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The Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord
At the Vigil Mass and at the Mass During the Day

Few of us could imagine celebrating Christmas without a Christmas crèche, a Nativity scene, displayed prominently in our home or in our church. What would you think, upon entering this church this day, if the Nativity display was absent? The Christmas crèche has become part and parcel of our Christmas celebrations, a most beloved set of figures.

The crèche comes today in countless styles, models and sizes and has even become a collector's item for those who so enjoy them, but we must not lose sight of the purpose of these sacred sets. What happens to you as you gaze upon the crèche?

It was Saint Francis of Assisi who first gave us the crèche on Christmas Eve in 1223 in the Italian village of Greccio. He was so moved by the humanity of Jesus that he said to a man named John who, we are told, "had a good reputation and even better life":

If you would like us to celebrate this feast day of the Lord in Greccio, then go there ahead of me and prepare what I tell you. I would like to portray the Child born in Bethlehem and to see somehow with my bodily eyes the hardship he underwent because he lacked all a newborn's needs, the way he was placed in a manger and how he lay on the hay between the ox and the ass.¹

¹ Tomaso de Celano, *First Life*, XXX.84 in *Brother Thomas of Celano: The Life of St. Francis of Assisi and The Treatise of Miracles*, trans. Catherine Bolton (Assisi, Italy: Editrice Minerva,), 80-81.

Everything, of course, was prepared as the Poverello requested and he celebrated Christmas that year at Greccio.

When Saint Francis arrived that Christmas Eve night, everyone present was

gladdened with new joy over the renewed mystery... The brothers sang the Lord's praise and the entire night was spent in celebration. Sighing, the Saint of God stood before the crèche, filled with sighs, contrite in piety and overcome with ineffable joy.²

Francis stood before the crèche, before the manger filled only with hay, flanked by the ox and the ass, and was filled with sorrow for his sins and with joy at the humility and love of the Child of Bethlehem. Does the same happen to you when you gaze upon a Nativity set?

Why did Saint Francis insist on having an ox and an ass present that night in Greccio? Looking through the Gospels we find mention of sheep, but not a single ox or ass is named as being present at the manger by Matthew or Luke. They are found, rather, in the prophecies of Isaiah.

The Lord God says through his prophet: "The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people does not understand" (Isaiah 1:3). Looking upon the manger scene, upon these two animals found in every Nativity set, do you - like the ox - know your Owner? Like the ass, do

² *Ibid.*, xxx.85.

you know your Master's crib? Or are you like Israel who neither know your Master nor understand his love?

Saint Francis wanted the ox and ass present to remind us that we too often do not know our Creator, our Master, our Lord, nor do we understand the depths of his love.

Looking upon the crèche we see the tremendous love of God for us, who have wandered far from him. In the Child of Bethlehem we see not only the love of God, but also his great power.

God is so great that he can become small. God is so powerful that he can make himself vulnerable and come to us as a defenceless child, so that we can love him. God is so good that he can give up his divine splendor and come down to a stable, so that we might find him, so that his goodness might touch us, give itself to us and continue to work through us.³

God who is love comes to us in the Child of Bethlehem and invites us to love him.

He opens himself to be loved by us, but at the same time, an openness to be loved is always an openness also to be rejected. Such is the wonder of God's love, the love that we often do not understand, the love that the ox and ass want us to understand.

Standing today before the crèche, the ox and the ass look at us with a question:

³ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 December 2005.

My people does not understand, but do you perceive the voice of your Lord? Do you know your Master? Do you know his love? Will you love him?

If we open our hearts to God's love, if we make room for him in our lives, if we welcome the Child of Bethlehem in the manger of our hearts, then what happened to those present in Greccio in 1223 will happen to us as well: we leave "gladdened with new joy at the renewal of the mystery" of Emmanuel, of God with us.