



COMMUNIO

Newsletter of the Brothers and Sisters
of St. Francis Region



Celebration of the First Creche Edition Winter 2024

Greccio Celebrated throughout the BSSF Region

Nativity scenes took on special meaning for Franciscans in December 2023 as we observed the 800th anniversary of the live nativity scene that St. Francis created 800 years ago in Greccio, Italy.

The peace, joy, and love of the Christmas season can be found among all the creative events that were made even more special as Franciscans shared their love of the Gospel and our Lord Jesus with members of their churches.

One event sponsored by the St. Joseph of Cupertino Fraternity in Bessemer, AL, inspired blogger Amy Wellborn who wrote, “It was one of those incidents – constant through daily life, if you are paying attention – in which responding to nudges of the Spirit brings just what you need - and perhaps didn’t know you needed – into your life.

Read about her experience at <https://amywelborn.wordpress.com/2023/12/18/we-adore-you-hidden-in-the-manger/>

Celebration, prayer, education, and good food



Fraternity of Brother Francis

Fraternity invited parishioners from four parishes that our members attend to join us for a four-part centenary celebration of St. Francis’s Greccio Nativity at St. Joseph’s Catholic Church in Newton, NC.

Friar John Elmer, OFM Conv. Spiritual Assistant of the Province of Our Lady of Consolation, (the province of Franciscan Friars this fraternity has been bonded to since 1987) drove over 400 miles of from Mt. St Francis, IN, to share in the joyful day of education, prayer and food.

The St. Elizabeth of Hungary Fraternity in Elizabeth City, NC, joined with the local Holy Family Catholic Church in their youth's Faith Formation Celebration in the blessing of our newly refurbished nativity.

Formation Director, Eileen Chaney, OFS, read a story about St. Francis and the first outdoor creche (left). Then our fraternity distributed Creche ornaments to the youth and family that Father Alex Gonzalez blessed along with our refurbished nativity (below).



Padre Pio Fraternity in Raleigh, NC, co-sponsored "Stations of the Creche" with St. Francis of Assisi parish. More than 700 people attended the Dec. 15 event which included a pilgrimage with prayer, song, and gospel dramatizations around campus and in the church. This was followed by cookies and hot chocolate and a display of 50 nativity scenes from the collection of Fr. Jim Sabek, OFM, including one from his grandmother at left.

Making Hay with St. Francis at Greccio

By Alice Baird, OFS

In Greenville, South Carolina, 800 years after St. Francis inspired the first Live Nativity at Greccio, **Our Lady of Good Counsel Fraternity** inspired the first live nativity ever performed at Our Lady of the Rosary School. As Secular Franciscans, we “made hay” with that inaugural performance.

Our fraternity meets at Our Lady of the Rosary Church, so it was only natural that we would approach the school to help us plan our commemoration.

When our Minister, Valerie Baronkin, OFS, and Secretary, Marsha Wiggins, OFS, met with staff at the school on Oct. 10 to tell them the story of Greccio and propose a collaborative project, they were all-in from the very first moment.

As Marsha described it, “Their enthusiasm was infectious.” Immediately, they pulled the entire student body into the project, from the youngest K4 and K5 children, who became angels and shepherds, through the 7th grade centurions and the 8th grade seniors, who “took charge” of the performance. Teachers made lesson plans, students began writing scripts, parents got involved in supervising costumes, and Christmas carols were rehearsed. A new middle school strings group practiced “Silent Night.”

Meanwhile, our fraternity was busy planning how to commemorate St. Francis’s role in making the Christmas creche such a beloved holiday tradition. One of our Seculars suggested that “blessed hay” would appeal to the imagination of the children and would be a tangible reminder of the miracles associated with the hay of that first Nativity at Greccio.

Ideas were tossed about, from little strips of paper representing hay to the real thing. Eventually, the fraternity decided to purchase 350 small gold organza bags, the kind used for jewelry, one for every student, teacher, and staff member at the school.

A beautiful holy card showing St. Francis holding the Christ Child at Greccio was also purchased and stuffed in every bag. One of our Seculars, a self-described “city slicker,” volunteered for the unlikely task of finding out where to purchase hay, and then she and another fraternity member volunteered to sit in a cold garage on a rainy afternoon stuffing bits of “holy hay” in all 350 bags. Once that was done, they took the bags to be blessed by OLR’s pastor, Father Dwight Longenecker.



The school’s Live Nativity took place in the church on Dec. 15, the last day of school before the Christmas break.

“When I arrived at the school that morning, I saw excited kids and parents arriving with various bits of costume, obviously looking forward to the coming performance,” commented one of our Franciscans.



