



Year after year... a new Bethlehem

800 years of the crib tradition

GRÜNE REIHE 125

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EDITORIAL

Year after year ...

This almost sounds like a routine, by which the Christmas season is announced with these words. 'The same procedure' as every year: the hype around the Christmas markets, mulled wine, the rush for gifts, the concern for family peace under the Christmas tree, and, perhaps, the discussion as to whether the annual trip to church is still worthwhile.

There was something else, of course, at least under some Christmas trees: a delicate crib with pretty figures. A romantic depiction of the birth of Jesus. A final reminder of the event that Christmas is actually about. Not many will know that our nativity scenes date back to a Christmas celebration designed by Francis of Assisi near the small village of Greccio in the Rietital Valley in 1223. With the 2023 Christmas festival, the Franciscan family worldwide therefore begins its celebration of the 800th anniversary of this event, which has shaped Christmas for centuries.

This issue of Grüne Reihe is dedicated to that event. In the course of this, it is not only the historical event that is to be recalled and interpreted. Likewise, the contributions emphasise the importance of nativity scenes in the tradition of the celebration of St Francis in Greccio for people from a wide variety of cultures. All these contributions bring out the actual substance of Christmas. Francis of Assisi wanted to celebrate this festival with a nativity play, from which these nativity scenes originated, in order to recall the actual meaning of the festival, which threatened to be lost.

In view of the annual mulled wine and bratwurst, against the backdrop of Christmas songs to put us in the mood at the Christmas markets, it is good to use the nativity scenes to bring up what 'that time of year' is actually about. The cover image of this issue was generated by an AI program. The remembrance of the actual meaning of Christmas is therefore not lost, even in an AI future.

The Editors

YEAR AFTER YEAR ... A NEW BETHLEHEM

Johannes B. Freyer ofm

When events become routine, they quickly lose their original meaning. This experience also pertains to recurring festivals. Over the course of the year, they become routine and are celebrated with a greater or lesser amount of energy. In the end, many are happy when it's over again. Christmas is no different. It can do you good here to pause for a moment in your routine and ask about the actual meaning of the festival. The question of the meaning of Christmas is not new.

The 800th anniversary of the Christmas celebration and nativity scene in Greccio by Francis of Assisi reminds us that the question of the meaning and design of this festival was also acute in the early 13th century. The biographical stories about this event subtly note that the deeper basis of this festival was lost from people's view, and, thus, so was the enthusiasm to celebrate it. Francis of Assisi wanted to remedy this disillusionment with a celebration that appealed to the human senses. As far as we know, he was the first to stage a live nativity scene with humans and animals at Christmas in 1223.

Our figurative nativity scenes go back to this living portrayal of the nativity. With this celebration, Francis did not merely want to recall the origins of the festival in a unique way. He wanted the participants in the celebration to now experience the events in Bethlehem for themselves by establishing an emotional connection to the event through the representation of the birth of Christ. According to biographical testimonies, the significance of the birth of Jesus for the festival guests' own lives became clear to them through their deliberate participation in the nativity scene. For them, Greccio became, as it were, a New Bethlehem, because, beyond the historical memory, the incarnation of Jesus was lent a personal, experiential value as a result of them being involved in the nativity scene. As strange as it may sound to the

'enlightened' spirit of our modernity, they had the experience of God becoming a part of their everyday lives. The horizon of their lives, often limited by illness, poverty, ostracisation, violence and a swift death, received a vast new hope of life, in the solidarity of God, experienced emotionally with all the senses, through a defenceless, needy, human child. An experience that no Christmas market can convey, no matter how much mulled wine there is.

For Francis of Assisi, it was clear that this experience was not to remain a festive one-hit-wonder. For him, the birth of Jesus and the celebration of Jesus was the decisive challenge of rethinking his way of life, and that of the people. That's what it was all about for him, in the end. Not a sentimental, romantic Christmas celebration. The birth of the disarming child in need of help was to awaken human empathy with all those who are defenceless and in need. God's solidarity with a wounded world, which shines out in this child, was intended to awaken human solidarity with the needy and destitute. This is not about almsgiving, but about an incarnate encounter on equal terms.

The festivity of the nativity, as a celebration of participation in the events of Bethlehem, is, as it were, the trigger of a dynamic to make this world more humane and possible to live in. However, this cannot be overcome in a one-off celebration, if, afterwards, there is simply a return to the previous way of life that is hostile to life and harmful to their fellow men. The erected nativity scene then becomes an image of the idyll that never existed. Therefore, as he writes in his Letter to All the Faithful, Francis wanted "Jesus Christ to be repeatedly born again through human good deeds". There is a New Bethlehem to be found everywhere where people have this world in view, following the example of God, in an empathetic, solidary, and even human form, and where they also keep an eye on their fellow men at the same time. This Bethlehem can

exist anywhere where the Christmas message does not get lost in the festive mood but becomes an everyday reality in the way life is conducted.

