

Christmas

My Uncle Frank made Christmas mangers in his spare time. He and my Aunt Harriet sawed pieces of wood, nailed them together, and populated them with figurines. The demand was so great that their home looked like Christmas every day of the year. When I was a kid, my parents set up one of Uncle Frank's mangers every year as part of our family Christmas tradition. I still have two that Aunt Harriet made.

So, I smiled broadly when I read what Pope Francis did early this month. He visited the little town of Greccio, about two hours north of Rome by car - or 20 hours on foot. That was the mode of transport Saint Francis probably used in the year 1223 when he started back to Assisi after a November visit to Rome. In Rome he likely saw the Basilica of St. Mary Major, with its fifth-century mosaic of the Nativity, and where tradition holds that the wooden panels of Jesus' manger are on display. Francis of Assisi arrived in Greccio fifteen days before Christmas. He asked a local man named John to find a manger, some hay, an ox and an ass. On Christmas Day, as the crowds gathered for mass, they saw an image the Christmas story in 3D. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of my Uncle Frank, created the first Christmas manger. We're still setting them up 800 years later.

While Pope Francis was in Greccio this month, he read aloud his new apostolic letter, "*Admirabile signum*, On the Meaning and Importance of the Nativity Scene." If you want some spiritual reading for Christmas, look no further.

Here's an excerpt: "First, there is the background of a starry sky wrapped in the darkness and silence of night.... We can think of all those times in our lives when we have experienced the darkness of night. Yet even then, God does not abandon us, but is there to answer our crucial questions about the meaning of life. Who am I? Where do I come from? Why was I born at this time in history? Why do I love? Why do I suffer? Why will I die? It was to answer these questions that God became" one of us.

Pope Francis continues, "Unlike so many other people, busy about many things, the shepherds become the first to see the most essential thing of all: the gift of salvation." "Indeed, the poor are a privileged part of this mystery; often they are the first to recognize God's presence in our midst."

"Mary is a mother who contemplates her child and shows him to every visitor.... In her, we see the Mother of God who does not keep her Son only to herself, but invites everyone to obey his word and to put it into practice." "At Mary's side, shown protecting the Child and his Mother, stands Saint Joseph."

The pope concludes, "To our astonishment, we see God acting exactly as we do: he sleeps, takes milk from his mother, cries and plays like every other child! As always, God baffles us. He is unpredictable, constantly doing what we least expect. The nativity scene shows God as he came into our world, but it also makes us reflect on how our life is part of God's own life. It invites us to become his disciples if we want to attain ultimate meaning in life."

The Letter to the Hebrews says, "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways ... through the prophets; in these last days, he has spoken to us through the Son." God appears in 3D. Come, let us serve him, Christ the Lord.

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