



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP
Christmas 2023

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

On Christmas Eve, 1223, St. Francis of Assisi assembled the first living nativity scene in Greccio, Italy. This Christmas marks the eight hundredth anniversary of this significant event.

The context is simple. When St. Francis was returning to Assisi from Rome, he stopped in the town of Greccio. St. Francis had previously visited the Holy Land and noticed that the countryside around the small town reminded him of Bethlehem. Here he was inspired to create a scene of the first Christmas. St. Francis found a cave and had it prepared with an ox, donkey, and a manger full of hay. The people then gathered around the cave and Mass was celebrated. We are told that everyone went home filled with joy because of what they had witnessed. (Thomas of Celano, *First Life* 84: Franciscan Sources, 470).

In 2019, Pope Francis visited the Shrine of the Nativity in Greccio. To mark this event, he wrote a beautiful reflection on the meaning and importance of the Nativity Scene. In this Apostolic Letter, entitled *Admirabile Signum* (An Admirable Sign), the Holy Father acknowledges that the nativity scene has the power to touch hearts and strengthen faith. He writes, "Why does the Christmas crèche (manger) arouse such wonder and move us so deeply? First, because it shows God's tender love: the Creator of the universe lowered himself to take up our littleness. The gift of life, in all its mystery, becomes all the more wondrous as we realize that the Son of Mary is the source and sustenance of all life." (*Admirabile Signum*, p.3).

Unfortunately, like so many other aspects of Christmas, the manger scene is being eclipsed by secular symbols. The nativity scene is disappearing from the public square, and in private homes, where it once was prominently displayed. This powerful sign of love is being muted by a misguided understanding of inclusivity and diversity and a lack of faith. The truth is that Jesus came to save all people, not just a select few. The manger scene offers a universal message of hope and love.

On this eight hundredth anniversary of the first manger scene in Greccio, take the time to contemplate this beautiful scene of simplicity, mystery, and love. When you are at your parish church for Christmas Mass, kneel before the Holy Family in the manger and ask that they intercede for your family. As you gaze upon the infant Jesus, contemplate the fact that he became so little so that you could love Him and experience His profound love for you.

If you do this with an open heart, then, like those people in Greccio so many years ago, you too will return home filled with joy because of what you have experienced!

May the joy of Christmas be with you always.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend Gerard Bergie, D.D.
Bishop of St. Catharines