In this respect, the 800th anniversary of the nativity celebration is not the end. Rather, the anniversary is intended to provide impetus for the repeated emergence of a new Bethlehem on every day of the anniversary year and in the future, wherever one may be. The cover image of this booklet is also supposed to refer to this. In the backdrop of a future view of the city, not exactly a fancy district, stands a nativity scene. The apparent idyll contrasts with the urban environment depicted. However, the God of solidarity is to be found, in always the same child, precisely in that place where empathy is tangibly needed. As in our world that purports to be civilised, in the picture, too, hardly anyone takes notice of this. There is no Christmas party frenzy. Animals, representatives of nature, are still the most likely to take part in events. In this image, created by an AI program, it becomes clear, here, that God does not impose himself on our world in this child. Yet, wherever notice is taken of the nativity scene, the cold, grey world, as depicted in the image, can become somewhat brighter, friendlier, more peaceful and more liveable.



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CHRISTMAS IN LATE SUMMER OR 'ASK FOR THE SECRETS OF HEAVEN WITH YOUR HANDS'

Martina Kreidler-Kos

We are on an 'adventure pilgrimage' in Assisi, a colourful group of large and small, questioning and doubting, loud and quiet people with and without disabilities. We want to rediscover faith and visit Greccio today in the footsteps of St Francis and St Clare. The small village is picturesquely located in the Sabine Hills and is called the "Franciscan Bethlehem". I accompany the group and begin to tell them on the bus: "St Francis is considered the 'inventor' of the nativity scene. He had the idea of bringing the Christmas story from the fields of Bethlehem to the mountains of his Italian homeland. This is how the gospel should also be experienced by ordinary people. You can visit the small rock monastery built above this cave, trace the life of prayer of the first brothers, enjoy the breathtaking view, and admire nativity scenes from all over the world and from a wide variety of materials in the adjacent modern church." Without hesitation, we make a game out of it: we look at the exhibition, and, at the end, the children are allowed to say which nativity scene they liked best. To my surprise, the crib made of Swarovski stones wins. They find the glittering, sparkling little arrangement particularly beautiful.

An eight-year-old pulls on her grandmother's hand impatiently. She really wants to go back to the car park. Too bad, I think. The place down there is not particularly nice, and, here, we will picnic, sing and play together. But before I can say anything else, she's already gone. What I don't know: the girl has a plan. As she goes, she collects various things she finds along the way: small pieces of wood, a snail shell, a piece of plastic. The small concrete wall down in the car park is just the right height. She wants to build her own nativity scene there. The snail shell gets placed on a curved piece of wood and is now the Angel of Annunciation above the draughty stable. Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus

are made from the first acorns – two big ones and a tiny one. She is still very young and inexperienced, but the girl gently lays them on a particularly beautiful leaf. She wraps the blue piece of plastic around one of the larger acorns. You can recognise Mary immediately. Lovingly and intimately, she gathers together everything she needs. The sheep are made of small pebbles, the shepherds of cones. For the star, she has to think for a while. Finally, she finds a rusty wire; her grandmother bends it into shape.

On the way back to the bus, we can all only marvel. What a special nativity scene has been created! Probably, this girl understood best of all of us what Francis actually wanted in Greccio: "I want to behold all this with bodily eyes," he is said to have said. He wanted to see, hear, smell, feel and touch what happened back then in Bethlehem. He wanted to make his unbridled joy about the presence of God concrete. And he wanted to share this experience with many. That is why he has assembled a living nativity scene, not because he was particularly naive or had a thing for folklore, but because he could not stop marvelling at the story of God incarnate. It will also not have been the very first nativity scene that was ever arranged. This idea already existed in the contemplative monasteries. However, Francis' nativity scene is the first that applies to all people. One did not have to be particularly pious or part of a privileged monastic community to be able to enjoy this experience of the closeness of God. One just had to have desire. The idea was that people should be able to come by and participate from far and wide.

Yet, it was not so easy for Francis to put this idea into practice. Where was he, the penniless mendicant friar, supposed to get an ox or a donkey? And who would provide him with hay in the middle of

winter? Or the food that was so urgently needed for the separate animals? The sources say that Francis spoke to a nobleman friend of his two weeks before Christmas in 1223. The man's name was John. He liked the ordinary poor people from Assisi very much and seemed not only to have been rich, but also to 'strive for the nobility of the soul', as his biographer writes. So, a spiritually sensitive man with ample money and contacts with whom one could realise a spontaneous, crazy project. In a cave near the small mountain village of Greccio, this nobleman thus had everything prepared the way Francis imagined: a crib was lined with hay and arranged between an ox and a donkey. Interestingly, the only talk of a child comes in the form of a vision. This means there will not have been a real baby lying in this crib. And there is a good reason for that: according to the stories, the Eucharist is celebrated directly above the crib. The Lord is present in bread and wine.

This reference to the Eucharist sounds more self-evident to us than it was back then. The people back then could not easily celebrate it anywhere else, and it has been shown that the brothers of Francis were not granted the privilege of portable altars until a year later. Yet it was precisely this synopsis – crib and Eucharist – that was crucial for the saint, and may have led him to value the rules no more highly than his longing for the presence of God. For him, it was literally irresistible: the child we celebrate in the crib is God, who wants to be born into our present day again and again – and who is closer to us in the celebration of the Eucharist than in any place else.

