or skin color. Let the warmth and brightness of the sun melt our selfishness. So that we can share the joys and feel the sorrows of our neighbors. And let the light of the sun be so strong that we will see all people as our neighbors. Let the earth, nourished by rain, bring forth flowers to surround us with beauty. And let the mountains teach our hearts to reach upward to heaven.  Amen.