

FR. PETER'S CHRISTMAS HOMILY ...

Again, I would like to welcome all of you as we celebrate the miracle of the Incarnation: God taking on human flesh in the baby born in the manger of Bethlehem.

Something very special happened on this day 800 years ago.

In the year 1223, St. Francis created the first living nativity scene.

He had made a trip to Rome where he had received the Pope's approval for his Rule of life for his friars.

While in Rome, Francis saw the beautiful mosaics depicting the birth of Jesus in the Basilica of St. Mary Major surrounding the shrine where the wooden panels of Christ's manger are believed to be preserved.

On his way home to Assisi, Francis stopped in the little town of Greccio.

There he asked a local man to help him to bring to life the memory of the Holy Child lying in the poverty of a cattle stall, surrounded by the animals and the poor shepherds.

Once all was arranged, they set up an altar over the manger and celebrated Christmas Mass.

What a beautiful coming together of the image of Jesus as the Bread of life!

The word "manger" refers to a place to eat, and in the Holy Eucharist Jesus gives us his Body and Blood as food and drink.

A few years ago, Pope Francis traveled to Greccio and visited the church built around the site of that first Nativity scene.

He used the occasion to sign an Apostolic Letter he had written entitled "O Wondrous Sign" which was a reflection upon the significance of the Christmas crèche.

Pope Francis points out that the preparation and placement of Nativity scenes – often in public places – is an expression of the work of evangelization, offering "a simple yet authentic means of portraying the beauty of our faith."

I want to quote a passage from the Pope's Letter:

"Why does the Christmas crèche 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 Pope continues: "In Jesus, the Father has given us a brother who comes to seek us out whenever we are confused or lost, a loyal friend ever at our side. He gave us his Son who forgives us and frees us from our sins." End quote

A Nativity scene is a heart-tugging reminder of the presence of Emmanuel – God with us – in the ordinary surroundings of our everyday lives.

I would invite each of us to see ourselves in the characters we find in the Christmas tableau.

As the angels first declared: "Today a Savior has been born for you, who is Christ and Lord!"

As Pope Francis so engagingly writes: "In Jesus, God was a child, and in this way, God wished to reveal the greatness of his love: by smiling and opening his arms to all."

As the charming beauty of the crèche draws us in, our hearts fill with gratitude for the miraculous "exchange" it represents: God became the child of Mary so that we could become the children of God.

This truly is "Good News" that is meant, not just for ourselves, but for all people.

Our gathering around the Nativity scene tonight/today is truly a source of inspiration calling us to share this Good News with others.

God is with us! God is close to us! God never abandons us!

As you look at the Christmas crèche here or in your home remember this: God loves you. Jesus loves you.

In Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary and entrusted to the loving care of Joseph, God has come so very close to us in the various circumstances of our human lives.

As we allow God's presence to transform our lives, we become sacraments of that presence to others.

I would like to offer two further brief reflections regarding our experience of the Christmas crèche.

First, Nativity scenes come in all shapes and sizes.

I set up four in my house, and each one is unique in style and manner of arrangement.

The splendor of God is revealed in the diversity of creation.

Our differences need not divide us ... they certainly don't limit the possibility of God's grace breaking through in unexpected ways.

I believe we need this message more than ever in our society so plagued by rancor, suspicion, and meanness.

Finally, I want to remind us all that a Christmas crèche does not need to be perfect.

Things were not as pretty in Bethlehem on that first Christmas as they are here in church!

And the same is true of our lives, isn't it?

The Good News is that God wants to be a part of your life no matter how "messy" things might be.

As we do with our manger scenes, we just need to make some room for God in our life.

Give God a little time and space each day ... God will work with whatever we can offer.

And just as it happened long ago in a stable full of hay ... God's life will be born in us.

Merry Christmas!