However, Francis did not simply leave the entire preparation to the rich nobleman. He did not want this experience for himself; he wanted all the residents around him, the ordinary people from the mountain villages and the farms in the plain, to celebrate with him. He will therefore have done some diligent advertising in these two weeks, with him and his brothers knocking on doors, telling stories, and busily extending invitations. And, obviously, they hit a nerve with people. On Christmas Eve, it is said that women, men, and children came

in flocks, bringing torches and candles with them, and that "this night became as bright as day", as the biographer describes it. And he had something else to report: "People and animals made them happy." At this living nativity, where the rustling of people and animals can be heard, where there is a smell of hay and wax, where people stand together and warm breath hangs in the cold night air, Francis solemnly sings the Gospel. And gives a poignant sermon. "The whole night shouted for joy," the stories exuberantly relate. And, most importantly: back then, when Christmas was remembered with all the senses, "the child of Jesus was reborn in the hearts of many." (1 Celano 84–87)

This is what Francis is all about in 1223 – and, intuitively, also for our inventive young travellers: understanding Christmas literally, beyond the seasons and the hustle and bustle, the clichés and sentimentality. Because it is, and remains, an incredible story. Even though we have heard it so many times, it is always fresh, dramatic, and existential. Nothing about it is smooth and predictable; so much is confusing and precarious: there is a young couple who want to get married, but before that happens, the bride gets pregnant. The circumstances are more than mysterious. Things could have turned out badly, but the young pregnant woman is lucky. Her fiancé sticks by her despite everything; a dream comes to his aid. The apparently betrayed groom does not withdraw in rage, with his honour offended, but the two overcome this almost unbelievable situation together. However, the danger continues. There is no safe place, no nest that has been built, in which this child can be born. The birth announces itself at an inopportune time and must be brought about in a cattle shed before the gates of the city while passing through. Strangers, poor fellows lying in the fields around, are the first shy well-wishers. A dirty manger is the early makeshift bed. And that's not the end of the drama. The newborn enters the sights of the powerful. The small family has to flee because a suspicious king seeks the child's life. The fledgling foster father has to once again rely on his dreams to save the family entrusted to him. And, at first, the young mother does not need to long for peace and security at all. They move to a

foreign country and have to see how they cope there. All this is really not an easy beginning for a family history.

But what comfort there is in that! Are not almost all family fates in human history at risk: from hunger, war and poverty, from violence, quarrels or misunderstandings? Are not all relationships threatened at some point in their history? In any case, they are very fragile structures. Whoever paints and idealises the holy family as a family that is safe and sound has not understood the drama of life – and, sometimes, imposes unbearable burdens on real families. Of course, there are blissful moments and infinite love between people. Thank God, one would like to proclaim! And every single one of them should be recorded and endure forever. However, life often plays out so very differently than we think and wish. All who live in families (and communities) will know this. Nothing is ever tranquil and safe. Everyday life is turbulent; in the evening, everything is always different than was planned in the morning. The vulnerability created by mutual love is limitless. Even the Pope understood this. In his paper on the family, *Amoris laetitia*, Pope Francis gives an unusually clear-sighted definition of family after the reflections on the 2014 and 2015 synods: as a result, we are shown that there is "no stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems." (*Amoris laetitia* 57) What great comfort it is that God does not leave this reality out in his story. He not only comes into our time and our humanity; he also comes into our misery, into all the wretchedness and dangers of our existence together.

Saint Francis wanted to bring the incredible closeness of God within reach. He wanted to ask for the secrets of heaven with his hands. And the eight-year-old pilgrim emulated him eight hundred years later. The message of both of them: God allows us to touch him so that we are moved by him.

He has no shame in being born in our doubting, sometimes so despondent and unimaginative hearts, in our troubles and relationship dramas, in our hopelessness and fear. And it does not matter when this realisation occurs. Hopefully, Christmas will happen again and again in our lives – even in late summer, when you can find the very first acorns.



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A CELEBRATION WITH 'RE-ENACTMENT'

Franz Josef Kröger ofm

'Modelled after the pilgrimage site of Greccio' – this is how Domradio.de titles a short note from 30/10/2023 stating that, this year, the nativity scene in St Peter's Square in Rome will be modelled after the Franciscan nativity tradition from Greccio in the Rieti Valley. The background to this is provided by the festivities for the 800th anniversary of the nativity celebration of St Francis in 1223 in Greccio.

Greccio

- a location that would hardly have found a place in people's memories if it hadn't been for the story of Francis and the nativity scene;
- one of those hermitages in the Rieti Valley that Francis loved so much;
- a small village in the Lazio region, on the border with Umbria. About a two-hour drive from Assisi;
- here, Francis staged the first 'nativity play' in 1223;
- a place of remembrance of the incarnation of God and the incarnation of man;
- a place of lasting and 'dangerous' memories;
- a place created to be a 'wake-up call'.

Remembering – this is one background of the incarnation of God. If we look at the Old (First) Testament, we read of many attempts on the part of God to bring himself back into the minds of man as a living memory. In the end, though, all attempts fail. No prophet, no exile and displacement, no revelation of God, however great, can give people a lasting and stable memory of God that permanently shapes their lives. After a short while, the memory fades, and man goes his own way again.

God then draws on a last resort, so to speak. God brings himself into play. And not with 'splendour and glory', but in the 'humility of God', as Francis describes the incarnation and, above all, his 'daily descent in the form of bread and wine' in the celebration of the Eucharist.

However, the 'weak point' in this 'play' remains the

person who finds it difficult to see the 'strength' in this 'weakness' of God, who finds it difficult to discover this path, for which God himself makes himself strong, as a viable and God-willed way for him or herself as well. "Do it like God – become human!" – this is the translated title of a book by Bishop Franz Kamphaus. That is easier said than done. Francis also knows this.

