

FAMILY Solidarity

NEWSLETTER

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Family Solidarity

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CHRISTMAS BLESSINGS! NOLLAG SHONA!



WHEN CHRISTIAN FAMILY LIFE FLOURISHES, THE CIVILISED WORLD BENEFITS

EDITORIAL

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New National Executive Committee officers were elected at the AGM on the 4th December 2021. These are: Angelo Bottone, Chairman; Gareth Carroll, Honorary Treasurer; and Stephen Browne, Honorary Secretary.

Liam Ó hAlmhain (Chairman for the last 12 years) and Arthur Cullen (Honorary Treasurer for more than 15 years) will remain as members of the Executive Committee.

Chairman's Annual Report 2021 to the AGM 4th December 2021

In spring we hosted two public webinars, one introducing FAFCE to our members and to other Irish family related associations in Ireland (on Saturdays 13th February) and the second on the Year of Saint Joseph (Saturday 13th March). FAFCE President Vincenzo Bassi presented a well received talk.

Nominal donations of €500 were made to Brosna Educational Trust, for their on line platforms "Fearless, Beloved and Hearts+Minds" which they launched in support of young people and the family, and to Catholic Comment, who engage with the media on Catholic issues. Our annual subscription of €5,000 was paid to FAFCE. The FAFCE appeal for funds has been sent to members whose email addresses we have and publicized in our Newsletter.

We also published in our March Newsletter 91 the text of the talk on "Restore the broken relationship with the family" by Vincenzo Bassi, President of FAFCE.

On 13th May, Mrs Maria Steen spoke on our behalf at "*The Family antidote to loneliness, beyond the pandemic*",

organised by FAFCE under the Patronage of the Patriarchal Vicar for Jordan, H. E. Msgr. William Shomali.

Family Solidarity was founded in 1984. We have a project underway to collect and preserve the archives of our early days and the recollections of the survivors of our early Executive Committee members. Three of them have been interviewed so far and they donated some historical material to our archives.

We are also trying to attract additional members to replace our aging membership, many of whom have been members since our earliest days and to expand our Executive Committee. Another new member Stephen Browne has been co-opted to the Executive Committee. We are also trying to re-establish our formal relationship with the Catholic Hierarchy which has weakened in recent years.

Newsletters were published in March, July and in October. A further newsletter will be published after the AGM.

We made a submission on the so-called Dying with Dignity Bill that was subsequently withdrawn from Dáil. (The Private Member's Bill to legalise assisted suicide and euthanasia, proposed by Deputy Gino Kenny, was rejected by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice as it

contains serious flaws and it was criticised by the majority of the public submissions, particularly by doctors.

See the Family Solidarity website

<https://familysolidarity.org/assisted-suicide-bill-was-too-flawed-to-continue/> for more details)

On 14th October, Family Solidarity hosted a webinar with Jason Osborne, journalist with The Irish Catholic. The title of the talk was "The Synodal Church of the 21st century: a young, married man's perspective". A recording of the webinar can be watched. (see

<https://familysolidarity.org/webinar-the-synodal-church-of-the-21st-century/>)

(At the AGM the second webinar was discussed. It took place on the 9th December)

We plan to have a follow-up webinar on the 3rd of February 2022 with Bishop Brendan Leahy, Chairman, and Nicola Brady, secretary of the Irish Bishops Conference synodal Steering Committee.

