



The Christmas Crib: Its Meaning Today

ABSTRACT

All too often, the meaning and symbolic significance of the Christmas crib is overlooked as the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season usually gets in the way of the consciousness of people. In contemplating the profound relevance of the crib in our contemporary times, this article brings to our attention three important considerations. First, it discusses the crib's historicity, especially in the context of the Franciscan tradition. Second, it reflects on the sublime mystery of self-emptying that the Triune God has done through the incarnation. Lastly, Fr. Tony points us to the values of simplicity and love inherently manifest in the crib that should inspire us to acts of service and compassion towards others.

May the Lord give you peace

Aside from breath-taking natural biodiversity and beaches, a predominant Catholic culture and Overseas



Filipino Workers (OFW), the talented performers and health-care workers, the beauty contest winners and other factors we are known for, as well as other not-so-flattering ones, which do not need any mention, the Philippines is known for having the longest Christmas season in the world. It starts with the "ber" months, from the 1st of September all the way to mid-January of the following year.

The Franciscan family, whose missionaries were the second group to arrive here, evangelizing in the Tagalog and Bicol-speaking provinces, is celebrating this year the 8th centenary (1223-2023) of three events: the Confirmation of the Rule of the Friars Minor, also known as Franciscans, the Letter of St. Francis of Assisi to St. Anthony of Padua and the Christmas crib presented by St. Francis in Greccio, Italy. While the Rule and the Letter to St. Anthony might be of interest only to the Franciscans, the one about the Christmas crib, however, had a broader influence on the Christian world's celebration of Christmas.

The three events, however, are related albeit loosely; but let me show this briefly, especially with regard to the Rule and the Christmas crib. In November of 1223, Francis was in Rome to receive the Church's approval for the Rule he wrote for the group that had followed his way of life. It has to be mentioned that in 1209, he had presented to Pope Innocent III a "form of life" based on a radical, even literal, living of the Gospel as shown in the life and ministry of Jesus and the apostles. In spite of the reservations presented by others in the Papal court regarding the practical nature of the life being proposed, the pope approved it for the group to try out, and that, if they will find it practicable,

that they return to have the official document and seal of approval. Thus, 14 years later, Francis and the group returned to get the official recognition of the Church that was then already with Pope Honorius III.

There was a glitch however. In the 1215 Fourth Lateran Council, it was decided that new religious groups would have to choose among the already approved Rules for them: those of St. Basil, St. Augustine, and St. Benedict. Thus, the Rule being presented by St. Francis risked not being approved. Cardinal Hugolino, a close friend and supporter of Francis and the group, however, argued that what Francis was presenting was not a new rule, but one that was already approved in 1209 by Pope Innocent III, albeit orally. What Francis was asking from Pope Honorius III was the confirmation of the said way of life, now written out embodying the results of its being practicable.

While in Rome, Francis and the brothers visited churches in the city. One of those was the Basilica of St. Mary Major, which had pieces of wood darkened with age under its main altar. They were supposed to have been parts of the manger on which the Blessed Mother laid the newborn baby that first Christmas night in Bethlehem, and were brought by pilgrims from the Holy Land. Francis must have been inspired by those relics that he saw in their simplicity and poverty, the affirmation of the simplicity and poverty that he had written about and proposed in the Rule. On November 29, the pope gave Francis the document that confirmed the Rule and stamped it with the seal of approval, which is preserved in the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi.

Before leaving Rome, Francis sent a message to his friend Giovanni Velita in Greccio, where he and his group would pass on their trek back to Assisi already just weeks before Christmas. The message specified his desire to spend Christmas in Greccio, celebrating the Christmas eve Mass there, for which he specifically asked Giovanni that in the place where Mass was to be celebrated, there be a simple manger with some hay, a cow and a donkey, nothing more. The Mass was to be celebrated in a grotto, for which Francis also received permission from the pope, according to St. Bonaventure, since in 1207, Pope Innocent III prohibited celebrating Mass outside of churches or chapels.

That Christmas eve, a friar priest celebrated the Mass in a grotto in Greccio, attended by Giovanni Velita and his household as well as people from the town. Francis was the deacon in the Mass who also delivered the homily. He did so with his usual fervor, particularly when he spoke of the simplicity and poverty that surrounded the birth of the Lord exemplified by the manger for all to see. Each time he would mention the infant born in Bethlehem, his voice and the expression on his face conveyed affection and tenderness.

The narrative of Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of St. Francis, who wrote about the incident in Greccio a few years after the event, mentions that at a certain point in the homily, when Francis was showing the simplicity and poverty of the manger, Giovanni Velita saw the Lord in the manger, apparently asleep.

Francis knelt before the manger and gently woke up the sleeping infant. The interpretation of the vision was that Francis had awakened the Lord in the hearts of the people who have forgotten the great mystery involved in

the Incarnation regarding the Son of God's emptying himself of his divinity to be born as one of us. The effect on the people of Greccio was as if a flood of grace had descended on them that they went home full of gratitude and happiness. They took hay from the manger, which they fed to their farm animals when these got sick. Even women who were having a difficult childbirth would put some of the hay on them, and the delivery would be easy, as well as the hay became a source of healing for people suffering from an assortment of afflictions.