"His (Francis') highest aspiration, his noblest desire and his supreme rule of life was to observe the holy gospel in everything and through everything. With all the vigilance, all the zeal, all the longing of his spirit and all the fervour of his heart, he sought to follow perfectly the teaching of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and to follow in his footsteps. In careful consideration, he evoked the memory of his words, and, in probing contemplation, he reconceived his works. Above all, it was the humility of Jesus' incarnation and the love demonstrated by his suffering that occupied his thoughts so much that he hardly wanted to think of anything else. (1 Cell 84)

Even if Francis writes at the beginning of his Non-Definitive Rule that it should be the life and rule of the brothers to "follow in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ" (NbR 1, 1), the sentence that Tobias Schuhwerk quotes in his book "Nüüf" (Up), from an experienced Alpine herdsman of the Allgäu High Alps, also applies to Francis and to many later brothers and many Christians throughout the centuries: "Whoever only follows in the footsteps of others will never develop his own profile." (Tobias Schuhwerk, "Nüff", self-published 2023, p. 44). Ultimately, a life in the discipleship or in the footsteps of Jesus cannot succeed without one's own profile.

Francis was a man of action. If he came upon a thought, something came to his mind or he felt addressed by God, he acted. When Francis feels addressed by the cross in the dilapidated chapel of San Damiano: "Restore my house!" – Francis first

understands this literally and begins to renovate the chapel. Perhaps it was the same with the nativity celebration in Greccio. A thought comes like lightning – and he puts it into practice. It was three years before his death.

His first biographer, Thomas of Celano, tells us how, just before Christmas, Francis addresses a man by the name of John, whom he cherishes very much, and asks him if he would like to celebrate Christmas at Greccio. In contrast to other hermitages that date back to the time before Francis, Greccio was a place where the brothers initially probably lived in caves and not in the solid walls of an old hermitage.

Francis asks John to prepare the celebrations. *"For I would like to commemorate the memory of that child who was born in Bethlehem, and I would like to see as tangibly as possible, with bodily eyes, the bitter distress that he had to suffer even as a small child, as he was placed in a manger by which oxen and donkeys stood, and as he was laid on a bed of hay."*

Francis lives a "tangible" faith, so to speak. He is less concerned with an intellectual 'understanding', but, rather, with a faith that he would like to live and experience with all the senses. Thomas of Celano writes: *"The night will become as bright as day, and people and animals will delight in it. The people rush in and are filled with new joy at the new secret. The forest resounds with their voices, and the rocks echo with the jubilation. The brothers sing and offer guilty praise to the Lord, and the whole night rejoices in bright jubilation. God's Holy One stands at the manger, sighing with deep sorrow, thrilled with holy devotion and overflowing with wonderful joy. A solemn mass is celebrated over the crib, and the priest is allowed to feel unimagined consolation."* (1 Cell 85, 6ff).

Thomas of Celano writes almost incidentally here of a festive service that was not provided for or allowed under the ecclesiastical law of the time. "At that time, celebration of the Eucharist was not permitted everywhere, but only at certain altars."

(Franziskus-Quellen (Franciscan Sources), p. 751, note 128). His second biographer, St Bonaventure, apparently noticed this problem. In his *Legenda major*, for example, he writes: "Three years before his passing, he decided to celebrate the feast of the birth of Jesus in the small village of Greccio with full solemnity, in order to revive the devotion to him. However, in order for this celebration to not be interpreted as an innovation, he requested permission from the Pope and obtained it." (LM X, 7.1) (p. 751)

Nevertheless, the official privilege to be able to celebrate the Eucharist in other places as well, with the help of a travelling altar, is only provided for the brothers by a bull of Pope Honorius III from 3rd December 1224, that is to say, almost a year after the nativity celebration in Greccio. This is only established, not evaluated.

Francis celebrates the festivity of the birth of Jesus, the beginning of God's new way with people, with indescribable joy and dedication. With bodily eyes and with his own hands, he wants to see and grasp how human, small, fragile and humble God has become here. His enthusiasm for the events at Christmas goes so far that he wants to obtain a law from the emperor that provides for all mayors and lords of castles to be obliged to send people out at Christmas to scatter wheat and other grains on the roads outside the cities, so that the larks and other birds also have enough to eat on such a high feast day.

"He wished that on this day the poor and hungry would be fed by the rich, and that oxen and donkeys would be given more grain and hay than usual." (2 Cell 199)

When a brother objects that if Christmas falls on a Friday, one should not eat meat, even in view of this feast, Francis vigorously counters him: *"Brother, you sin when you call the day on which the child was born to us Friday. I want even the walls to eat meat on such a day, and, because they can't, they should at least be painted with it from the outside."* (2 Cel 199).

Today, we may hardly have access anymore to such expressions of feelings, to a faith that lives as a result of, from, and with all the senses. However, one is mistaken if one assumes that Francis had a merely emotional relationship with the incarnation of God.