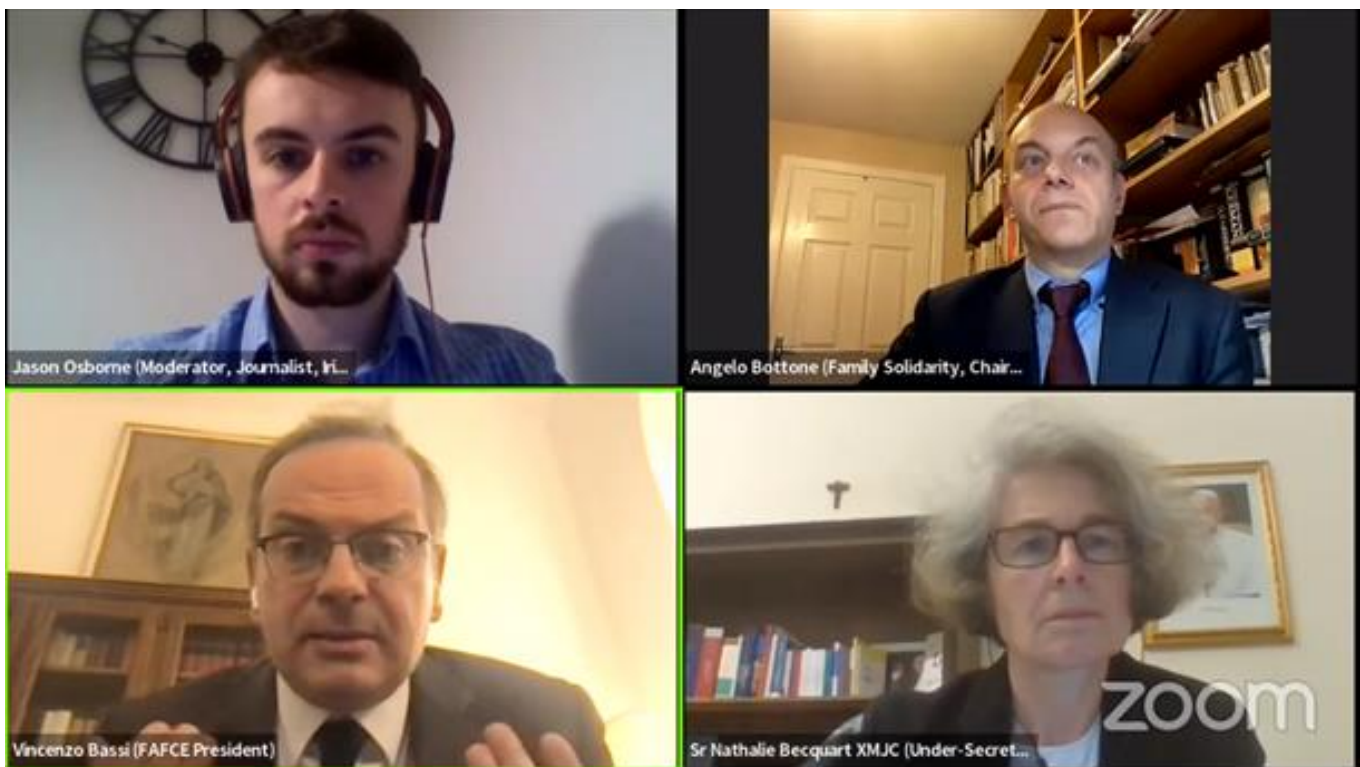
Liam Ó hAlmhain, Retiring Chairman 4th December 2021

Family and Synodality: a call for participation

9th December 2021

The webinar in association with FAFCE announced at the AGM took place on the 9th December 2021 with the undersecretary of the Bishop's Synod in Rome, Sister Nathalie Becquart, and FAFCE President, Vincenzo Bassi, as speakers. This can be viewed on YouTube and on our website:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3s395dH232A>



The following is the introduction to the webinar:

“We stand before you, Holy Spirit, as we gather together in your name”

Thank you, Sr Nathalie, for being with us tonight.

“What is a synod? How can we participate?” These are the first questions that were raised at the National Executive meeting of Family Solidarity, in May this year, when the Irish bishops invited submissions on how to embark in the Synodal Pathway.

None of us had been ever involved in a Synod before and so, rather than presenting our own views, we decided to ask others, more expert, to tell us what they expected from the Irish Synod.

Listening was for us the beginning of this journey, and this is how we came up with the idea of public seminars online. In October, our first guest was a young newly married journalist who reverted to the Catholic faith during his college years, named Jason Osborne.

Today we have you, Sr Nathalie, because in October the Pope launched the Universal Synod, and so now we are engaged in not just one but two synods, at least in Ireland. In February we will host bishop Brendan Leahy and Nicola Brady, from the Irish Synod Steering Committee. And we might have more speakers during the year.

So, listening is for us, at least in this phase, the key word. Synodality means listening, and listening is not passive, it is an active engagement, it requires a dynamic participation.

I have observed two worrying reactions to the idea of a synod: there are those who reject it, as dangerous or useless. They see it as a threat to our faith and to the hierarchical structure of the Church. And then there are those who want to use the Synod to promote their own agenda, which is already clearly set. The latter are the ones that I have seen especially vocal in the secular papers, expressing demands and criticism about a synodal process that has barely started.

What is common in those two attitudes is the refusal to listen. There are two ways to not listen: closing our ears off or shouting. Some close their ears, rejecting the opportunity of the synodal journey, and others shout, spoiling this opportunity.

The Synod, instead, should be a time for listening carefully and tonight, in our modest contribution to this synodal journey, we will hear the voice of Sr Nathalie, who was particularly involved in the previous 15th ordinary Synod of the Bishops dedicated to the youth in 2018, and she is now the under-secretary of the 16th ordinary Synod that will end in 2023. We will also hear from Vincenzo Bassi, representing the associations of Catholic families in Europe, and also from the public. But the Synod is foremost an occasion to listen to the Holy Spirit.

