



## Born for us Along the Way

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Translation: IFC-TOR

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#### 1. Francis Celebrates Christmas in Greccio



Greccio, Foto: Sr. Christina Mülling

Francis continually contemplated and marvelled at three mysteries in the life of Jesus: the humble descent of God into our flesh and blood in the Incarnation of Jesus, the humble descent of Jesus into the darkest depths of our lives in his suffering and Jesus' humble self-giving to humanity in the Eucharist.

In 1223, so as to experience the mystery of the Incarnation tangibly and see it with his own eyes, he had the stable of Bethlehem reconstructed in a grotto near Greccio. He wanted to embrace the mystery of the Incarnation of God with his whole being. And so, his brothers prepared the place for the Christmas celebration with manger and straw, with ox and donkey. Then the people and the brothers celebrated the Christmas service. Francis, as deacon, read the Gospel and preached about the birth of the poor king."

That celebration was so moving that the description ended with the words: "At that time the Child Jesus was born again in the hearts of many." This first celebration of the nativity in Greccio was the origin of all future nativity plays.

Therefore, what he did at the village called Greccio on the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ in the third year before the day of his glorious decease is to be recorded with reverent memory. There was in that place a man named John ... Blessed Francis now sent for this man about fifteen days before the Nativity of the Lord and said to him, "If you will that we celebrate the present festival of the Lord at Greccio, make haste to go before and diligently prepare what I tell you. For I would make memorial of that Child who was born in Bethlehem, and in some sort behold with bodily eyes His infant hardships; how He lay in a manger on the hay with the ox and the ass standing by."

1 Celano, 4 - 8

For Francis, Christmas is the high feast of the love and humility of God. Here the infinite love of God becomes concrete for him. But the Incarnation of Jesus is not a mystery that took place only once, more than 2000 years ago. Jesus also wants to be born again and again in our hearts. „Christmas is a life program, a life's journey.“

#### 1.1 Born for us along the way

For Francis, the birth of God has a journey character. It began more than 2000 years ago with Jesus and has continued ever since in the hearts and lives of all people. It is part of our calling as Christians that we, like Mary, say "yes" again and again to prepare God's dwelling and home in us and to bring him into the world through our actions.

Francis recognized that the birth of God is constantly being entrusted to us as Christians. The more we open ourselves to it, the closer we come to our own destiny, to our own incarnation.

The birth of God in a person is a progressive process. Our spiritual death occurs when the birth of God no longer takes place in our heart and life. For us as Christians it is not enough to know that Jesus was born over 2000 years ago. We have to keep tracking the mystery of God's Incarnation!

## 1.2 Born in our Humanity and Frailty

In the second Letter to the Faithful, Francis states that in Mary's womb Jesus took the real flesh of our humanity and frailty. That means that he accepted humanity in all its fragile reality. This is the poverty of God and our riches.

The most high Father made known from heaven through his holy angel Gabriel this Word of the Father - so worthy, so holy and glorious - in the womb of the holy and glorious Virgin Mary, from whose womb he received the flesh of our humanity and frailty. Though he was rich, he wished, together with the Most Blessed Virgin, his mother, to choose poverty in the world beyond all else.

Second Letter to the Faithful 4-5

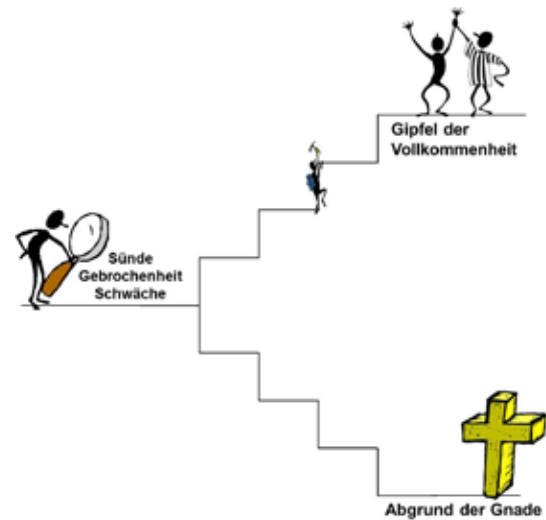
The love of God, his irrevocable yes to us, is consolidated in a person and takes on flesh and blood. In Jesus, God stoops down into the darkest depths of man's being, to bring home in his love all that is lost. In his Incarnation, God accepted in Jesus all our brokenness and sins, in order to meet and help us in our brokenness, sin and weakness.

To describe this reality, Francis used three concepts:

- *fragilitas* (fragility, frailty, weakness),
- *debilitas* (lameness, infirmity) and
- *infirmitas* (sickness, powerlessness, lack of talent, weakness of character, fickleness, timidity, lack of independence, unreliability).

It is truly a comprehensive assumption of our frailty, a yes to our unadorned reality.

A constant basic temptation of the spiritual path is to imagine the path of purification and incarnation in the following way:



- I recognize my sin, brokenness and weakness that don't fit my self-image.
- Then I equip myself with the appropriate tools: axe, hatchet, saw, pickaxe... etc.
- And finally, I begin to rip out sins, to cut off temptations, to weed out weeds, to cut off or bury certain tendencies ... and so on
- And when I have finally left the quagmire of my soul behind me, climbed to the summit of perfection and finally stand before God, pore-deep clean, with a white vest, then God says to me: Because you are so beautifully holy and thoroughly good, you are worthy to live with me in my heaven. Come into the glory of the Lord! This path does not lead to God, but only to the idolatry of myself.

Francis shows us another way.

- God is waiting for us in our depths. The Franciscan way of the incarnation therefore goes down: into my sins, brokenness, weaknesses, perversions and disorder.

