

# Day One

## Desire and Fervor

Our introduction to the Advent season and our lens for seeing the breadth of Christmas traditions comes from the thirteenth-century life of Saint Francis. He was born in 1181/82 to a well-to-do family in Assisi, Italy, baptized Giovanni de Pietro di Bernadone, but was generally known as Francesco. He enjoyed a good life in the prosperous home of a cloth merchant, was well-liked, and was popular at parties. He tried on the assumed glorious life of soldier, but was captured, imprisoned and held for ransom. After a year in prison, he returned home ill but still seeking some higher or better glory. He thought joining soldiers of the Fourth Crusade might lead to returning as a prince, but a powerful dream turned him around before any battle occurred, much to the disappointment of his father, who had outfitted his son with horse and armor. Francis entered into a period of prayer and confession. A chance encounter with a leper and a mystical experience where he heard God telling him to “go repair my house which is falling into ruins,” turned his life toward compassion for all—especially for the poor—and gave him a purpose and a mission.

Francis started to rebuild the church at San Damiano, just outside the walled city of Assisi, while continuing his spiritual journey by adopting simplicity and poverty as his companions. He discovered newfound compassion for all creation—for the forgotten of his society—and he began to preach of God’s love and peace. His joy in life and in following Jesus attracted others to him, which led to developing a rule or guide for living for his followers.

The stories about Francis are many and inspiring. I will share some of them in these pages but the primary one for Advent is his creation of the Christmas crèche.

The earliest biography of Francis was written by Thomas of Celano in 1228. Thomas knew Francis and was one of his followers, though he was not one of his earliest disciples. Thomas was commissioned by Pope Gregory IX to write the biography in the year that Francis was canonized and henceforth became, Saint Francis. In thirty chapters, he tells many stories of Saint Francis, including the first outdoor nativity celebration.

In the chapter recounting the living nativity at Greccio, Italy, he begins with a passionate description of Saint Francis. “His highest aim, foremost desire, and greatest intention was to pay heed to the holy gospel in all things and through all things, to follow the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and to retrace his footsteps completely with all vigilance and all zeal, all the desire of his soul and all the fervor of his heart.”<sup>1</sup>

The extroverted, good-times fellow became a passionate, enthusiastic follower of Jesus. Francis was no half-hearted, lukewarm, casual, tepid, or fair-weathered disciple. He made following Jesus his “highest aim” with “all the desire of his soul.” He was consumed with the words and teaching of Jesus.

Thomas continues, “So thoroughly did the humility of the Incarnation and the charity of the Passion occupy his memory that he scarcely wanted to think of anything else.”<sup>2</sup> Francis

wanted everyone to see, in their own time and place, what the love of God looks like and the extent to which God would bend to restore human dignity. The love of God, for Francis, looked like a baby.

Many of us live distracted lives, constantly pulled in many directions, interrupted by phone calls, texts, crying babies, sirens, and children's schedules. It is hard to imagine being so focused on any one thing that we would use the superlatives that Thomas uses to describe Saint Francis.

One contemporary author, Cal Newport, has written a book about our distracted world and the need for what he calls *deep work*. *Deep work* is the clearing away of cell phones, emails, and texts so that one may focus on one task with clarity, abundant time and even solitude. He tells one story about a businessperson who paid for a long trip to the far east so that he would have the whole plane ride over and back to think about a big project without common distractions.

As we enter these four weeks of preparation, I invite you to look for and plan for times of quiet reflection with this book and with the contemplation of the Loving God who chooses to come and dwell with us in the life of Jesus.

This week's Psalm reminds us to put our trust in God (Ps. 25:2) and pray that God would show us the way and teach us the right paths to follow (v. 4). We are on the path to Bethlehem, mindful of distractions, but with Saint Francis and scripture to guide us.

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