“With You alone to guide us, make Yourself at home in our hearts: teach us the way we must go and how we are to pursue it”

Family Solidarity was established about forty years ago, inspired by *Familiaris Consortio*. Terence, one of our founders, told me that he used to go speaking at meetings around Ireland with two little books in each of his hands: in one hand, the Irish Constitution, and in the other hand, *Familiaris Consortio*.

This fundamental document on the family, by Saint Paul John II, is the outcome of the 6th Synod of the Bishops in Rome, in 1980.

Family Solidarity is then, to a certain extent, one of the results of that Synod. This link between our own organisation and the Synod of the Bishops was probably never noticed before, but now we can say that the Synod is in our DNA.

Familiaris Consortio, following *Lumen Gentium*, calls the family a “domestic church”. This was particularly true in recent months when we were not permitted to use our churches due to Covid-19. In no other country in Europe public worship was banned for so long as in Ireland.

The home was, and still is for many who can't go out, the only place where people could gather and pray together. It was also the main place of education, and preparation for sacraments.

The Christian family has played a central role in these months, when parishes and schools were closed or working at a reduced capacity.

Family associations, in mediating and facilitating the work of families, have also sustained the “domestic church” during these difficult times. Vincenzo Bassi will cover this topic in his final remarks.

The family was likewise an antidote to loneliness, as it says in the title of a webinar organised in May by FAFCE. Maria, one of our representatives, reminded us on that occasion that “the lockdown culture not only locked people down, but locked people out of family and of society, from human interaction that is fundamental to human flourishing.”

“A call for participation”, says the title of tonight’s meeting. Participation is one of the three key words of the 2023 Synod, together with communion and mission. Pope Francis wants to involve anyone in this journey. But how can families, and family associations play an active part? Sr Nathalie and Vincenzo, we want to hear your answers. In the Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches, published by the Secretary General in September, I found nothing specific for families but under the heading “Who can participate?”, among other things it says: “creative means should also be found in order to involve children and youth.”

This is a brilliant idea. We should listen to our children and young people, as they are not only the future but also the present of the Church. In raising them into the faith, we learn so much from them. Their young lives have now been tainted by the pandemic and their involvement in the Synod is probably one of the best way families can be part too, as this can be hardly pursued without their families.

Tonight, we gather online from all over Europe. We are using a common language, English, that for many of us is not our mother tongue.

If the synodal journey is an exercise in listening, it is also an exercise in translation. Like in translation, we aim at understanding each other, while struggling to overcome difficulties and differences. This will bear fruit if we let the Spirit guide us.

Angelo Bottone
Chairman, Family Solidarity

The Powerpoint slides used by Sister Nathalie during her presentation are available on our website.

IRELAND IS EXPERIENCING A DEMOGRAPHIC CATASTROPHE



Due mainly to Covid-19, Ireland saw a significant drop in the number of births in the second quarter of this year compared with the same period last year. At 14.6pc, it was the second biggest fall in Europe, and would have been even worse were it not for the number of non-Irish nationals having babies here. Marriages also went significantly down. We are experiencing a demographic catastrophe.

Vital statistics for the second quarter of 2021 released by the CSO last week show that 11,551 babies were born from April to June this year, whereas in the same period in 2020 there were 13,527 births. That is a drop of 1,976, the equivalent of -14.6 pc. An enormous reduction.

Those born from April to June 2021 were conceived in the second half of 2020, when Ireland was experiencing the second wave of the pandemic. If we compare births for the first quarter (January-March) of this year with the first quarter of last year, before the pandemic got a grip on the country, there was a fall of 3.3pc, not too out of line with trend for the last few years.

This proves that conceptions dropped significantly only in the second half of last year when, after an initial period of uncertainty, people began to understand the long-term impact of Covid-19 and they planned their future life accordingly.

If we combine quarters 1 and 2, the drop of births was 8.8pc, compared to the first semester of 2020. A similar drop has happened in other countries but not everywhere. With the exception of Moldova, Ireland has had the highest drop in Europe in 2021 so far.

Compared to the same period of the previous year, births went down in Portugal (-8.5pc), Poland (-7.6pc), Italy (-4.4pc), England and Wales (-3.9pc). And also outside of Europe: Japan (-4.9pc), United States (-1.9pc). But there was an increase of births in some North European countries: Finland (6.9), Norway (5.7), Netherlands (5.7), Denmark (3.1). Sweden, which had no lockdowns, also saw a 0.7pc increase.

