

The "Nativity Psalm" (OffPass 15)

Leonard Lehmann, O.F.M. Cap.

"El "Salmo Navideño" de San Francisco (OffPas 15)"

Selecciones de Franciscanismo Vol. 20 (1991) 59, 251-263

Translated by Paul Barrett, O.F.M. Cap.

When we think about Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) in connection with Christmas, most of us are automatically reminded of the dramatic incident at Greccio, when the Saint is erroneously believed to have constructed the first Christmas crib or Nativity scene in history. On that Christmas Eve in 1223, in the wood near the small mountain village of Greccio, Francis did stage a moving portrayal of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. But to understand fully what he did then, we must realize that it was not done on the spur of the moment. We have, instead, to see it against a broader background, and we must remember that, during the whole Christmas season, Francis used to recite several times a day a *Psalm* which he himself had composed. Although this psalm is little known, it is quite authentic, and we intend to study it here. Later, we shall consider briefly the Christmas celebration that took place in Greccio so long ago.

Francis's Own "Office"

The *Nativity Psalm* is part of the private office "which our most holy Father Francis composed in reverence, memory and praise of the Passion of the Lord," as we learn from the introductory rubric to the Saint's *Office of the Passion of the Lord*. This office was similar to other votive offices which, in the Middle Ages, were often added to the recitation of the canonical hours. It consists of fifteen psalms, composed by Francis from psalms from the Old Testament, to

which he added quotations from the New Testament and his own thoughts. The psalms he selected and the additions and changes he made are typical of his personal form of prayer.¹ In composing his office, Francis chose a scene from the Bible and contemplated it with the help of the psalms, which he knew well from his personal studies and the liturgy. His *Office of the Passion* begins very significantly with Compline of Holy Thursday.² In a composition formed of pieces from eight different psalms, we hear Christ praying to the Father, we see Him surrounded by His enemies, abandoned by His friends, betrayed by Judas and brought before the Sanhedrin. He gives free rein to His sorrow and cries out to God, yet He abandons Himself unhesitatingly to the Father's will.

Francis records everything here—the scene on the Mount of Olives, the betrayal by Judas and Christ's arrest. And just like the Gospels (see Mt 26:36-56 and the parallel passages), Francis's psalms sum up the essential element of Christ's trusting self-surrender into His Father's hands: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Mt 26:39). The way Francis speaks of the Father as "holy" and "most holy" is typical of his style and appears in all the psalms of the Office for the last three days of Holy Week and the ferial days of the year (OffPass 1-7). This demonstrates clearly that Francis understood these psalms as referring to Christ; and he "baptizes" them with additions from the New Testament. When he retraces the way of the cross with Christ, he hears Him sorrowing, beseeching and crying out to the Father with full confidence of being heard. When Francis celebrates the Resurrection of Christ, he cries aloud with joy and invites all creation to praise God.

The "Nativity Psalm"

What is Francis's reaction to the birth of Christ? What psalms does he choose to quote *from*? What does he find *most* significant in the feast of Christmas? Here is the *Latin*:

¹ Cf. L. Lehmann: *Tiefe und Weite*, Werl, 1984, 121-148; *Franziskus, Meister des Gebets*, Werl, 1989.

² This translation is from R. J. Armstrong O.F.M., Cap. and I. C. Brady OFM: *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, Paulist Press, N.Y., 1982, pp. 97f.

³ The *italics* indicate Francis's personal additions, that is, his quotations from the Gospel of the Infancy (Lk 1-2), as well as single words or phrases quoted from this Gospel or other liturgical texts.

