



Christmas 2019

The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ... this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." Luke 2.10,12

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We all look for signs and symbols for the understanding of our deepest thoughts and desires. Francis of Assisi was no different; his life shows this over and over again in his discernment and insights. The year 1219 was an important year for Francis of Assisi, a year of dreams and hopes, as well as encounters and disappointments. After his peace-making visit in Damietta, Egypt, with Sultan Malik al-Kamil, he returned to Italy, travelling through the Holy Land to visit the friars there. Various sources speak of his time in the Holy Land and the emotional impact of his visits to the sacred places of Jesus. He found peace in the desert lands and in the barrenness, especially in the cave of Bethlehem, which became a seed to flower four years later.



Back in Italy in 1223, Francis remembered the cave of Bethlehem and how he was profoundly marked by experiencing the place of Jesus' birth. He wanted to celebrate Christmas in a cave in Greccio in a very special way. That his inspiration might not seem something trivial, he asked and obtained permission from Pope Honorius III. Going to Greccio, he prepared a manger, and asked that hay, an ox and an ass be brought to the cave. He explained, "I wish 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 an ass standing by, he rested on hay..." ^{1 Celano, XXX,84} What a great sign he shared with all who prayed in Greccio that Christmas night long ago! Francis' vision was fulfilled more than he could imagine: "There simplicity is given a place of honor, poverty is exalted, humility is commended, and out of Greccio is made a new Bethlehem." ^{1 Celano, XXX,85}

Advent/Christmas is a time of dreams and visions, hope and fulfillment, a time of signs and wonders. We are challenged by our Third Order Rule "to make a dwelling." ^{TORule #8} When we look around, what do our eyes behold? What sounds fill our ears? Do these experiences lead us to imagine, to discern our God-with-Us? How do we use our creativity and inspiration, our dreaming, to see new meaning to the ordinary things of our lives? How do we share these signs of God's love as heralds of peace and hope?

May this Advent/Christmas time plant seeds of hope in us. May these seeds be nourished by love as we make a dwelling within ourselves and within our world for peace and love.

Wishing you a blessed Christmas,

Sr. Deborah LOCKWOOD, President IFC-TOR
Sr. M. Magdalena SCHMITZ, Vice-President
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