After opening prayer, Valerie set the stage by recounting the story of Greccio for the children:

“An eyewitness said a miracle happened at Mass that night. Giovanni Veleti asserted that he saw a real Infant appear in the empty manger and that St. Francis took the beautiful Child into his arms, holding him to his chest in an embrace. In the period that followed, other miracles were reported, brought about by touching the straw of the manger where the Child Jesus had appeared.”

“Miraculous healings took place after pieces of hay were placed on sick animals or women laboring in difficulty. Today we have Nativity scenes everywhere to remind us of Jesus’s birth thanks to St Francis. Please enjoy your fellow classmates as they perform this live Nativity, and at the end the Franciscans will give you this little prayer card and some blessed hay that you can bring home and put in your own Nativity.”



The Nativity performance was both delightful and reverent, and there were tears in the eyes of parents, grandparents, and even Secular Franciscans in the church, as the children enacted the drama of Jesus’ birth.

A child holding a bright lantern played the part of the star, and shepherds cradled floppy toy lambs in their arms. The three kings arrived majestically with an entourage. The choir of angels sang, and a real baby, the daughter of a school secretary, played the part of Jesus; she was wide awake, never whimpered or cried. She must have sensed she was part of something special! We heard later that the child playing Herod was not pleased with having to play “the villain,” but he acquitted himself well.

As the children exited the church to return to their classrooms, several members of our fraternity stood by each door and offered them the little bags of blessed hay. Some exclaimed how pretty they were and thanked us, while others hurried past. Teachers and parents accepted them appreciatively.

Our minister Valerie summed up the experience thoughtfully: “Starting the celebration of the Live Nativity by sharing what a Secular Franciscan is and giving tribute to our Seraphic Father Francis was a blessing for our fraternity. Ending the celebration by giving the children a St. Francis prayer card and blessed hay that they could put in their own home nativity gave the children a physical sign of the blessed event they could share with their families.”

But perhaps the best part for our fraternity came after the performance when Headmaster Tommy Curtin announced that this first Live Nativity would become an annual tradition at the school. We left with the feeling that, indeed, we Franciscans had “made hay” with the school’s commemoration of that first Live Nativity 800 long years ago.

We had a most enthusiastic school staff to thank for much hard work in bringing this Nativity to light. We especially thank David Haggard, Dean of Student Life, who was the driving force behind the project; Katie Fowler, Director of Enhanced Learning; and Maria Law, who worked with the youngest students on an adorable craft project: a big yellow construction-paper star with a simply drawn swaddled baby lying atop scraggly little scraps of paper hay. Much imagination went into the school’s first Live Nativity, and much cooperative effort. And to all of us there—families, children, teachers, and Franciscans—it was well worth it.

After all, it was to the glory of God at this holy season of Christmas.



St. Clare Fraternity Spreads word about Greccio to youth, elders

Secular Franciscans at the **St. Clare Fraternity** in Winston-Salem, NC, took the news of Greccio to college students at Wake Forest University and residents of an assisted living facility in December.

Their celebration of Greccio, entitled, "The Christmas Creche: A Franciscan Tradition", was designed much like their Transitus program.

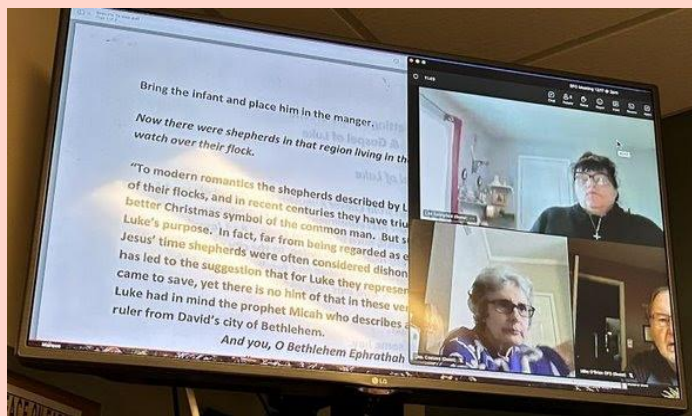
There were nine reader parts, adapted from St. Bonaventure's account of Greccio, which were read while holding up the nativity placards in the photos at left, according to minister Betti Longinotti, OFS.

At the conclusion of the program they sang, "Away In A Manger."

The Stigmata of St. Francis Fraternity in Duluth, GA, celebrated Greccio on December 17.

The Nativity story was read from the Gospel of Luke. As the piece was mentioned in the story, a volunteer brought the piece forward to place in or by the Creche.

Thus, everyone there was involved in doing so at least once. The setting up of the Creche was also seen by those attending virtually and they could follow along with the story as seen on their screen.



Save the Date

Get ready to enjoy prayer, fellowship and fresh mountain air!

AUG. 9-11, 2024

Annual Regional Gathering

of the Brothers and Sisters of St. Francis Region

RIDGECREST CONFERENCE CENTER

BLACK MOUNTAIN, NC

800th Anniversary of the creche at Greccio Special Edition