

Homily for the Feast of the Holy Family 2017

St. Francis of Assisi is credited with creating the first nativity scene in Greccio, Italy in December of 1223. His was a live nativity scene complete with a cave, animals and plenty of hay. Since then Catholics throughout the world have been placing nativity scenes in their churches and homes.

St. Francis wanted to help the people of Greccio to understand and appreciate the great mystery of the incarnation. The mystery of God becoming man. The thirteenth century was a time, not unlike our own, where spirituality and religious fervor were lacking in most places. His intent was to recreate the scene of Christ's birth that would move the hearts and minds of the people and engender within them greater devotion and love for the holy family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

Franciscans are credited with promoting the placement of nativity scenes in churches. They are also credited with promoting the Stations of the Cross, which engender a deeper understanding of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. Hopefully these beautiful religious images succeed in accomplishing what they are intended to accomplish. They are, in our Catholic nomenclature, sacramentals. Images blessed and set apart for a holy purpose. At their best, these sacramentals move us on both an intellectual and emotional level and lead us to deeper prayer and devotion.

There is a downside, however, to the use of nativity scenes and other religious imagery including the images found on Christmas cards. Often these are copies of beautiful art work from the middle ages when biblical scenes were the theme of choice for most medieval artists. The downside is that these scenes, while moving our hearts and minds, often do not truly depict or communicate the reality of life at that time leaving us with a somewhat unrealistic, romanticized, and sanitized version of what life was really like.

The birth of Jesus took place after a long and difficult sojourn from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The journey was arduous and dangerous. There were bandits and wild animals — lions and bears. They would have relied on the hospitality of strangers along the way. At night they would most likely have camped outside, unless offered lodging by a hospitable person. The route to Bethlehem would have taken them through Samaria and Samaritans were not friendly to Jews. So they were probably met with great hostility. They probably traveled with others from Nazareth so they would not have been alone. Joseph most likely had a donkey and Mary, nine months pregnant, probably rode of the donkey. Given her condition, she was probably sick most of the way. When they arrived in Bethlehem they found no room in the inns and were forced to stay in a cave which was used as a stable. It would have been cold and dark in the cave, which they would have shared with the animals. It would have been smelly and dirty.

When the baby was born, after the visit of the magi, they were forced to flee because Herod ordered the execution of Jewish males under the age of two. They were refugees on the run and would have spent a couple of years as refugees in Egypt, living in refugee camps like the ones we have seen on the news.

Life expectancy was about 30 years of age. Medical care was non-existent. Living conditions were primitive if not deplorable at least by today's standards. Life was hard. The majority, including the holy family, were very poor and barely eked out a living.

On the other hand, they were part of a close knit community of family and extended family who cared for one another and watched out for each other. And they had a deep faith and kept religious traditions and customs that sustained and nourished them. Their Jewish faith and family life would have been a major support for them.

We need to keep in mind the real life circumstances of life at that time, lest we romanticize the holy family and minimize the hardscrabble life they endured. So when we talk about the holy family we need to realize the challenges they faced. When we do this, our appreciation for the holy family deepens. We can better appreciate the courage and determination it must have taken to fulfill all that God asked of them. One of the primary qualities of the holy family was their obedience to God's plan despite all the challenges and hardships that the holy family encountered along the way.

This might help us, then, to be strengthened in our own family life and in our own determination to fulfill our vocations and all that God asks of us, despite the hardships and sufferings that we encounter along the way. It also helps us to appreciate the hardships of so many people in our own day who suffer some of the very difficulties that the holy family suffered.

In his Christmas homily, Pope Francis reminded us that the holy family was, for a time a refugee family, like millions of families today who have been forced from their homes. At the present time it is estimated that 60 million people are refugees seeking a safe place to live.

Pope Francis preached: "So many other footsteps are hidden in the footsteps of Joseph and Mary. We see the tracks of entire families forced to set out in our own day. We see the tracks of millions of persons who do not choose to go away but, driven from their land, leave behind their dear ones. In many cases this departure is filled with hope, hope for the future; yet for many others this departure can only have one name: survival. Surviving the Herods of today, who, to impose their power and increase their wealth, see no problem in shedding innocent blood.

Mary and Joseph, for whom there was no room, are the first to embrace the One who comes to give all of us our document of citizenship. The One who in his poverty and

humility proclaims and shows that true power and authentic freedom are shown in honoring and assisting the weak and the frail.

This is the joy that we tonight are called to share, to celebrate and to proclaim. The joy with which God, in his infinite mercy, has embraced us pagans, sinners and foreigners, and demands that we do the same.

The faith we proclaim tonight makes us see God present in all those situations where we think he is absent. He is present in the unwelcomed visitor, often unrecognizable, who walks through our cities and our neighborhoods, who travels on our buses and knocks on our doors.

In the Child of Bethlehem, God comes to meet us and make us active sharers in the life around us. He offers himself to us, so that we can take him into our arms, lift him and embrace him. So that in him we will not be afraid to take into our arms, raise up and embrace the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned (cf. Mt 25:35-36).

In this Child, God invites us to be messengers of hope. He invites us to become sentinels for all those bowed down by the despair born of encountering so many closed doors. In this child, God makes us agents of his hospitality.”

As we celebrate this Holy Family Sunday, let us enter into solidarity with the 60 million refugee families throughout the world. Let us pray for them, for their safety and wellbeing. Let us pray that nations will offer them hospitality and welcome. Let also pray for the nations from which they have been displaced, for a resolution to the conflicts, violence, and prejudices that have led to their displacement. May we feel the same love for them that we feel for the holy family of Bethlehem and open our hearts to them.