What happened in Greccio was Francis' deep realization regarding the humility and poverty of Jesus that would obsess him so deeply throughout his life. He realized that this mystery of the self-emptying of Jesus was manifested in his death on Calvary and in the Eucharist for all time. This awareness made Francis so passionate about the sufferings of the Lord that he even received the Stigmata and was enthralled with his real presence in the Eucharist. Francis' vision of a Christ-centered world expanded his horizons regarding the Church, all humanity and other faith systems and eventually embracing the whole of creation.

The presentation of the Nativity scene had evolved greatly since. At Christmas, the crib, which in time came to represent the scene with the combination of what is found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, not just the mother and child, but all the characters mentioned in the Infancy narratives.

What inspired Francis to present the Christmas crib was not so much about what was seen or represented. It was not about the cute baby Jesus. It was about the sublime mystery of the second person of the Trinity's "self-

emptying" of his Godhead becoming man, so clearly put by St. Paul in his Letter to the Philippians, 2: 6-8, "Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. Having assumed human form, he humbled himself further, obediently accepting even death, death on the cross."

For Francis, therefore, the Christmas crib speaks to us ultimately of love: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). In this love of God is the love of Jesus Christ who "emptied himself" in ways that have already been mentioned. This is what Francis wanted people to discover in the Christmas crib: LOVE. The manger was the concrete symbol and expression of the poverty shown by the Son of God in his incarnation, since being the Son of God the creator and owner of everything, the physical conditions of his birth could have been something more grandiose, but that would be the human way of looking or thinking about it. But then, God's ways are not our ways.

The challenge of the crib today is for us to echo that message of love in our life, not only at Christmas but always, because the unconditional love of God is always present. Always. God does not change, which is, if we can call it that, a "limitation" to God's infinite, limitless and all-embracing nature. We must then remember that when we feel God is "not there," or as if he does not hear us, or that God is distant, we must ask, who moved?

Having been created according to the image and likeness of God, our constant challenge is to put our effort

on knowing God better, not that we might be like God as was the temptation to Adam and Eve, but so that we can with all humility work "to be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful," as Jesus tells us. Being merciful is one of the concrete expressions of love, and we know how much our world today needs compassion.

The poverty and simplicity of the manger should urge and even impel us to make slow but concrete and constant steps towards discovering a new direction in our journey, one that will incorporate more and more being simple, being dispossessed, less materialistic and living the kind of nearness and concern for the poor, the less privileged, specifically those who are living in the peripheries of our society. Jesus was not born poor for nothing, he chose to be poor. Poverty, as Francis was inspired to live it in the concrete was not about material things, it was rather to achieve freedom, the freedom to love and be a brother to all, accepting everyone without distinction, through a life of service and compassion, hope and courage.

This is the concrete challenge of the Christmas crib today. It is not only about gifts and decorations and parties and all the usual things and events related to the season, but rather to be able to look beyond and deeper into the simplicity and poverty of the circumstances of the Lord's birth and discover Love in person. This will inspire us to reach out to others in friendship and service, in compassion and forgiveness towards our fellow travelers, as we look for someone we can help, or bring joy and hope to, or someone we can offer help and forgiveness, with an invitation to a fellow traveler to enter the warmth of our heart and experience what Christmas is all about. As

Francis woke up the sleeping infant in Greccio, may we be inspired to do the same through a simple act of love or service.

Yes, let us have the Christmas crib in our homes and institutions, and let us find time to be quiet and contemplate the mystery before us. This is perhaps the only response that can be given under the inspiration of our common journey and the conflicts in our world. People and things around us may still be the same, but we know in our heart of hearts that change has happened, a big change took place, because we believe Christ is present in his words: "I am with you always, until the end." May the Lord give us peace.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Armstrong, Regis J., OFM Cap., Hellman, J.A. Wayne, OFM Conv., and Short, William J., OFM, eds. *Francis of Assisi - Vol. 1, The Saint - Early Documents*. New York, London, Manila: New York Press, 1999, particularly the writings of Celano;
- _____. *Francis of Assisi, Vol. 2, The Founder - Early Documents*. New York, London, Manila: New City Press, 2000, especially the writings of Bonaventure.
- Carballo, Jose R., OFM, *The Grace of Our Origins*, Curia Generalis OFM, Via S. Maria Mediatrix 25, Roma, p.3; this is cited in the 2014 Custodial Statutes, Custody of St. Anthony of Padua, Cebu City.
- Esser, Cajetan, OFM. *Origins of the Franciscan Order*. Translated by Aedan Daly, OFM and Dr. Irina

Lunch. Chicago, Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1970.

Rosales, Antonio Ma., OFM. *The Christmas Crib: its Meaning and Challenge Today*. Calbayog City, Samar: Christ the King College Press, 2023.