

Vatican City

December 17, 2023

Dearest Knights and Dames,

We are nearing Christmas, which this year has a certain Franciscan feel to it, because it coincides with the Eighth Centenary of Saint Francis of Assisi organizing the first Nativity scene in Greccio. The event was described by Thomas of Celano:

“The holy man of God is dressed in the vestments of the Levites, since he was a Levite, and with full voice sings the holy Gospel. Here is his voice: a powerful voice, a pleasant voice, a clear voice, a musical voice, inviting all to the highest of gifts. Then he preaches to the people standing around him and pours forth sweet honey about the Birth of the poor King and the poor city of Bethlehem. Moreover, burning with excessive love, Francis often calls Christ the “Babe of Bethlehem” whenever he means to call Him “Jesus.” Saying the word “Bethlehem” in the manner of a bleating sheep, he fills his whole mouth with sound but even more with sweet affection. He seems to lick his lips whenever he uses the expressions “Jesus” or “Babe of Bethlehem,” tasting the word on his happy palate and savoring the sweetness of the word.” [Thomas of Celano’s Life of St. Francis of Assisi (1229), Book 1, Chapter III: The Manger He Made In Celebration of the Lord’s Birthday).

With its backdrop, depictions and lights, the Nativity scene set up in Saint Peter’s Square this year, recalls this event.

Pope Francis once said that: “to make a Nativity scene is to celebrate God’s closeness. God has always been close to His people but when He became incarnate and was born, He was very close, extremely close. To make a Nativity scene is to celebrate God’s closeness; to rediscover that God is real, concrete, alive and vibrant. God is not a distant lord or a detached judge but rather humble Love that descended upon us. The Child in the Nativity scene transmits His tenderness to us. Some small figurines portray the little Baby with open arms to tell us that God came to embrace our humanity.” (General Audience, December 18, 2019).

The story of St. Francis, then, reminds us of the profound link that exists between Christmas and the Holy Eucharist. Every celebration of the Eucharist repeats the mystery of Christmas, because in every Eucharist the Son of God comes to be present in our midst, as when over 2,000 years ago, He was born of the Virgin Mary. This time, however, His abode is not in the womb of a woman, but on the Eucharistic Table. In all of our churches, each altar is a manger of Bethlehem.

Angelus Silesius, a German mystic of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century wrote: “If Christ were born in Bethlehem a thousand times, and not in thee thyself, then art thou lost eternally.” (The Cherubic Wanderer, I, 61). This, dearest Brothers and Sisters, is my wish for this Christmas: that participating in the Holy Mass be, for each of us, the Birth of Jesus in our hearts.

Marcello Cardinal Semeraro

Grand Prior