On the one hand, Francis is filled with indescribable jubilation about what becomes visible in the manger via the incarnation of God. God becomes a child, helpless and dependent on human proximity and love; homeless and born on the road, and, a short time later, on the run. God himself gets to know the life of man with all his worries and needs, with all his sunny but also dark sides, from childhood onwards, from his own body. Francis can, so to speak, throw himself into the arms of a God who is not alien to all that is human in our lives with absolute confidence. Hence his jubilation at the birth of this child; at the fact that God has become one of us. Francis is almost intoxicated at this feast, the *"feast of feasts, at the God who clung to human breasts when he became a small child."* (2 Cell 199)

Perhaps it was also a great longing which had erupted in Francis on his path of discipleship and which found its fulfilment here. Perhaps Francis would perhaps have wholeheartedly agreed with the poem "Alles beginnt mit der Sehnsucht" (Everything begins with longing) by the Jewish poet Nelly Sachs:

*The blue sky
The endless belt of road –
man sees a symbol of life in it.*

*The heart always has room
for more, for things more beautiful and greater.
Constantly stretching out
for what's to come –
this is man's greatness and misery.*

*Longing for understanding,
for friendship, for love.
And where longing is fulfilled,
it erupts even more strongly:
that it remains so,*

*that it does not slip by.
Did not also your incarnation, God,
start with this longing for man?
So now let our longing begin,
our longing to search for you,
and let it end with having found you.
(Nelly Sachs, Everything begins with longing)*

On the other hand, the events of Christmas were not a reason for thoughtless jubilation for Francis, but also filled him with great thoughtfulness. For it is a thoroughly 'dangerous remembrance' which he embarks on here, and which he wants to give people to take with them on their path into everyday life.

For Francis, the staging of a nativity play, as we like to call it, was anything but a gimmick. What the remembrance of the incarnation of God had awakened and triggered in Francis himself, he wanted to allow to become a 'wake-up call' for the people of his time. Bettina von Arnim later put it this way: "What you awaken, awakens you again". Remembrance can awaken. Remembrance can lead to a redesign of life and faith.

"Remembrance is a form of meeting." As Khalil Gibran has said. A meeting that shapes life – today, tomorrow and beyond.

Also pointing in this direction is a 'wondrous vision' of a pious man during the nativity celebration in Greccio, of which Thomas of Celano says: *"For, in the manger, he saw a little boy lying lifeless, to whom he saw the Saint of God draw near and awaken the child as if from deep sleep. This vision is not at all incongruous; for the Christ Child was forgotten in many hearts. Then, with God's grace, he was awakened in them again by His holy servant Francis and imprinted into devoted remembrance."* (1 Cell 86, 8)

"What you awaken, awakens you again."

In his book "Mit Engeln und Eseln" (With Angels and Donkeys), Andreas Knapp tells us his perspective of the 'invention of the nativity play'. He has children in Rieti play out the Christmas story in the presence

of Francis and three other brothers. While Francis reads the Christmas story from the gospel, the events of Christmas are re-enacted by children. And the people from whose circle the children come are simultaneously enchanted and transformed by the goings-on. In the end, Andreas Knapp draws the following conclusion:

*That night, the Word became flesh. The poor people from the Rieti Valley felt they had received a bounteous gift. They felt that God had come into their little world with His love. Mary, in her poor peasant clothes, was one of them. Joseph, with his braided straw hat, was one of them. The Baby Jesus, a helpless infant, was one of them. This child had reawakened their own humanity: they could be tender, caress, kiss, hug, forgive, love. In the shining eyes of their children, who had brought Bethlehem to Greccio, they found greater wealth than in the splendour of gold and silver. In the huge palaces that revolve around money and power, it was greed and jealousy, envy and strife that prevailed. But here, in the poor stable, they had found true joy. Here, God had become man in their midst. That night, no one would have wanted to exchange Greccio's hut for the Pope's palace in Rome. (Andreas Knapp, *Mit Engeln und Eseln*, p. 102f, translated into English)*

I remember a visit to a crib scene years ago. Next to me were two older ladies. After a period of silence, one of the two women suddenly said: "So sweet you could take a bit out of him – the baby Jesus". And I thought: Yes, that is probably what God wants – that we take a 'bite'; that from the incarnation of God, our own incarnation takes shape and develops.

"What you awaken, awakens you again."



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MANGERS AND 'POSADAS' IN CENTRAL AMERICAN VILLAGES

Joaquin Garay ofm

Latin American peoples possess an important Christian cultural substratum as part of their historical identity. In fact, the work calendar and bank holidays are organised, at least in good part, around the major Christian festivals: Christmas and Easter. This is because the entire process of political-military, social, cultural colonisation, etc. was intrinsically linked to evangelisation and/or Christianisation, as part of a so called "civilizational" programme. This is not the place to write about the shadows and mistakes of the Spanish conquest and colonization, as there are already plenty of analyses and writings on the subject. I would like to highlight some of the bright points and positives that have endured until today.

The religious people of the mendicant orders, especially the Dominicans, the Franciscans and the Mercedarians, were the ones who assumed the task of the initial Christianisation in the conquered territories, especially in the region of Central America. Later, the Augustinians and Jesuits arrived. These missionaries promoted staging as an effective pedagogical method for conveying the Christian faith (either live or through images) especially at the time of Easter and at Christmas time.

