



800 Years of the Living Nativity

This year marks 800 years since St. Francis created the first Nativity scene in the tiny town of Greccio, Italy, a tradition that was spread by the early Franciscans, and by the people of the area. We share with you the story of that event in Greccio.

Manger scene ~ Sanctuary at Greccio, Italy

The Incarnation, God revealed to us through the infant Jesus, is a foundation of the spirituality of St. Francis. The simplicity and the poverty of God, who entered our world as a poor person, touched him deeply. Francis placed great importance on the observation of the birthday of the child Jesus, and celebrated it with great joy.

On Christmas Eve, 1223, St. Francis created the first Christmas living nativity scene so that the people around the Italian village of Greccio could have an experience of the Incarnation of Jesus. He invited the people of the region to come to a cave on Christmas Eve. He had the cave filled with straw and animals. He wanted them to feel what it would have been like on that first Christmas; the heat generated by the animals in the stable and the smell of the damp hay and the animals. He prepared a crib in a manger as a resting place for the infant Jesus. A Franciscan tradition tells us that during the liturgy, while Francis was preaching with deep feeling about God's love, the child Jesus appeared and rested in Francis' arms. The people came, with lights and song and great joy. This first living nativity was a dramatic demonstration of how God entered (and continues to enter) into the world in simplicity, poverty and humility.

On Christmas, Francis wanted the poor and the hungry to be filled with the abundance of God's great love. It was not only people that Francis wanted filled, but all creation as well. He asked that more than the usual amount of grain and hay be given to oxen and asses, and that corn and grain be scattered about for the birds.

After the Christmas celebration at Greccio in 1223, as the friars preached throughout Europe, they used the crèche to remind people of the great love of God revealed in the Incarnation. Their preaching led to customs that remain today.

As Secular Franciscans, we continue this tradition of sharing seed for the birds. It is our simple gift to you. May it remind us of the great gift of our God in the Incarnation, and of the gift of all creation that surrounds us.

Prayers for a blessed, joyful, peaceful Christmas!

The St. Clare Fraternity, Secular Franciscan Order

Interested in learning more about the Secular Franciscans? Join us as we celebrate a Franciscan Creche service on Epiphany Sunday, January 7, 2024 at 1:00 in St. Edward Church.