**THE MANGER**

***The Miracle of the First Christmas Manger in 1223***

The beautiful custom of setting up mangers to commemorate the birth of the Infant Jesus was inspired by Saint Francis of Assisi.

**The First Creche**

It was the year 1223. Saint Francis went to Rome to obtain from Pope Honorius III authorization to celebrate Christmas in a totally new way. Saint Francis chose a high place in the vicinity of the village of Greccio, in the region of Umbria, not too far from Rome, where a good friend of his lived, the noble Giovanni Velita.

About 15 days before Christmas, Saint Francis said to him: “If you want to celebrate the feast of the Divine birth in Greccio make haste to prepare what I indicate to you.

“So that we can properly remember the circumstances in which the Divine Child was born and all the inconveniences he endured as he lay in the manger on straw between an ox and an ass, I would like to re-create this in a palpable way, as if I had seen it with my own eyes.”

Many religious and the residents of Greccio and the surrounding area were all invited for this special commemoration. Just before midnight, they came in procession with flaming torches to the spot chanting the antiphons of Advent.

The wind blew strongly, and the light of the torches projected their flickering shadows on the valley and the cliff face. However, in the place where the crib had been set-up, there reigned an ambience of holiness and peace.

When the village bell of Greccio began to toll midnight, a priest began to celebrate Mass. The crib had been placed near the altar, with the ox and ass on either side. A beautiful full-size statue of the Child Jesus rested on the straw.

As is well known, Saint Francis never wanted to be ordained a priest out of humility. Because of this, as deacon, it was his duty to solemnly sing the Gospel of that Christmas Mass.

After the reading of the Gospel, all waited attentively to hear the sermon that Saint Francis himself gave on the grandeurs and mercies of the Saviour of the human race, who that night was made flesh and dwelt among us.

Saint Francis spoke words sweetly about the poverty in which the God-man was born and about the insignificant city of Bethlehem. It is difficult to imagine the fiery love that the clear, and sonorous voice of Saint Francis produced in the hearts of those privileged to hear him.

**The Miracle**

At the end of his sermon, Saint Francis bent over to kiss the statue of the Divine Child. At this moment a miracle took place that only he and Giovanni Velita saw. The statue became alive. It was as if it had been woken from a profound sleep with Saint Francis’s kiss, and then the Child Jesus smiled at Saint Francis.

At the consecration, when the bread and wine truly become the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Saint Francis was able to contemplate the Messiah in two ways: in the form of the Holy Eucharist and laid in the manger.

At the end of the solemn midnight Mass, and after having incensed the manger, the friars stayed at Greccio and the villagers returned to their homes. Everyone was full of supernatural joy.

The veracity of this event can be certified by the sanctity of the one who experienced it, as well as by the miracles that happened afterwards. The straw from the manger was carefully kept by the people and was an efficacious remedy to miraculously cure sick animals and an antidote against many other diseases.

**A Tradition Is Born**

This devout institution of the manger was enthusiastically received by the faithful. Saint Clare of Assisi established it in her convents. Every year she set-up the manger herself.

The Franciscan friars also spread this custom far and wide. Whether composed of figurines artistically carved from clay, porcelain, or wood, the crib became the very symbol of Christmas.

From the majestic cathedral to the simplest rural chapel, from the palace or mansion to the humblest abode, Catholics worldwide, since that time, have had the pious custom of setting up a manger. In this way they repeat the custom that Providence inspired in the seraphic Saint Francis of Assisi in the remote year of 1223.

TFP Student Action