

**CHRISTMAS EVE 2017**  
**SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH**  
**FATHER CRAIG LOONEY**  
**TITUS 2.11 SAINT LUKE 2.1**

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It would be a Christmas like no other. There would be a real Crèche...the first live Nativity Scene...the townsfolk would play the part of Mary and Joseph and the angels...and real shepherds would play themselves...and there would of course be oxen and sheep and many other live animals he loved so much.

Nativity scenes in Church and in our homes are so common we take them for granted? We can thank Saint Francis of Assisi for staging the first Nativity scene in 1223...just three years before his death. And we know Francis loved animals...he called them his friends...we bless animals on the Sunday closest to October 4<sup>th</sup>...his feast day...a cherished event in the life of Saint Joseph Parish.

Francis intended to celebrate Christmas with the friars of the Hermitage at Greccio (gah-RAY-cho)...a small hill country town in central Italy...halfway between Rome and Assisi. When he arrived...he discovered the chapel was far too small for the crowds expected to attend midnight Mass.

We have all seen signs around town reminding us *Jesus is the reason or the season*. Francis would have understood and agreed...the commercialization of Christmas is not a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomena. Francis wanted people to celebrate Christmas in a wonderful new way...in love and admiration of the Christ Child.

With help from the friars of the Hermitage and townsfolk...Francis created the first recorded Nativity scene...with live people and animals. A cave outside of town served as the stable...a trough with hay was the manger...everyone had a role to play. And bare rock served as the Altar.

Francis, who had been ordained a deacon, sang the Gospel and preached the sermon. To the people gathered around the cave for the outdoor Mass...the Crèche (manger scene) in its simplicity symbolized the lowliness, poverty and humility into which Jesus was born...God made his presence among us known not in blazing flashes...but rather a fragile flame...a baby.

Toward the end of his sermon Francis picked up the infant child asleep in the trough...the real-life stand in for Jesus...and the child awakened. Brother Thomas of Celano (sah-LAH-no), Francis' biographer, described the scene as magical and he wrote: "...for the Child Jesus had been forgotten in the hearts of many; but, by the working of his grace, he was brought to life again through his servant Francis and stamped fervently upon our memories."

Earlier this evening at the Mass for Children at the Crèche, the children helped decorate the Crèche with the figures of Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, the shepherds and animals. They told the story of Jesus' birth in simple yet powerful words that draw our attention to the Crèche...and the real meaning of Christmas.

Tonight we celebrate the birth of Jesus with hymns of joy and praise. The Christmas story needs to be told over and over again...to a world increasingly out of order and disordered...and in need of hearing the Good News about God's love and the peace and hope Jesus' birth brings.

The birth of Jesus is the story of the *INCARNATION*...God became a human being like us...born in a barn...the humblest of births. He is our *EMMANUEL*...*GOD WITH US*. He is the Light of John's Gospel...who leads the world out of the darkness of sin and death. He walked among us so one day we might walk with him in heaven...forever.

Francis wanted a Nativity scene that would draw people into it and give them a new appreciation for Christmas. Before we leave here tonight...let's spend a few minutes at the Crèche...let it become for us an *INCARNATIONAL* reminder that *Jesus is the reason for the season* is more than a clever slogan.

Tonight let's join with Saint Francis of Assisi and all of the Angels and Saints and shout *GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST HEAVEN, AND PEACE ON EARTH TO THOSE WITH WHOM HE IS PLEASED!*

And let me wish you a Merry Christmas!

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