

ST. FRANCIS' THREE LOVES – THE CRIB

In the course of history, analyzers of St. Francis began to collect many aspects of his life around three themes: the **Crib**, the **Cross**, and the **Eucharist**.

Our Opening Prayer:

**Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that, as we are bathed in the new radiance
of your incarnate Word,
the light of faith, which illumines our minds,
may also shine through in our deeds.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever. Amen.¹**

The Greccio Story, December 24, 1223



Giotto di Bondone: Institution of the Crib at Greccio, 1295

In *The Life of St. Francis* by Julian of Speyer, we read: “Moreover, something marvelous happened three years before the blessed passing of Blessed Francis and, although many other things have been neglected, I think it is worthy of being recalled. The holy man assiduously meditated particularly on the things that were done in the time of Christ, and did not wish, if he could help it, to neglect even a jot or tittle of what was narrated in the books of the holy gospel. Quite the contrary, he considered everything written about Christ, but above all the vicissitudes of his life, and longed to experience the very sweet yoke and light burden of the Master himself.

“Therefore, desiring to represent as faithfully as possible the lowly poverty of the infancy of the Savior born at Bethlehem, when the Feast of the Nativity was at hand, the man of God sent word to a religious nobleman in the town of Greccio named John, who provided an ox and an ass, with a stable, in anticipation of the joys of the coming celebration.

“Finally the holy night arrived. Blessed Francis was there with many of his brothers gathered around him.

“The hay in the manger is prepared, the ox and the ass are arranged around the manger, and the vigil celebration begins with joy. A great multitude of people stream together from various places, the night is filled with an unaccustomed joy and made luminous by candles and torches. And so, with a new ritual, the festival of a new Bethlehem is celebrated.

“The brothers also paid their debt of praise to the Lord, and all present acclaimed him with new songs of praise. Blessed Francis, however, was standing before the manger full of sighs of joy and suffused by an indescribable sweetness. Finally, when Solemn Mass was celebrated above the manger, the holy Levite of God [Francis the deacon], dressed in festive vestments proclaimed the gospel with a sonorous voice and then with a voice flowing with honey he preached to the people about the poor King born in Bethlehem. Truly, he was so overcome by sweet devotion toward the infancy of that King, that whenever he had to speak the name of Jesus Christ, he would, as if stuttering, call him ‘the babe of Bethlehem,’ out of an excess of loving tenderness.

“Lest it be thought that these things happened without divine approval, a miraculous vision was shown to a certain virtuous man, who saw Blessed Francis go up to the manger and waken, as if from a deep sleep, a child who seemed to be lying there lifeless. It is therefore believed, and not

without reason, that the Lord Jesus aptly revealed his infancy in this vision to the one who reflected upon it. He who was asleep or dead in the hearts of many, owing to forgetfulness, was awakened and recalled to memory by the teaching and example of Blessed Francis. The solemnities were completed with great exultation, and everyone happily returned to their homes.”²

Unfortunately, by contrast, we know only too well that some people in our society do not even want to look at the crib scene. The crib scene recalls for us one of the two greatest events of all history: God-becoming-man (and God being our Redeemer). The crib carries the message: “I proclaim to you good news of great joy” (Lk 2:10) – **you are loved**.

When Blessed John Duns Scotus, O.F.M. was beatified, written were these words on the medal struck for the occasion: “*Incarnation – Summum Opus Dei*” [“The Incarnation – the Greatest Work of God!”] This awesome fact manifests one of the key elements of our rich Franciscan theology.

We always have a choice: merely to look at the crib scene, or to be a part of the scene, as Francis did. There we see and experience the powerful messages and examples of poverty/humility/dependency/love.

As St. John’s Gospel (1:11) starts out, after Christ became man, we find this jarring statement: “He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him.” What an indictment!

But we gather to let the whole world know that we want to accept Him, to receive Him – as our Priest (who offered the great sacrifice once and for all to redeem us); - as our Prophet (our teacher, by his words and his example, of how life should be lived; what’s important, etc.) – as our King: a King with his Kingdom (the Prince of Peace as we express in our hymns). And we receive Holy Communion as the seal on this acceptance – we accept him as Priest, Prophet, and King in our own lives once again.

Francis did not want just to look at a crib scene; he wanted to become a part of it! In fact, we come to realize that for Francis the crib was not just for Christmas! It can be for our prayerful appreciation every day of the year.



Benozzo Gozzoli: Scene 9 from the Life of St. Francis, 1452

- Q1. What does Christmas mean for me – really? What customs do I follow which show this? How does this compare with St. Francis?
- Q2. Many of us set up cribs in our homes. How can I use the crib as a “prayer-site”? For myself and/or my family? How might I do this?
- Q3. What kind of Christmas cards and postage stamps do I use? Are they the generic “seasons greetings” (sometimes even with cute Santas or dolls or snow people) or do they contain words and pictures that express what Christmas is really about?
- Q4. How do I celebrate the “Christmas Season” (Christmas Day to Epiphany and through the Baptism of the Lord)?

Q5. How do I see the crib scene as a symbol of God’s longing to be with us?

Q6. In what way is the crib a reminder of poverty? / humility? / helplessness?

Other readings about Greccio: FA:ED, *The Life of Saint Francis, First Book*, 1228 – 1229, Thomas of Celano, Vol. I, pp. 254 – 257, Chapter XXX and FA:ED, *The Major Life of Saint Francis*, 1260 – 1263, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Vol. II, pp. 610 – 611, Chapter Ten, v. 7.

¹ *Roman Missal*, Nativity of the Lord (Christmas, Mass at Dawn)

² FA:ED, *The Life of Saint Francis*, 1232-1235, Vol. I, pp. 405-406, Chapter X, vs. 53-55