

The Minister's Christmas Message

By Deacon Tom Bello, SFO
National Minister



Christmas Fresco from the lower church at Assisi
By Giotto

The holiday season is a time of sharing stories, and one of my favorite stories about St. Francis is the Christmas story at Greccio. What I did not know, until I heard the wonderful lectures by Brother Bill Short, OFM, (*St. Francis of Assisi: A New Way of Being Christian*) was that this Christmas story came after a time of great hardship for St. Francis and dissension even among his brothers. This Christmas story, thus, has a special joy because of the suffering St. Francis had experienced before.

Thomas of Celano, who, Brother Short tells us, probably knew St. Francis personally, decided to conclude his *First Life* of St. Francis with the consoling Christmas story of Greccio (Chapter XXX, 84-86):

“St. Francis’s highest intention, greatest desire, and supreme purpose was to observe the holy gospel in and through all things. He wanted to follow the doctrine and walk in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to do so perfectly, with all vigilance, all zeal, complete desire of the mind, complete fervor of the heart. He remembered Christ’s words through constant meditation and recalled his actions through wise consideration. The humility of the incarnation and the love of the Passion so occupied his memory that he scarcely wished to think of anything else. Hence what he did in the third year before the day of his glorious death, in the town called Greccio, on the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ, should be reverently remembered.”

Francis instructed a citizen of Greccio named John, “I want to do something that will recall the memory of that child who was born in Bethlehem, to see

with bodily eyes the inconveniences of his infancy, how he lay in the manger, and how the ox and ass stood by.” “The day of joy drew near, the time of exultation approached. The brothers were called from their various places. With glad hearts, the men and women of that place prepared, according to their means, candles and torches to light up that night which has illuminated all the days and years with its glittering star. Finally the holy man of God arrived and, finding everything prepared, saw it and rejoiced.

“The manger is ready, hay is brought, the ox and ass are led in. Simplicity is honored there, poverty is exalted, humility is commended and a new Bethlehem, as it were, is made from Greccio. Night is illuminated like the day, delighting men and beasts. The people come and joyfully celebrate the new mystery. The forest resounds with voices and the rocks respond to their rejoicing. The brothers sing, discharging their debt of praise to the Lord, and the whole night echoes with jubilation. The holy man of God stands before the manger full of sighs, consumed by devotion and filled with a marvelous joy. The solemnities of the Mass are performed over the manger and the priest experiences a new consolation.

“The holy man of God wears a deacon’s vestments, for he was indeed a deacon, and he sings the holy gospel with a sonorous voice. And his voice, a sweet voice, a vehement voice, a clear voice, a sonorous voice, invites all to the highest rewards. Then he preaches mellifluously to the people standing about, telling them about the birth of the poor king and the little city of Bethlehem. Often, too, when he wished to mention Jesus Christ, burning with love he called him ‘the child of Bethlehem,’ and speaking the word ‘Bethlehem’ or ‘Jesus,’ he licked his lips with his tongue, seeming to taste the sweetness of these words.”

We all know that St. Francis had a great devotion to the Passion of Christ, but let us not forget that St. Francis also had a great devotion to the Child Jesus. In this Holy Christmas Season, let us renew our devotion to the Holy Infant.

Let us pray: “Holy Infant Jesus, shine upon us Your innocent love. Help us to seek no greater joy in this life than that of serving You. Impress upon our hearts the virtues of Your holy childhood: the innocence, the simplicity, the total trust in God our Father. You are the source of all life and of all holiness. Help us to be holy and innocent in life and in love.”

Let us renew our resolve to protect all human life, especially all our children, born and unborn.

May all the love, peace and joy of this Holy Christmas Season be yours now and throughout all the Holy New Year 2010.

Peace and Love, the greatest Good, Tom