It is worth noting that in April-June last year, 77.5pc of babies were born to women with an Irish nationality. Non-Irish nationals represent 12.9pc of the total population, but accounted for 22.5pc of births. They are having more children per head than the Irish.

Not surprisingly, the number of marriages plunged as well, but in order to understand the scale of reduction it is better to compare 2021 not with the previous year but with 2019, as in some periods of 2020 weddings were heavily restricted and so most of them were postponed.

2,558 weddings took place in the second quarter of 2021 in Ireland. About half (50.8pc) compared to 2019 when, in the same period, 5,204 couples tied to knot. In the second quarter of 2020, there were only 303 marriages, when only six people could attend.

There were 4,823 marriages in the first half of 2021, 42.5pc fewer than 2019 when 8,389 couples married. Instead, compared to the first half of 2020, when most weddings were cancelled, this year saw a significant increase of 68.6pc.

A drop in marriages during the pandemic is a world-wide trend, with no exceptions, and it was already evident from the 2020 data but the impact of Covid-19 on births appears only in 2021, after 9 months. The change in birth rate in different countries is complex to explain but it is

associated to how much and when the virus hit them. Only few, mostly Scandinavian countries, experienced a small baby-boom.

The Irish birth rate in quarter 2 of 2021 was the lowest ever since it has been recorded: 9.2 per thousand population. The total fertility rate (average number of children a woman would have in her life) for the first half of 2021 was also the lowest recorded ever: 1.4. This is way below the replacement rate.

All those figures might slightly improve in the years to come, when Covid-19 will fade away, but the current situation is dramatic. Ireland is experiencing a demographic catastrophe and there seems to be little awareness in the public opinion.

Our low fertility rate should be a cause of national debate, but mysteriously is not, despite its dire, long-term consequences.

THE ESRI'S BLIND SPOT ON MARRIAGE



New research from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) confirms that when fathers play an active role in the

lives of their children, it has beneficial effects on the child. Unfortunately, the research fails to take into consideration the role marriage has in encouraging more father involvement with children. It is a big blind spot.

As the press release accompanying the report says, “children who have a good relationship with their father are happier, feel less anxious and are more engaged in physical activity”.

The paper is based on data from ‘Growing up in Ireland’, a government-funded longitudinal study that follows the lives of thousands of Irish children. The paper seeks to examine ways father involvement with children can be supported through policy.

Among the findings is that highly educated, and also migrant fathers, are more likely to engage in activities with their children.

Interestingly, whether the father did or did not avail of paternal leave in the first year of a child’s life makes little difference to paternal involvement, according to the research. This is probably not very surprising. In the first year of a child’s life the mother-child bond is particularly intense. However, as the child grows, fathers have more involvement, especially when on flexible hours or work from home. This is hardly a surprise either.

In early years, the study found no significant variation in father involvement with their sons or daughters, but when the children grow older, fathers are more likely to engage in activities with their sons than with their daughters. This is probably sport-related.

Nonetheless, nine-year-old girls are more likely than boys to report getting on very well with their fathers.

Also unsurprising is that children not living with their fathers are less likely to report getting on very well with them. “The relationship was better where contact was frequent and where the mother had a better relationship with the father.”

It is disappointing that the research takes into consideration many factors, such as the education or employment status of the father, but not the role of marriage in fostering greater father involvement.

Other studies by the ERSI have highlighted that the two-parent family tends to produce better outcomes for children. For instance, a report on adolescent behaviour presented by the ERSI in May, highlighted the “poorer behaviour across all domains for those in lone parent families or families that experienced separation during the young person’s adolescence.”

A report from October 2018 found that children of separated parents are more likely than those from intact families to have problems with their health, education and emotional wellbeing.

Throughout the centuries, marriage is precisely the social institution most likely to link a father to his children and their mother. Where marriage declines, fathers are less likely to be living with and involved with their children.

It is an omission on the part of the ESRI not to mention this fact. If it cares about father involvement with children, then it should care about marriage as well.

THE SIGNS ARE OMINOUS ON ABORTION CONSULTATIONS

The following is from prolife group Deise4Life, reprinted here by curtesy of www.catholicarena.com

What happens when a woman in Ireland contacts a GP about having an abortion? Online HSE documentation makes it clear that the first consultation with the GP is not meant to be a rubber-stamping exercise, but what actually happens in practice?

The HSE abortion consent form

The HSE has posted online their abortion consent form for medical abortions (i.e. abortion pills). It gives a clear picture of what is supposed to happen under our new abortion legislation.

When a woman applies for a medical abortion in Ireland, she makes an initial appointment with a GP or other abortion provider. The consent form is to be read and signed by both parties. The woman signs to being “fully informed..about side effects.. and potential risks and complications”. In fact, she signs that she understands to her “complete satisfaction”.

