

# Christmas at Greccio (1223)

by Bret Thoman, OFS

This year, the Franciscan Family continues to observe a series of eight-centenary commemorations. In 2023, we are reflecting on two important events that occurred 800 years ago: the Approval of the Later Rule and the reenactment of Christmas at Greccio.

Not far from Rieti, in the northernmost part of the eponymous valley, is the hill town of Greccio. Home to just about 100 residents, the village is famed for an event that took place in 1223. Within a grotto nestled within a cliff, here, St. Francis of Assisi reenacted the first nativity scene.

Referred to locally as the “New Bethlehem,” St. Francis desired to recreate a living nativity scene (with live animals and hay) in order to render the feast of the birth of Christ more real. Before this event, the feast of the Nativity of Christ was a minor feast in the liturgical calendar of the Church.



The grotto where the first nativity scene took place



The hermitage of Greccio stands out prominently on the side of a cliff.

St. Francis had been to Greccio several times and was close to a local knight and tertiary named Giovanni (John). Francis told John that he wished to “enact the memory of that babe who was born in Bethlehem: to see as much as is possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, and how, with an ox and a donkey standing by, he rested on hay” (Thomas of Celano, First Life, Chapter 30).

The site was a cave on the face of a cliff some three kilometers (2 miles) from the village. With John’s assistance, animals were led to the grotto and hay and a manger were installed. St. Francis, a deacon, served at the Mass. The liturgy came to life spectacularly. The people gathered entered into the mystery of the incarnation in an entirely novel way as they saw with their eyes what Christmas meant.

Afterwards, an altar was constructed over the manger and a small church was built around the grotto. A similar Mass was celebrated the following year. In time, the practice spread to other parts of the region, then all of Italy. Soon, people everywhere began reenacting Christmas in such a way. Today, Greccio is visited by tens of thousands of pilgrims each year. A hermitage staffed by OFM Franciscan friars safeguards the grotto where St. Francis recreated the first creche. Around the cave is an ancient hermitage where St. Francis and the early friars lived in the early thirteenth century. It includes a primitive refectory and dormitory.

Above it is the newer hermitage (that is, from the mid-thirteenth century), built during the era of St. Bonaventure, the Minister General of the order. The small, wooden cells can be visited along with the ancient choir and church.

Next to the old church is a modern church with a display of hand-crafted creches along an upper corridor. Particularly striking are those from the school of Naples, known for a long tradition of artisanship and nativity scenes. The message is that the birth of Jesus was not an event that took place remotely in a faraway age and place; rather, our Savior is with us here and now