

The first Christmas crèche

Every five or six years, it is not unusual for the Fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve to fall on the same day. This year is a case in point. December 24th, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, is Christmas Eve. Our obligation for attending Mass on the Fourth Sunday of Advent is not satisfied by attending the vigil Mass on Christmas Eve. Each celebration is separate and recalls for us important events in the history of our salvation. However, the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God on January 1st is not a holy day of obligation this year because it falls on the day after the Sunday celebration of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph on December 31st.

While most people have little or no difficulty attending two different Masses for important solemnities, the ministers of music, liturgy, and environment often find themselves sacrificing time away from family when preparing for and celebrating Masses on the same day or two consecutive days. Consequently, we want to minimize their time away from family by preparing our liturgical environment for Christmas during the Advent season. One way this can be done is by following the story of St. Francis of Assisi and the first Christmas crèche as told by Fr. William Saunders and used with permission from *Arlington Catholic Herald*.

In the year 1223, St. Francis, a deacon, was visiting the town of Greccio to celebrate Christmas. Greccio was a small town built on a mountainside overlooking a beautiful valley. The people had cultivated the fertile area with vineyards. St. Francis realized that the chapel of the Franciscan hermitage would be too small to hold the congregation for Midnight Mass. So he found a niche in the rock near the town square and set up the altar. However, this Midnight Mass would be very special, unlike any other Midnight Mass.

St. Bonaventure (d. 1274) in his *Life of St. Francis of Assisi* tells the story the best:

It happened in the third year before his death, that in order to excite the inhabitants of Greccio to commemorate the nativity of the Infant Jesus with great devotion, [St. Francis] determined to keep it with all possible solemnity; and lest he should be accused of lightness or novelty, he asked and obtained the permission of the sovereign Pontiff. Then he prepared a manger, and brought hay, and an ox and an ass to the place appointed. The brethren were summoned, the people ran together, the forest resounded with their voices, and that venerable night was made glorious by many and brilliant lights and sonorous psalms of praise. The man of God [St. Francis] stood before the manger, full of devotion and piety, bathed in tears and radiant with joy; the Holy Gospel was chanted by Francis, the Levite of Christ. Then he preached to the people around the nativity of the poor King; and being unable to utter His name for the tenderness of His love, He called Him the Babe of Bethlehem. A certain valiant and veracious soldier, Master John of Greccio, who, for the love of Christ, had left the warfare of this world, and become a dear friend of this holy man, affirmed that he beheld an Infant marvelously beautiful, sleeping in the manger, whom the blessed Father Francis embraced with both his arms, as if he would awake Him from sleep. This vision of the devout soldier is credible, not only by reason of the sanctity of him that saw it, but by reason of the miracles which afterwards confirmed its truth. For example of Francis, if it be considered by the world, is doubtless sufficient to excite all hearts which are negligent in the faith of Christ; and the hay of that manger, being preserved by the people, miraculously cured all diseases of cattle, and many other pestilences; God thus in all things glorifying his servant, and witnessing to the great efficacy of his holy prayers by manifest prodigies and miracles.

Undoubtedly, it took Francis several days to make ready the first Christmas creche and to acknowledge, with reverence, the different pieces of the nativity scene that provided such a wonderful spiritual impact. During each week of Advent, we will be making ready the Church of St. Matthew Christmas creche so that on the Fourth Sunday of Advent/Christmas Eve, we are not preparing the liturgical environment but celebrating with our families.