

December 1, 2021

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Greetings to you on this first day of December. We have entered Advent, our Season of Hope, and joyfully await the coming of Christmas. O Come Emmanuel. The Lord of love is coming to earth to be with His people. Our Beloved Saint Francis called Christmas the "feast of feasts," reflecting the depth of Franciscan incarnational theology.

We all know the story of how St. Francis created the first creche, a story we love to tell and retell. It was Christmas 1223 and, according to St. Bonaventure in his *Life of Saint Francis*, the Saint was in Greccio. He wanted to invite the inhabitants of Greccio to enter deep devotion in their celebration of the birth of our Lord. It is told that he prepared a manger, filled the place he chose with hay, an ox, and an ass, and all gathered there to raise songs of praise. And now, eight hundred years later, we can see this same reenactment around the world, and symbolized in wood or metal on our home altars.

I want to share with you, sisters and brothers, one of the most exciting and meaningful celebrations of Christmas in my life took place now fifty years ago, my encounter with a blessed creche.

It was not by accident that I was in Israel in December. I had intended it. I wanted to spend a Christmas in Bethlehem. And so, on a solo pilgrimage to the Holy Lands in 1971, I celebrated the birth of our Lord and Savior on Christmas Eve at the Manger. Two days before Christmas I traveled to Bethlehem from Jerusalem. Finding a guest house or youth hostel was not hard in those days, and soon I settled into a dormitory style room with other young travelers. On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, I walked out of the town for a few miles to the place where I think the shepherds would have been tending their flocks. I wanted to relive the story. I carried my small edition of the Gospels and read from Chapter 2 of the Gospel According to Luke.

"In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled....And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child."

I am not certain I would be able to walk as freely today from that point where "shepherds watched their flocks by night" into the town of Bethlehem. Even then there were soldiers with M-16s everywhere, and check points, and warnings to "be careful." But there was none of that on the narrow country road into the town. As evening fell, I made the two-or-so-mile walk back peacefully, quietly, without fear. A few cars passed me, respectfully moving closer to the center of the narrow road not to put me in harm's way. I walked in awe and wonder and, as planned, I walked looking up to the heavens as the moon began to rise and the stars made their first appearances.

The contrast as I entered Manger Square was stark. Crowds had gathered. Children of many ages were darting in and out, to play games, chase each other, and seek their parents to ask for food. I, too, felt hungry. I was gratified to see lots of open-air stalls serving dinner. Being from Syrian and Lebanese parentage, I reached easily for the grilled kebab drizzled with yogurt sauce, lying in a bed of hummus-soaked-freshly baked pita bread. I ate standing in the middle of that electrified gathering, smiling, and somewhat disbelieving the spot upon which I stood eating as naturally as if I were in my hometown in Pennsylvania. I looked around for an Arabic coffee, mildly sweetened, to sustain me for the evening's activities and midnight mass. I drank two of them.

There was a line to enter the cave-chapel, which holds the manger scene of Jesus, the creche. Each visitor was given a short time inside to sit quietly, then move on and make room for other pilgrims. I actually did not think I would go in. I don't like things that I consider too glitzy, not devotional enough. But I entered nonetheless and was surprised when I responded so powerfully.

I remember the chapel as plain and bare, with colored lamps hanging from the ceiling to light the otherwise dark space. I circled around and stood in line a second time, sensing some importance here for my soul. I stood in line a third time and would still be standing there still today had I not be asked by the kindly guard to yield my place to another.

I did. I walked the short distance up the hill to await midnight Mass. I was quite shaken and yet subdued. I reflected prayerfully on the encounter. I reflected upon the wisemen who came, gave their gifts, and went back "by another way." Fifty years later I hold this memory in a very special place in my heart.

We all know this, don't we, dear Franciscan family? Once we encounter the living Christ, we are never the same. We go another way. We encounter Him daily if, as a wise one once said, "If we have ears to hear and eyes to see." We encounter Him in nature, in scripture, in the liturgy, in the faces of all who live, everywhere.

So let us join together in our encounters as we prepare our hearts, minds, and souls for the Christmas celebrations and for the year to come. May the Lord of love, who is with us now and will be forever, live in our world and in our hearts.

Peace and All Good,
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