1. Ring out your joy to God our help (Ps 80:2a) * and shout with cries of gladness (cf. Ps 46:2b) to *the Lord God living and true* (cf. 1Thess 1:9).
2. For the Lord, the most high, * the awesome, is the great king over all the earth (Ps 46:3).
3. For the most holy Father of heaven, our King before all ages (Ps 73:12a), has sent His beloved Son from on high * and He was born of the Blessed Virgin Holy Mary.
4. He called upon me: you are my Father (Ps 88:27a), * and I will enthrone Him as the firstborn, the highest, above the kings of the earth Ps 88:28).
5. On that day the Lord sent His mercy * and at night His song was heard (Ps 41:9a-b).
6. This is the day the Lord has made * let us rejoice and be glad in it (Ps 117:24).
7. For the most holy beloved child was given to us, and He was born for us (cf. Is 9:5) along the way and placed in a manger * since there was no room in the inn (cf. Lk 2:7).
8. Glory to the Lord God in the highest * and on earth peace to people of good will (cf. Lk 2:14).
9. Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice, let the sea and all that is in it be moved * let the fields and everything that is in them be joyful (Ps 95:11-12a).
10. Sing a new song to Him * sing to the Lord, all the earth (cf. Ps 95:1).
11. For the Lord is great and worthy of all praise * He is awesome, beyond all gods (Ps 95:4)!
12. Give to the Lord, you families of nations, give to the Lord glory and praise * give to the Lord the glory due His name (Ps 95:7-8a).
13. Offer your bodies and take up His holy cross (cf. Rom 12:1; Lk 14:27) and follow His most holy commands even to the end (1Pet 2:21).

One Psalm for All the Hours

This is how Francis distributed the fifteen psalms in his votive office over the whole liturgical year: seven for the three last days of Holy Week and the ferial days of the year (OffPass 1-7); two for Paschal time (8-9); three for Sundays and the principal feasts (10-12); two for Advent (13-14);³ and one for "the time of the Nativity of the Lord until the octave of Epiphany" (OffPass 15). In the rubric for this psalm, we read:

'Note that this psalm is said from the Nativity of the Lord until the Octave of the Epiphany at all of the hours.'

Thus, Francis provided only one psalm to be recited at all the hours of the day during the Christmas season, an arrangement that was quite different from his directions for the other liturgical seasons. His private office for the time between the feast of Christmas and the octave of the Epiphany (this octave was still being celebrated then) consisted of only one psalm. This in itself shows how important the Nativity Psalm was to him. Clearly, he believed that the thoughts it contained on the mystery of Christ's birth were so significant and profound that he recited it seven times a day for three weeks running. We have inherited from Francis other prayers which formed part of the friars' daily lives, such as the prayer which they used to say whenever they saw a cross or a church ("We adore you...": Test 5), or the *Praises to be said at all the Hours*, both of which are typical examples of frequently repeated prayers. Francis, then, was able to raise his heart to God time and time again by repeating the same words, an ability which he obviously regarded as part of our condition as pilgrims on earth and perfectly suited to that condition.

A Mosaic of Texts

Like the other psalms in the Office of the Passion, the *Nativity Psalm* is a mosaic made up of verses from many psalms, other biblical texts and Francis's own personal additions. But this psalm has more personal passages than any of the others, so that it is the most individual of all the psalms which the Saint assembled to meditate on the life, Passion and death of Christ. It would seem, then, that the mystery of God's Incarnation either made a very deep impression

³*Translator's note:* During Paschal time, besides psalms 8 and 9, psalms 3 and 7 are recited; on Sundays and the principal feasts, besides psalms 10, 11 and 12, psalms 8, 9, 3 and 7 are recited; and in Advent, besides psalms 13 and 14, psalms 3, 7, 10, 11 and 12 are recited.

on Francis, or else it was the mystery of which he found the fewest traces in the psalms of the Old Testament.

It is immediately apparent that the Saint's personal additions were inspired by the Gospel accounts of the Nativity. With a few short strokes, he sketches the main features of the Christmas message. He does not repeat fully and literally the Gospel narrative of Christ's birth in Bethlehem, nor does he allude directly to the angels or the shepherds or St. Joseph. His meditation contains no reference to the slaughter of the Innocents ordered by Herod, or to the flight into Egypt. The central event of his psalm is what happened on that "holy night": with the co-operation of the Blessed Virgin Holy Mary, the most holy Father in heaven gave us His beloved Son, a cause of great joy for all creation.

Commentary

By examining each of the verses, we shall discover the structure and basic ideas around which Francis composed the psalm.⁵ The threefold exhortation to praise in verses 1, 6 and 10, is followed by the three reasons for that praise, each introduced by the word "because" (vv. 2-3, 7, 11). The nucleus of this psalm is the fact that the most high God sent His beloved Son to save us.

1. Ring out your joy to God our help (Ps 80:2a) * and shout with cries of gladness (cf. Ps 46:2b) to *the Lord God living and true* (cf. 1Thess 1:9).