The pedagogical role fulfilled by the architecture of the great Romanesque temples and cathedrals, the images in Renaissance stained glass and the images and music during the Baroque period, served as catechetical tools and conveyors of the Christian message throughout European history. This same educational purpose was embraced by processions featuring images in the commemoration of Holy Week. Likewise, the inclusion of family nativity scenes, the singing of carols and the observance of inns during the Christmas season assumed a similar instructive role. These catechetical and pedagogical options for conveying the faith around

Easter and Christmas were so effective that they are still practised today.

The large and colourful processions during Easter in Central American countries are still known internationally. Likewise, these countries partake in the celebration of the inns and the tradition of the family nativity scene in homes, especially in small cities, towns and rural areas. In most places, "the inns" are held as a novena in preparation for Christmas: starting on 16 December and ending on 24 December. It is a neighbourhood, community and local tradition, organised by families for families and neighbours. Participants upload the images of Mary and Joseph from one house to another, where they will ask for "posada". Upon arrival at the host house, people are divided into two groups: one enters the host family's house and the other is left outside. They knock on the door, and through a song they ask in the name of Mary and Joseph for an inn for that night. This is how the journey that Joseph and Mary had to make to reach Bethlehem due to the census is staged. The pilgrims, the images of Mary and Joseph, are still on the way, and that night they are welcomed at the host family's house, where they spend the night.

After this staging of the inn, the recitation of the rosary or other prayers may take place. Later there is a celebratory gathering: cheerful carols, and depending on the region, it may even culminate in breaking piñatas for the children. The next day, the images are taken to another family, where they will also ask for "posada". On 24 December they are taken to the church of the place where the Christmas liturgy will be held.

Likewise, in preparation for Christmas, mangers are also placed not only in temples, but also in homes. It is the tradition of family nativity scenes,

which was promoted above all by the Franciscans, and which has been maintained through time to the present day, be it with less and less intensity.

Surely the motivation, at least as far as the Franciscan missionaries were concerned in propagating the preparation of nativity scenes in homes, was the same intuition as that of Francis of Assisi. As Thomas of Celano recounts, Francis motivated us to prepare the manger of Bethlehem in a grotto in Greccio, and celebrate the Eucharist there so that everyone could see and contemplate the concreteness of the Incarnation, that is, the simplicity, poverty and humility of the Son of God “who gave himself unto us with great and ineffable love” (1 Celano 87). With the manger it was intended, on the one hand, to bring the mystery of the Incarnation inside the houses by seeing and contemplating the figures of the birth. But, on the other hand, families not only reproduce what happened in Bethlehem, putting only the images of Jesus, Joseph and Mary, but they make the manger their own and in their own way “update” it.

Around the figures of Joseph, Mary and the Child Jesus, the donkey and the ox, figures are added, representations of characters known in the town, as well as known local scenes, ornaments and motifs of the time and place. Imagination and initiatives often have no limits. What might seem somewhat cheesy and sentimental, almost approaching syncretism to an outside observer can be comprehended as an ability to assimilate, show hospitality and embrace the Family of Bethlehem, integrating it into the life of the community. It is a popular and simple way to inculcate the Mystery of the Incarnation. The same goes for the inns: host families feel privileged to share their home and their poverty, and they identify with Mary and Joseph as poor and homeless pilgrims. Maria and Joseph are pilgrims who ask the families of the inn, today it can be interpreted: they ask for refuge or asylum.

Unfortunately, these traditions have gradually disappeared from the big cities. Since the mid-twentieth century, the aggressive onslaught of trade and consumerism, particularly from the United States,

has been noticeable, replacing the manger with the Christmas tree and, most significantly, imposing the figure of Santa Claus, which has no connection with history or with the local climate reality. With television and cinema, new narratives, Christmas characters, music, culturally alien ornaments were introduced, but they have clearly prevailed.

These traditions, such as the manger and the inns, are losing their ability to be promoters or generators of meaning in the new generations. They are still practised in small towns and rural areas; however, the process is almost uncontrollable. Yet, in the end, this can be embraced not with defeatist pessimism but as the great challenge of reinventing, within the digital world, the concretions of this intuition of Francis of Assisi: that everyone can see with their own eyes and contemplate gratefully in their hearts the Mystery of the Incarnation. How and in what ways in the virtual world? Therein lies the big challenge.



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THE NATIVITY SCENE. A GREAT SYMBOL OF THE INFINITE TENDERNESS OF GOD

Magdalena C. Mitei Iosf

“... and the Word was made Flesh and lived among us... (John 1:14)”

The incarnation in which God the Son took flesh in the womb of Mary, is a profound instance of God’s initiative for human redemption. Incarnation is an on-going dialogue that consist in looking at Africa’s way of life, culture, and core values. The aim of this article is to reveal the relevance of inculturation in the evangelization of a people. Nativity scene is an example of inculturation par excellence, that is, of the gradual engagement and harmonization of Christianity with the culture proper to the recipient peoples in order to safeguard the integrity of the Gospel, while respecting, integrating and assuming the varied cultural contexts of the Gospel.

The characters in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke’s Gospels: shepherds, magi, angels, and animals around Baby Jesus are ordinary, but their value goes far beyond their artistic or visual appeal to inspire reflection on the entrance of God into the very tangible world in the Incarnation. The humanity of Christ in the manger and the loving attention of his parents invites the viewers to enter deeply into the mystery of Christmas. It is not surprising that the traditional representation of the Nativity scene varies from culture to culture, region to region, and both within and across countries, according to the traditions, customs, and uses of the place. In fact, the tradition of nativity scenes in Africa is a fruition of historical influences, religious faith, and cultural fusion.

