

# Thomas of Celano's Book I: Life of St. Francis of Assisi (1229)

(Thomas probably joined St. Francis & his followers in 1215)

## Chapter XXX

### THE MANGER HE MADE IN CELEBRATION OF THE LORD'S BIRTHDAY

<sup>84</sup> His highest aim, foremost desire, and greatest intention  
was to pay heed to the holy gospel in all things and through all things,  
to follow the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ  
and to retrace His footsteps completely  
with all vigilance and all zeal,  
all the desire of his soul  
and all the fervor of his heart.

Francis used to recall with regular meditation the words of Christ  
and recollect His deeds with most attentive perception.  
Indeed, so thoroughly did the humility of the Incarnation  
and the charity of the Passion  
occupy his memory  
that he scarcely wanted to think of anything else.

We should note then, as matter worthy of memory and something to be recalled with reverence, what he did, three years prior to his death, at the town of Greccio, on the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ. *There was a certain man in that area* named John who *had a good reputation* but an even better manner of life. Blessed Francis loved him with special affection, since, despite being a noble in the land and very honored in human society, he had trampled the nobility of the flesh under his feet and pursued instead the nobility of the spirit. As usual, blessed Francis had John summoned to him some fifteen days prior to the birthday of the Lord.

"If you desire to celebrate the coming feast of the Lord together at Greccio," he said to him, "hurry before me and *carefully make ready* <sup>Prv 24:27</sup> the things I tell you. For I wish to enact the memory of that babe *who was born in Bethlehem*: to see as much as is possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he *lay in a manger*, <sup>Lk 2:7</sup> and how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he rested on hay." Once the good and faithful man had heard Francis's words, *he ran quickly* <sup>Jn 20:4</sup> and prepared in that place all the things that the holy man had requested.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Finally, *the day of joy* has drawn near,  
*the time of exultation has come.*  
From many different places the brethren have been called.  
As they could,  
the men and women of that land with exultant hearts  
prepare candles and torches to light up that night  
whose shining star has enlightened every day and year.  
Finally, the holy man of God comes  
and, finding all things prepared,

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*he saw them and was glad.* [Jn 8:56](#)

Indeed, the manger is prepared,  
the hay is carried in,  
the ox and the ass are led to the spot.  
There simplicity is given a place of honor,  
poverty is exalted,  
humility is commended,  
and out of Greccio is made a new Bethlehem.

*The night is lit up like day,* [Ps 139:12 \[Vulgate, Ps 138:12\]](#)

delighting both man and beast.  
The people arrive, ecstatic at this new mystery of new joy.

The forest amplifies the cries  
and the boulders echo back the joyful crowd.  
The brothers sing, giving God due praise,  
and the whole night abounds with jubilation.

*The holy man of God* [Mk 1:24](#) stands before the manger,  
filled with heartfelt sighs,

contrite in his piety,  
and overcome with wondrous joy.  
Over the manger the solemnities of the Mass are celebrated  
and the priest enjoys a new consolation.

<sup>86</sup> The holy man of God is dressed in the vestments of the Levites, since he was a Levite, and with full voice sings the holy gospel.<sup>b</sup> Here is his voice: a powerful voice, a *pleasant voice*, [Sg 2:14](#) a clear voice, a musical voice, inviting all to the highest of gifts. Then he preaches to the people standing around him and pours forth sweet honey about the birth of the poor King and the poor city of Bethlehem.

*Moreover*, burning with excessive love, he/Francis often calls Christ the "babe from Bethlehem" whenever he means to call Him Jesus. Saying the word "Bethlehem" in the manner of a bleating sheep, he fills his whole mouth with sound but even more with sweet affection. He seems to lick his lips whenever he uses the expressions "Jesus" or "babe from Bethlehem," tasting the word on his happy palate and savoring the sweetness of the word. The gifts of the Almighty are multiplied there and a virtuous man sees a wondrous vision. For the man saw a little child lying lifeless in the manger and he saw the holy man of God approach the child and waken him from a deep sleep. Nor is this vision unfitting, since in the hearts of many the child Jesus has been *given over to oblivion*. [Ps 31:13 \[Vulgate, Ps 30:13\]](#) Now he is awakened and impressed on their loving memory by His own grace through His holy servant Francis. At length, the night's solemnities draw to a close and everyone went home with joy.

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<sup>87</sup> The hay placed in the manger there was preserved afterwards so that, through it, the Lord might restore to health the pack animals and the other *animals* there, as He *multiplied his holy mercy*. It came to pass in the surrounding area that many of the animals, suffering from various diseases, were freed from their illnesses when they ate some of this hay.

What is more, women who had been suffering with long and hard labor had an easy delivery after they placed some of this hay upon themselves. Finally, an entire group of people of both sexes obtained much-desired relief from an assortment of afflictions.

At last, the site of the manger was consecrated as a temple to the Lord. In honor of the most blessed father Francis, an altar was constructed over the manger, and a church was dedicated.

This was done  
so that where animals *once ate the fodder of the hay*, <sup>Dn 5:21</sup>  
there humans henceforth  
for healing of body and soul  
would eat the flesh  
of the immaculate and spotless lamb,  
our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who *gave Himself for us* <sup>Ti 2:14</sup>  
with supreme and indescribable love,  
who lives and rules with the Father and the Holy Spirit as God,  
eternally glorious forever and ever.  
Amen. Alleluia, Alleluia.