The very first words of the psalm, "Ring out your joy" (*Exultate*, in the original Latin) proclaim the exultation that surrounds the birth of our Lord and announces that the psalm is an invitation to celebration because, on that "holy night," God revealed that He is "our help" and, Francis adds, *the Lord God living and true*. This addition, which recalls 1 Thessalonians 1:9, emphasizes that, for Francis, God was not an abstract idea but a living Presence, the indisputable Reality from which he came and in which he lived.

2. For the Lord, the most high * the awesome, is the great king over all the earth (Ps 46:3).

⁵O. Schmucki, "Das Geheimnis der Geburt Jesu in der Frömmigkeit des hl. Franziskus von Assisi," in *Collectanea Franciscana* 41 (1971) 260-287.

3. *For the most holy Father of heaven, our King before all ages (Ps 73:12a), has sent His beloved Son from on high * and He was born of the Blessed Virgin Holy Mary.*

Verses 2 and 3 give the motive for our joy—because the Lord, although He is “the most high,” did not think it unworthy of His dignity to send us His Son from above. So it is clear that both these verses refer to the Father. Francis marveled at the greatness of the mystery and used contrasting concepts to express his wonder—“the most high..., most holy Father..., King before all ages,” sent His Son down from on high to our world and our time. In these verses, Francis gives the main themes of Christmas, the birth of the Son and the name of His Mother, Mary. The two titles, “most holy Father” and “beloved Son” express the intimacy existing between the Father and the Son, as the New Testament describes it (for example in Jn 17) and as Francis understood it. In the other psalms of the *Office of the Passion*, too, we find the words “most holy Father,” which are, as it were, Francis’s typical, personal mark. He could never say “Our Father” without the adjective “holy” or “most holy.” The phrase, “beloved Son,” is also typical of the Poverello. The words, “most holy,” refer especially to the transcendence of the Father, just as the adjective, “beloved,” emphasizes the Son’s nearness to us humans.

Through the birth of Christ, the Son of God, Mary participates in the holiness of the Father; hence, Francis proclaims that she is, first, “blessed” and then “holy.”

In verses 1 and 2, Francis stays close to the wording of the psalms, but verse 3 is made up almost entirely of his own words, and he takes only one phrase, a phrase from Ps 73, to acknowledge and proclaim God’s sublimity and eternity. The rest of verse 3 is his own composition, inspired by Scripture and the liturgy, the subject matter of which he uses freely while he stays close to the vocabulary. Verse 3 announces the mystery of Christ’s birth, as does verse 7 later. This is Francis’s Christmas credo, the credo of the Church.

4. He called upon me: you are my father (Ps 88:27a), * and I will enthrone Him as the firstborn, the highest, above the kings of the earth (Ps 88:28).

Verse 4 can be fully understood only in the context of the whole psalter, and it is doubtful if Francis was learned enough to know this context. The person speaking in Ps 88 is David, who is recalling that, although he was Jesse’s youngest son, God had made him His firstborn and raised him to the dignity of being King of Israel. If this interpretation is correct, Francis’s

thoughts on the birth of Christ are already turning to Christ's royalty and lordship: similarly, Good Friday reminds Francis that "the Lord has ruled from a tree" (Off Pass 7:9).

The term, "firstborn," undoubtedly moved Francis to quote Ps 88:28; in fact, this word appears also in the Gospel narrative of the Nativity (Lk 2:7) and probably suggested the psalm verse to Francis.

5. On *that* day the Lord sent His mercy * And at night His song was heard (Ps 41:9a-b).

6. This is the *day* the Lord has made * let us rejoice and be glad in it (Ps 117:24).

Verse 5, with Ps 41:9, proclaims that God has offered us His mercy by day and by night. However, to adapt the verse completely to the mystery of Christmas, Francis adds the demonstrative adjective, "that," : "on *that* day"—"in *illa* die," putting his finger, as it were, on the precise day. The words, "at night His song was heard" are reminiscent of the song of the angels on Christmas Eve.