Nativity scene among the Nandi community in Kenya

Every year, Christmas and Christmas decorations emerge in our cities, towns as well as Christian worship places. Among all the decorations that will be all over is the Christmas Crib; the Scene of

the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Africa is among the global power houses of Catholicism and Christianity, and Kenya is among the leading countries. Here is contextualized case in Kenya among the Nandi Community.

The Nandi People

The Nandi are an East African people. They belong to the Kalenjin cluster which descends from the ‘Highland Nilotes. The Kalenjin are believed to have originated from a country in the North of Kenya known as ‘*Emetab Burgei*’ which means the hot country. It is speculated that this country is either Sudan or Egypt. They then traveled Southwards, along the River Nile passing through Mt. Elgon; *Tulwab Kony*, before settling in the highlands of Western Kenya and the Rift Valley.

Today the Nandi inhabit Nandi County and its surrounding areas in the Highlands of Western Kenya namely; Trans-Nzoia and Uasin- Gishu. They are scattered in various parts of the country. The two social groupings; the clan; *oret* and the kindred; *tiliet* of the Nandi were not localized. Each clan has a totem(s). There are 17 clans and they are exogamous with exception of those having more than one totem. Clan membership is determined partrilineally. Members of every clan are found throughout Nandi. Kinship (*tiliet*) for the Nandi is relationship within the kindred group; hence to say *mii tiliet* or *mamii tiliet* –a man is or not in the kindred group expressed relationship in Nandi. No man may marry a member of his own kindred group or clan. Like all the Nilotic people in the past, the Nandi were pastoralists; cattle being their main interest but also sheep and goats making their contribution.

Nativity Characters

The characters of Mother Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus are central to the nativity scene. In African

context, these characters carry distinct African features, symbolizing the continent's broad cultural and ethnic diversity. The biblical story largely relatable to the African audience in their diverse beautiful cultures.

Mary: Among the Nandi a mother is a key figure because through her, a clan or family lineage is perpetuated when she gives birth. A mother is regarded as an altar wherein life comes forth. Through a mother, the fire of the clan is lit hence continuity of clan lineage. without a mother among the Nandi there would be no children, hence no continuity of family lineage.

Joseph: His presence in the nativity scene portrays the significance of the role of a father in a family. Among the Nandi it is not normal for a man to be present when a child is being born. Therefore, for Joseph to be present at the Nativity scene of Jesus brings to the fore the fact that Jesus has come into the world for the salvation of all: thus, inclusion of men in the salvation plan.

Baby Jesus: Among the Nandi a son holds significant position: enkindles the propagation of the kindred (continuation of one's clan).

Symbolism

Manger: Among the Nandi the manger called *Kaptugut* holds a very important place. A trough or box in a stable, barn, from which cattle feed. This trough is very significant for the Nandi because sustenance of the Cattle is realized.

Animals: Among the Nandi, a cow is a sacred animal. It symbolizes fertility, motherhood, sacrifice, nourishment, generosity and life-giving qualities, and innocence and purity and at the same time source sustenance of life (food) and livelihood. A cow produces milk. Milk is a symbol of peace. This is evident when people reconcile, they would drink milk from the same guard (*Sotet*). Milk is also used for blessing someone. Jesus is our prince of peace; He has come to reconcile humanity with God.

The Shepherds: Among the Nandi a shepherd; called *Mestowot*, takes care of the cattle with great diligence. The shepherds at the nativity Scene prefigured our Lord Jesus Christ the good shepherd who has come so that we may have life and have it in abundance (John 10:1-10). In Christ we lack nothing (Psalm 23).

The Magi: Among the Nandi, when a child is born the mother remains in seclusion for some time. When appointed time comes, relatives come to see the child. They come with gifts. As we built or visit Nativity scene (Christmas Crib), may we be guided by the Spirit to fathom the infinite tenderness and greatness of the love of God manifested in the Crib. May we be the Magi of today who though rich men but with thirst for infinity, they set out on a long and dangerous journey up to Bethlehem. They do not allow themselves to be scandalized or distracted by the environment but knelt before the Child in whom they recognized as God. The Nativity scene invites us to be like the Magi, disciples and witnesses of God's tender love and mercy.

In addition, may the Nativity scene help us to relive the history of what took place in Bethlehem. The creator of the universe lowering himself to take up our littleness. May we grow in continued awareness of the secret of true Christmas because it speaks of God's love and mercy shown in great humility "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor so that by his poverty you might become rich (2corinthians 8:9).

Blessed and grace filled Celebration of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ!



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GRECCIO IN INDIA

Nijil Chiramal ofm

It is beautiful to have an experience of Christmas in India, in a land where only 2.5 % Christians live. There are various sorts of celebrations during Christmas but what takes the total attention is crib, that we see in homes, in churches, in catholic schools and institutions.

Greccio experience gives a beautiful picture about Christmas. The meaning and its significance goes to every mind and heart without much explanation. In the land of diversity and in a land with millions of poor people, crib gives a beautiful message especially to the poor people.