- I learn to face them, to accept them responsibly with my rough edges, my depths and low points, so as then to ask Jesus to make them his home and dwelling and transform them in that way.

It is a descent into my own truth and poverty and therefore a path of humility. Spiritual life is not about getting rid of everything that does not fit the image that I would like to have of myself. It is much more about bringing to light, out of the cabinet so to speak, everything that dwells and grows in the darkness of my heart. Only then can I bring it into contact with Jesus and allow it to be transformed by him.

Experience shows that only what is accepted can be changed. On the other hand, what I fight against in myself, I will also fight with all my might in other people. There is a danger of becoming a hard and loveless person.

This active acceptance of my weaknesses and brokenness has nothing to do with laissez-faire. I can't say: That's just the way I am, now see how you cope with it. To admit that I am like this, my guilt, my failure, my inability to excuse myself, or to blame it on others is often much more difficult than to suppress and deny it. Often it is more difficult to learn to love oneself and others instead of fighting the malady in myself and in others!

In the Incarnation of Jesus, God also spoke his irrevocable yes to my humanity and brokenness. Therefore I, too, may accept myself in my brokenness and know that I am loved.

### 1.3 Giving birth to Christ through our actions

If Christ has created a dwelling and a home for himself in our poverty in this way, then it is up to us to make him tangible and visible through our actions. In the First Letter to the Faithful, Francis invites us to give birth to Christ through our actions.

O how happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things and persevere in doing them because the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them, and the Lord make his home and dwelling place with them. They are children of the Heavenly Father whose works they do. They are the spouses, brothers and sisters and mothers of Our Lord Jesus Christ. We are his spouses when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit with Our Lord Jesus Christ. We are brothers and sisters when we do the will of the Father who is in Heaven. We are mothers when we bear Him in our hearts and bodies with divine love and with pure and sincere consciences; and we give birth to him through a holy life which should enlighten others because of our example.

First Letter to the Faithful 3-10

God wants to become incarnate in us all and through us he wants to come into the world - again and again. It is up to us whether God becomes visible and tangible in this world or not.

Actually, there is no doubt about it: the love of God comes every day and knocks at the door of our hearts, asking whether it may enter our lives, whether it may be given a foothold in our actions!

The question is only whether we always want to make room for it. Are we willing to let it entice us beyond our narrow limits? Are we ready to risk reconciliation, to allow things to be settled, to give even the most difficult fellow human being credit?

Every time we manage to make room for the love of God in our hearts and actions, the birth of God takes place in our lives and in our surroundings. We give birth to it through holy actions. The whole world is waiting with longing for brother and sister „human beings“ who have allowed themselves to be transformed into fellow lovers with God.

## 2. Incarnation in St. Clare

### 2.1 Lack of the heavenly food

Therefore, if a Lord of such majesty and such a noble nature wished to enter the virgin womb and appear despised, needy and poor in the world, so that those who were wholly poor and needy and who suffered exceedingly great want of heavenly food might become rich in him and take possession of the kingdoms of the heavens, rejoice from the heart and be filled with overflowing joy and spiritual exultation!

Letter to Agnes 19-21

Clare also emphasizes the explicit will of God to accept the contempt, neediness and poverty of human life in the Incarnation of Jesus. „He does not want to embrace poverty as God from heaven, but to enter into the status of poverty himself; he wants to become human“.

God wants to become despised, needy and poor in order to come into our poverty and neediness and give us His riches. His philanthropy should be visible to our eyes, audible to our ears and tangible in our hands.

But Clare sees the extreme poverty and neediness of humankind in the fact that people lack heavenly food. Even more than Francis, Clare sees the Incarnation of Jesus in the context of Christ's being made bread in the Eucharist. For her, communion is the ultimate salvific exchange: by coming into our extreme poverty, God fills it with the riches of God.



Sieger Köder, Greccio, Foto: Sr. Christina Mülling

## 2.2 The Soul is greater than Heaven heavenly food.

See it is already clear that the soul of a faithful person, the most worthy of God's creations through the grace of God, is greater than heaven. For the heavens and the rest of creation together cannot contain their Creator and only the soul of a faithful person is his dwelling place and throne, and this is possible only through love ... For Truth says, "the one who loves me, will be loved by my Father, and I shall love him, and we shall come to him and make our dwelling place with him" (Jn 14,21.23).

Just as the glorious Virgin of virgins carried him in her body, so you too, following in her footsteps, especially her humility and poverty, can always carry him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body, of that there is no doubt, you can hold him in you, by whom you and everything is held, you can possess what you will possess with far greater certainty.

Third Letter to Agnes 21-26

In the third letter to Agnes of Prague, Clare takes up the idea of St. Francis that we, too, are mothers of Christ. „What has happened in Mary 'biologically and historically' remains, on the 'mystical and spiritual' level, a real possibility for every believing Christian: the contemplation of God, the Incarnation of God, the indwelling of God in humankind." Love expands the soul so that it can receive God whom all creation and heaven cannot grasp.

Through the love for God, for ourselves and our fellow human beings - indeed, for the whole of creation - we can prepare a dwelling place for God in our soul and hold him. And again, a salutary exchange takes place: He whom we hold, holds us. The love that we give to others becomes a gift to ourselves.

## II. From Knowledge to Life

- Do I know people who bear witness for me to the incarnation of God? What fascinates me about them?
- Where do I want to give Jesus more space and acceptance in my life? What can I do?
- Which people protect and promote the mystery of the Incarnation in me?
- Are there also persons who disrupt or endanger this mystery in me?