While verse 5 praises the birth of Christ as a gift of God's mercy, verse 6 celebrates that birth with the help of a well-known verse from Ps 117, as "the day the Lord has made." If we glance at another psalm in the *Office of the Passion* (cf. OffPass 9:5), we shall find once more that Francis is following the same train of thought. In fact, verse 24 of Ps 117 is used in reference to Easter Sunday in Matins for that day. As Francis saw it, both Christmas and Easter are days which "the Lord had made"; the only thing that changes is the reason for the celebration. In the psalm at Easter, Francis is focusing on the words of the Old Testament psalm; and he adds nothing personal to it, no doubt because we humans find it more difficult to appreciate and understand the mystery of the Resurrection than we do the birth of the Infant God.

This verse, which Francis incorporated into his psalm to express his joy, shows how deeply the birth of "the Herald of the great King" impressed and enchanted him.

7. For the most holy beloved child was given to us, and He was born for us (cf. Is 9:6) along the way and placed in a manger * since there was no room in the inn (cf. Lk 2:7).

Verse 7 leaves aside the psalms which Francis has used so far to express his thoughts. Here he sets down the basic details of Christ's birth gathered from the liturgical readings for the feast. He weaves together quotations from Isaiah

(9:6) and Luke (2:7), with slight changes, to form one sentence. In this way, he smoothly links the Old with the New Testament, combining the promise of the Messiah with its fulfillment.

The affirmation of the oneness of the two Testaments which this sentence implies can be fully understood only if we remember that the Cathari, a sect contemporary with Francis, did not accept the Old Testament.

In this, the most important verse in the Nativity Psalm, Francis places particular emphasis on the *historical truth* of the event, the fact that the Child was really born and placed in a manger. He goes beyond Luke's text and adds that Christ was born *along the way* ("in via"), that is, away from home, a detail which he may have drawn from the apocryphal gospels. Brief though this addition is, it depicts poverty and the wandering, homeless life as Francis understood them. In this, as in everything else, Christ was his model.

The phrase, *along the way*, sums up the wearisome journey on foot from Nazareth to Bethlehem, as well as the anxious search for lodgings, details which are scarcely even implied in the Gospels but which are enlarged upon in many elaborate Nativity scenes.

Christ was born during the journey, He came into the world "along the way," far from home and without any assured permanent shelter. From His very birth, He set out on the path of homelessness and voluntary wandering which He would resume later during His public life. This also helps us to understand better why Francis chose for himself and his companions a form of life that imitated Christ's poverty, humility and itinerant preaching:

As pilgrims and strangers in this world who serve the Lord in *poverty and humility*, let them go begging for alms with full trust. Nor should they feel ashamed since the Lord made Himself poor for us in this world (RegB 6:2f).

There is another important point about verse 7 that we should note. In verse 3, Francis refers to Christ as the "beloved Son," while here, in verse 7, he speaks more tenderly and affectionately and calls Him "the most holy beloved child," but does so without sentimentality or cloying sweetness. The newly born Babe is the "most holy child," and Francis draws near to Him with profound respect and delicacy. The intimacy with which he regards the Child does not make him forget that Christ was born "for us." The word "us" occurs twice in the verse ("to us": "for us"), so that the verse includes all who read the psalm. Francis expresses his tender love for the Child lying in the manger by using, not the singular "me," but the plural "us." The Child is a gift for the whole human

family. Therefore, as the following verses indicate, all nations—indeed, all creatures—should praise and glorify God.

8. Glory to *the Lord* God in the highest * and on earth peace to people of good will (cf. Lk 2:14).

In response to faith in the Divine Child, verse 8 sings the well-known canticle of the angels: "Glory to *the Lord* God in the highest and on earth peace to people of good will." Here again, Francis adds a word, "Lord" ("Dominus"). Such additions, brief though they are, provide further proof that the author of the psalm was none other than Francis, who was accustomed to adding the word "Lord" to the prayers he had learned from tradition. "Lord" is a basic, normal word for Francis to use, as we can see from his Testament.⁶

9. Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice, let the sea and all that is in it be moved * let the fields and everything that is in them be joyful (Ps 95:11-12a).
10. Sing a new song to *Him* * sing to the Lord, all the earth (cf. Ps 95:1).
11. For the Lord is great and worthy of all praise * He is awesome, beyond all gods (Ps 95:4)!
12. Give to the Lord, you families of nations, give to the Lord glory and praise * give to the Lord the glory due His name (Ps 95:7-8a).

