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OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE  
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

# BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 231220a

Wednesday 20.12.2023

## General Audience

This morning's General Audience took place at 9.00 in the Paul VI Hall, where the Holy Father Francis met with a group of pilgrims and faithful from Italy and all over the world.

In his address in Italian, the Pope focused on the theme: "The Greccio Nativity, school of simplicity and joy" (Bible reading *Lk 2:10-22*). He then made an appeal for the victims and casualties of the earthquake that struck the Chinese provinces of Gansu and Qinghai last Monday.

After summarizing his catechesis in various languages, the Holy Father addressed special greetings to the faithful present.

The General Audience concluded with the recitation of the *Pater Noster* and the Apostolic Blessing.

## Catechesis of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Eight hundred years ago, at Christmas in 1223, Saint Francis organized the living Nativity scene in Greccio. While nativity scenes are being prepared or completed in homes and other places, it is good for us to rediscover its origins.

What was St Francis' intention? Let us gather it from his own words: "I want to depict the Child born in Bethlehem, and in some way see with the eyes of the body the hardships in which He found Himself for want of the things necessary for an infant: how He was laid in a manger and how He lay on the straw between the ox and the donkey" (Tommaso da Celano, *Vita prima*, XXX, 84: FF 468). Francis doesn't desire to create a beautiful work of art, but, through the Nativity scene, to provoke amazement at the extreme humility of the Lord, at the hardships He suffered, for love of us, in the poor grotto of Bethlehem. In fact, the biographer of the Saint of

Assisi notes, “in that moving scene, evangelical simplicity shines forth, poverty is praised, humility is recommended. Greccio has become like a new Bethlehem” (ibid., 85).

This is the first characteristic: the nativity scene was conceived as a school of simplicity [Translator's note: “sobrietà”, literally, “sobriety”]. And this has a great deal to say to us as well. Today, in fact, the risk of losing sight of what counts in life is very great and paradoxically increases precisely at Christmas: immersed in a consumerism that corrodes its meaning, overwhelmed by a tide of distractions and advertising, we run the danger of neglecting what is essential. So, while Jesus comes to give Himself as a gift in poverty, Christmas has become for many only an occasion to be given presents. The Lord Himself warned us against this, saying that the most insidious temptation for faith is the “dissipation of the heart” (cf. *Lk* 21:34), the hustle and bustle of a worldly well-being that anaesthetises the soul.

And the nativity scene was created to bring us back to what matters: to God Who comes to dwell among us, but also to other essential relationships, such as the family, present in Jesus, Joseph, and Mary; and loved ones, represented by the shepherds. People before things, people as they are—we note that the characters in the Nativity are simple, poor; and they are in harmony with creation: in the crib, the countryside occupies the most space, and the ox and the ass are never missing! It is good, then, to stand in front of the crib to get our life in order by returning to what is essential. It is like entering an oasis to get away from the daily grind, to rediscover peace in prayer and silence, in an unsullied tenderness. I think of children and young people, who risk indigestion from virtual and violent images: in the Nativity scene they can rediscover genuineness and creativity. How beautiful it is that they stand there together with their grandparents, doing each other good!

But the Nativity scene of Greccio speaks not only of simplicity, but also of joy. Let's listen once again to the chronicle of the time: “And the day of gladness comes, the time of rejoicing! [...] Francis [...] is radiant [...]. The people flocked and rejoiced with a joy they had never tasted before [...]. Everyone returned home full of ineffable joy” (*Vita prima*, XXX, 85-86: FF 469-470).

But where did that extraordinary Christmas joy come from? Certainly not from having brought home presents or from having experienced lavish celebrations. No, it was the joy that overflows from the heart when one tangibly touches the nearness of Jesus, the tenderness of God, who does not leave us alone, but consoles us [translator's note: stands with (*con*) those who are alone (*solì*)]. This is the experience of the Nativity scene: to perceive God's closeness in a concrete way. In fact, it represents reality as it is: everyday life is there, with shepherds and other types of work; evil is there, represented by Herod's palace; in a word, here is the beauty and misery of the world. But everything is inhabited by the Newness: God is in our midst and embraces our existence.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Nativity scene is like a small well from which to draw the nearness of God, the source of hope and joy. It is like a living Gospel, a domestic Gospel. Like the well in the Bible, it is the place of encounter, where we bring to Jesus the expectations and worries of life, just as the shepherds of Bethlehem and the people of Greccio did. If, before the Nativity scene, we entrust to Jesus all we hold dear, we too will experience “great joy” (*Mt* 2:10).

### Greeting in English

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those coming from Malaysia and Nigeria. In these final days before our celebration of the Lord's birth at Christmas, I invoke upon you and your families the joy and peace of the Lord Jesus, Son of God and Prince of Peace. God bless you!

### Appeal of the Holy Father

I turn my thoughts to those who have died and those who were injured as a result of the devastating earthquake that struck the Chinese provinces of Gansu and Qinghai last Monday. With affection and prayer I am close to the suffering people; I encourage the relief services; and I invoke upon all the blessing of the Almighty, that He may bring comfort and relief in their sorrow.

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