As I grew up in North India, I remember my father explaining what happened at Christmas night. Jesus our God was born in a poor manger and the shepherds and kings flocked to this manger to worship Him. It is beautiful to see their reactions with multiple questions. How could your God be born in a manger? Why did he choose the poor and filthy place? How can your all-powerful God be born as poor? Probably they were not convinced about the answers to these questions, but certainly they had an impression that their God is different. He is almighty and still he not only reaches out to the poor but also becomes one among them. I have witnessed on Christmas day Hindus flock to the nearby churches to amaze at the cribs and get a blessing on this Christmas day.

This is the message that people mostly carry along with them after an encounter with the crib: the humility of the Incarnation and the beauty of one greater become one among the lowest.

For whatever reasons, there are records that cribs have been destroyed by certain miscreants. Once carolers affiliated with the Roman Catholic church were assaulted by a mob in a village in a state called Madhya Pradesh. It shows also that there is no religious tolerance in this country.



People do celebrate Christmas not because of any religious sentiments, rather because it is time to make big business. We find varieties of business cakes, online vendors selling Christmas baskets, Santa Claus at the shops.

Christmas and Greccio experiences in this country is a mixture of joy and grievances.

This gives me a picture to the people as Celano mentions in his book, "there simplicity is given a place of honor, poverty is exalted, humility is commended, and out of Greccio is made a new Bethlehem" and at times devastation and rejection.

It is amazing to see how Greccio's new Bethlehem travelled to the far distant country where Christians are just a minority. I wish that this new Bethlehem initiated by St. Francis of Assisi continue to inspire and rejuvenate the faith in the people.



About the author:

Father Nijil Chiramal ofm, who comes from India, is a pastor in the cathedral parish of Osnabrück.

AN ICON OF HUMILITY: THE CHRISTMAS CRIB IN THE FILIPINO TRADITION

Elton Viagedor ofm

The Philippines is known for its heartwarming and very festive Christmas season and, just as in many other cultures and traditions, the nativity scene is a fundamental and essential part of it. Together with glittering lights, elaborate decorations, giant lanterns, and joyful carols, the crib remains central to the Filipino Christmas celebration. As early as October and November, preparations are already being made for the location and setting up of the Christmas crib at homes and strategic public places such as offices, schools, and, in particular, churches. This tradition has a very rich history and dates back to the colonial period. It was the Spanish missionaries in the early 16th century who first brought this tradition to Filipinos, and for this reason the Filipino name for the Christmas crib is 'Belen' (Spanish for crib). Since its introduction to the Philippines, it has been gladly embraced by all and has since then been gradually enriched and incorporated into the very fabric of the Filipino culture and faith tradition.

Common and Contemporary Expressions

The traditional Filipino Christmas crib or Belen is characterized generally by its simplicity and is made up of simple materials such as wood, papers, used clothing, and hay or dried grass. The room which houses the baby Jesus, Mother Mary and St. Joseph is usually made up of light materials made of bamboo with palm leaves and branches. This resembles the traditional Filipino house known as the “Nipa Hut”. From this, it can be seen that from the very beginning, Filipinos have already tried to express and celebrate the Christmas crib using the elements and characteristics of their very own culture. As time passed, the Belen in the Filipino tradition has had various creative and unique expressions. Some Christmas cribs are made from recycled materials while the statues are made from ceramic



and even sculptured wood. Contemporary designs and decorations made possible by technological advances are sometimes also incorporated in them. Nevertheless, its fundamental and essential character remains the same: simplicity. For Filipinos, this characteristic aptly reflects the humility and self-emptying love of God as expressed in the mystery of the Incarnation.

The importance and centrality of the Christmas crib in Filipino Christmas tradition is further confirmed by the various ways it is celebrated in the different regions and provinces of the Philippines. In some churches and parishes, the faithful offer different parts and aspects of the Nativity scene within the Eucharistic celebration in the Christmas Novena masses, also known as 'Misa de Gallo'. This nine-day novena mass, usually celebrated at 3 or 4 in the morning, starts on December 16 and ends on December 24. The offering of the parts and pieces of the Christmas crib is done gradually in such a way that on Christmas Eve, the whole Nativity scene is already complete. In some other areas, Christmas crib festivals and competitions are being held. This is usually organized by schools and local government units. The one who is adjudged to be the best Christmas crib, based on agreed categories,

is announced as winner and receives a special prize. In some other areas, live Christmas cribs are also being done with live animals and persons who act as Blessed Mary and St. Joseph. In recent years, there has been some trend of using the Christmas crib as a platform to share and communicate socially related issues and concerns such as the care of creation and advocacy for peace.

Faith and Cultural Significance

As already underlined, the central and major characteristic of the Filipino Christmas crib is its simplicity. This is intimately related and reflective of the social reality of the Philippines: Many families are struggling politically and economically. As such, many live very simple lives and realities. In this sense, the simplicity of the Belen or Filipino Christmas crib is reflective of the social condition of many Filipino families. In other words, people can identify with the poverty and simplicity of God as shown in his Incarnation. The Nativity scene is therefore a reminder that in the midst of difficulties and

struggles in life, the Lord Jesus, who saves and liberates, is present. Furthermore, it is a symbolic expression that points to the humility of God who empties himself so that we can experience his salvific love. Therefore, the Christmas crib for Filipinos is an icon of God's humility and self-sacrificing love. It is also a beacon of hope which prods and inspires every faithful to follow Christ in the way of self-emptying love for the sake of others, especially the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized.



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