We can consider verses 9 through 12 together since they all come from the same psalm, Ps 95, a psalm of praise which was recited at Matins of Christmas and the Epiphany. Yet, we should notice how Francis inverts the order of the verses, placing verses 11 and 12 before verse 1. We can surmise the reason for this transposition. As we have just seen in verse 8 above, he quotes the canticle of praise sung by the "heavenly host," which the shepherds heard "out in the field" (cf. Lk 2:9,13). That is why he continues by saying: "Let the heavens be glad.... let the fields ... be joyful."

Here Francis brings together verses that invite the whole universe to praise God. Heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in it, all peoples and nations should give the Lord God the praise He is due. The triple invitation, "Give" ("*Afferte*"), in verse 12 recalls the three Magi from the East who adored the new-

⁶Cf. L. Lehmann, *Tiefe und Weite*, pp. 53-81.

born Babe and offered Him precious gifts. In this way, Francis announces the Gospel of the Nativity, enlarging on it with thoughts of the Epiphany, the manifestation of God to all the nations (cf. Mt 2:1-11).

13. Offer your bodies and take up His holy cross (cf. Rom 12:1; Lk 14:27) * *and follow His most holy commands even to the end* (1Pet 2:21).

Verse 13 is another text composed entirely by Francis. The first word, "Offer," meshes with the previous verse, which begins with the command, "Give," and continues the thought of Ps 95:7-8a.

But, instead of completing the quotation with the second part of the verse: "Bring an offering, and come into His courts," Francis pursues his own train of thought with ideas taken from the New Testament. Real self-sacrifice consists in offering to God our *bodies*, that is, giving ourselves body and soul to God, by taking up the cross of Christ. Here, taking up the cross and following Christ are indissolubly linked together, which is in complete conformity with the Gospel (see, for example, Lk 14:37). Christ tells us that we are to take up our cross *daily*; so, too, does Francis: "Follow His most holy commands *even to the end*," in accordance with the radical demands of the Gospel.

Several times in his writings, the Founder of the Order asks for perseverance in following Christ to the end of life. Thus, for example, chapter 21 of the first Rule closes with the exhortation: "Beware and abstain from all evil and persevere in good till the end" (RegNB 21:9).

As we can see, the Nativity Psalm does not confine itself to calling us to praise God but concludes with a demand for action which involves the whole person, body and soul. True praise of God urges us to act, and action proves the sincerity of our praise. Lifelong fidelity in giving ourselves to the Lord and in carrying out His will shows the degree to which we have understood the mystery of Christ's birth and have allowed ourselves to be caught up in it.

The most striking characteristic of the Nativity Psalm is the way it demonstrates the closeness between the crib and the cross. Francis did not indulge in sentimental joy nor did he minimize the sublimity of God's gift to us, a gift that demands that we, in our turn, give ourselves to God. In his relatively short Nativity Psalm, the Poverello marvelously unites the majesty and humility of God, Bethlehem and Calvary, praise and action, humanity and the universe.

Christmas at Greccio

Let us now return to Greccio, the place so closely linked in the popular mind with St. Francis and Christmas. We shall summarize the biographers' long, detailed accounts of the happenings at Greccio and assemble from them the salient features which complete the picture painted in the Nativity Psalm. Greccio shows us especially how Francis celebrated the feast of the Lord's birth by making that picture come alive.

In 1228, Thomas of Celano, the Poverello's first biographer, wrote his *First Life of St. Francis*, in which he enthusiastically describes how our Founder celebrated Christmas, 1223, in the little village of Greccio (1Cel 84-86). Later, in 1262, St. Bonaventure was to summarize Celano's narrative when describing the same event in his *Legenda maior* (LM 10:7). Both accounts tell us about the renowned Christmas celebration. Wishing to reproduce the stable at Bethlehem as faithfully as possible, the Poverello obtained a real ox and donkey, used a natural cavity in the rock as a cradle for the Child Jesus and held the whole event in the open air at midnight. Not only did he wish to reproduce visibly the events at the first Bethlehem but also wanted those present to take an active part in the celebration in order to arouse in them a deeper faith and more ardent devotion. For this purpose, he invited all the brothers from the nearby hermitages, as well as the people from Greccio and the surrounding countryside to take part.

