

## ***The Nativity – Depth in Simplicity***



*By Fr. Germain Kpakafi, ofm cap.*

Interview by Daniel Bahuaud, Communications Coordinator for the Archdiocese of Saint Boniface

***This Christmas marks the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of Christianity's most beloved traditions. It was in 1223, in Italy's Greccio valley, that Saint Francis of Assisi created the very first Nativity scene, right next to a grotto where he celebrated Christmas Mass. Brother Germain Kpakafi, Franciscan priest and pastor of the St. Boniface Cathedral Parish, explains how it happened...***

In the Congo, in the small village where I grew up, the nativity scene was present in the village church, not in our homes. For me, as it is for many children, it was a source of wonder. As a child, seeing the creche allowed me to imagine what had happened in Bethlehem. The child Jesus was lying on straw, in a poor place where animals ate. Usually, we go to great lengths to ensure that a child is born in a clean, comfortable place. But Jesus was born in a very humble place.

This sense of wonder is precisely what Saint Francis wanted. His first biographer, Thomas de Celano, actually quotes Francis when he described the first Nativity scene:

"I wanted to depict the Child born in Bethlehem, and see as it were with the eyes of the body, how He was placed in a manger between the ox and the donkey. With infinite love, He gave Himself for us.

Francis wanted us to meditate on the mystery of the Incarnation, the divine made present in the flesh. In the Nativity scene, we see the simplicity, poverty, and humility of the Son of God. Here, infinite Love is manifested in a simple place. So, we can contemplate with our own eyes - in our own flesh - the love God has for us by making himself close to us: God with us, Emmanuel. Having become man, Jesus becomes our brother. What's more, by taking on our condition, he invites us to care for the least of our brothers and sisters, those who are weak, poor, and neglected.

And that's why all Franciscans, whether priests, brothers, or lay people, are called brothers. It's important to realize that this way of naming each other in a monastic community was quite an innovation. No one had thought to do this before, and usually, any new order adopted the Rule of Saint Benedict. And so Saint Francis was jubilant on November 29, 1223, when the Franciscan Rule was confirmed by Pope Honorius III. On his way back from Rome on foot, Francis stopped off in the Greccio valley, where he prepared the first Nativity scene. There was joy in his heart and a deep gratitude.

Francis chose an out-of-the-way place to celebrate Christmas and create the first Nativity scene. That's because he often turned to the countryside and nature to put himself in the presence of Christ. For Francis, all of Creation has become closer to us, in Jesus made flesh. And that's why, in his *Canticle of the Sun*, wind and sun are brothers, moon and water are sisters. All of Creation meets in the birth of Jesus. The more we contemplate the Nativity, and gaze at a Nativity scene, the more we deepen our understanding of the great mystery of divine love, so that we can better love our brothers and sisters, and nature itself.