Carrying candles and torches, the whole gathering went in procession to a place previously prepared, where they began the devout representation of the mystery of the birth of the Son of God. It must be stressed that a solemn *Mass* was part of this night celebration in the open air. Francis was the deacon at the Mass, sang with great emotion the Gospel narrative of the birth of Christ and then preached to the assembled crowd. His sermon, however, was not a doctrinal commentary on the Gospel text but rather a graphic representation of the events related in that text. He preached with his heart and with his hands, with his facial expressions, gestures and words, that is, with his entire being. His whole body expressed the depth of his life's spiritual experiences. As Thomas says, when Francis pronounced the names "Jesus" or "Bethlehem," he spoke like a stammering child, and "his voice was ... like the bleating of a sheep" (1Cel 86).

This sermon was unusual, indeed inimitable, for it recalled the mystery of Christ's birth more with gestures than with words. After the sermon, the priest-brother who was the celebrant joined Francis at the altar that had been prepared on a rock and continued the Mass, so that the mystery of God's

Incarnation led on to the mystery of Redemption and to the new, eucharistic, presence in the Eucharist of Christ in His glory.

Francis had preached vividly and with deep emotion on the birth of Christ, and so we can imagine the fervor with which he greeted the Redeemer as He made Himself present on the altar and how devoutly the Poverello adored and received His Lord.

The Christmas celebration at Greccio was much more than a representation of the mystery, for it was clearly linked to the Mass and was, therefore, a combined dramatic and liturgical celebration. The central point was not a routine re-enactment of an historical event that had taken place in the dim and distant past but the living, acting-out of a mystery of faith. In fact, as Celano states, the faith which had grown weak in so many hearts was awakened to new life that blessed night (1Cel 86b).

The Christmas liturgy at Greccio was not confined to the events in Bethlehem but followed Christ to Golgotha and acknowledged Him as the Risen, Glorified Redeemer, who still comes down from Heaven and gives Himself to us in Communion. So, *Bethlehem*, the *cross* and the *altar* were combined in one celebration of faith. Greccio, then, is clearly linked with the Nativity Psalm since the outstanding characteristic of the Psalm is its unified vision of the crib and the cross. In the celebration at Greccio, the circle was drawn wider still to embrace the Eucharist, in which God continues to give Himself to us every day.

Francis Was Not the First to Introduce the Christmas Crib

Christmas at Greccio was a unique feast in two senses: first, because neither Francis nor his spiritual sons ever repeated it; and also because it was incomparable and could never be celebrated again in the same way.

However, we must not forget that, apart from the inclusion of the Mass, Francis's striking re-enactment of the mystery of Christ's birth was simply a normal part of the Christmas season and was connected especially with the rural mystery plays of the time.

Finally, it would be quite wrong to regard Francis as the innovator of the Christmas crib or Nativity scene, as some popular and even some scholarly writers claim. Even before the Saint's time, there were some, though not many, simple representations of the scenes at Bethlehem, for example, in St. Mary Major's in Rome; while the Nativity scenes that we know, with their colorful lifelike figures, appeared quite some time after Francis, beginning in the

sixteenth century, as derivatives of the medieval mystery plays. The spread of these Nativity scenes was due more to the Jesuits than to the Franciscans.

So it was that, while Francis's dramatic portrayal on Christmas Eve was part of the customs of his time, his linking the Nativity with the Eucharist was a new element, with unusual and inimitable features that we owe to the Saint's gifts of simplicity and improvisation. His whole quasi-dramatic liturgical celebration was permeated with his personal, all-embracing, realistic way of experiencing and passing on the faith. This, combined with his universal popularity, is the reason why many people want to believe that he was the one who introduced and spread the custom of having Nativity scenes or cribs at Christmas. But the Little Poor Man of Assisi does not need such spurious fame.

The fervor of Greccio and the wonder of Francis's living re-enactment of Bethlehem must not lead us to ignore his serene, solemn Nativity Psalm, inviting us to imitate and follow Christ. Francis and his brothers used to recite this psalm several times daily during the Christmas season, and it continued to resonate in their lives, echoing the joyous affirmation of faith that was heard in Greccio on that unforgettable night.