The medical practitioner signs the following statement: “I confirm that in my opinion, the patient understands the nature of the treatment. I have provided them with the ‘Your Guide to Medical Abortion’ booklet and explained what the treatment will involve, the benefits and risks of this and any alternative treatments. I discussed any particular concerns of this patient. These were explained to my patient in terms suited to their understanding and they are able to give informed consent.”

There is then a 3-day waiting period after the initial appointment, and the woman returns to receive her two abortion pills, the first of which is taken on the spot, the second the following day.

Sarah's story

Some women have shared their actual experiences in conversation with the Life Institute, and these have been posted online. Here is one such story (Sarah's Story); others like it are also listed on the Life Institute web page.

"I was surprised how quickly I got an appointment. He (the GP) went through the abortion and it all sounded very straightforward really. There was no offer of help, support, no counselling, no encouragement... just to return in 3 days. The next three days were a blur but you could cut the tension with a knife at home. I returned 3 days later and I always remember he didn't tell me to sit down, and while I was standing up, he handed me the pills and the plastic cup filled with water. It was like I had no time to even think about what I was doing. The next day I was to take the 2nd set of pills. I hesitated for a few hours but overwhelming stress came over me, and I convinced myself again that I just had to do it and the damage was already done anyway. The next few hours were excruciating, I was told I would have mild cramps. This is not true. I bled so much and the pain was awful. I stayed in bed for the next two days and only got up to use the toilet. After all that was over, I thought 'okay it's done', I just felt so fragile. After a week I was in the toilet and just felt something very strange and out came a perfect tiny baby. I couldn't believe it, I always remember the perfect

shape of his leg, you could see it so clearly. I took a photo, I just had to.

All I can say is, I am traumatised. My life is now measured by everything before and after the abortion. I feel like a different person and I'll never be the same. It has impacted every area of my life. This is the part you are never told, no one warned me about this. I wish I had known, I would have never done it."

How typical is Sarah's story?

The short answer to this question is that we have no way of knowing, because hardly any information is being collected about the operation of the new regime - but there are some disturbing indicators.

More than 2000 women, about 1 in 3 women who had an abortion that year, contacted the HSE post-abortion helpline in 2020. That suggests an awful lot of women who found the abortion experience harder to deal with than they were led to believe.

In 2019, according to the Irish Family Planning Association annual report, 8% (nearly 1 in 12) of a sample of their clients ended up in hospital after taking abortion pills. Nationally, that suggests more than 500 women in just one year ending up in hospital after the pills.

There have been huge variations in abortion rates in neighbouring Irish counties, suggesting that GP's in some counties are doing a better job of listening and counselling than others, and that when this happens, more women change their minds about proceeding with an abortion.

It has recently been confirmed (parliamentary question from Carol Nolan TD) that there have been 94 abortion-related claims to the State Claims Agency up to end October 2021.

To sum up:

- More than 6500 abortions a year
- Large variation in abortion rates between neighbouring counties
- Traumatized women accessing post-abortion helplines in their thousands
- Hundreds of women being hospitalised after taking the abortion pills
- Nearly one hundred women to date have submitted abortion-related claims

Whatever happened to “rare” and “safe” in the 2018 slogan “safe, legal and rare”? At least three members of Cabinet used that slogan in the referendum campaign. It is rarely mentioned now, and it is easy to see why.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NATIVITY SCENE

“Dear brothers and sisters, the Christmas crèche is part of the precious yet demanding process of passing on the faith.”

Pope Francis has given this reminder in the Apostolic Letter he has written, titled *‘Admirabile Signum,’* on the meaning and importance of the Nativity Scene. He signed it on Dec. 1st 2019, the first Sunday of Advent, in the Franciscan Shrine in Greccio, where St. Francis of Assisi made the first ever Nativity Scene.



“Beginning in childhood, and at every stage of our lives,” the Holy Father recalled, “it teaches us to contemplate Jesus, to experience God’s love for us, to feel and believe that God is with us ...”.

Moreover, he continued, it teaches us “we are with Him, His children, brothers and sisters all, thanks to that Child who is the Son of God and the Son of the Virgin Mary.”

“To realize that, in that knowledge,” Pope Francis said, “we find true happiness.”

Here is the full Vatican-provided English text of the Letter:

1. The enchanting image of the Christmas crèche, so dear to the Christian people, never ceases to arouse amazement and wonder. The depiction of Jesus’ birth is itself a simple and joyful proclamation of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. The nativity scene is like a living Gospel rising up from the pages of sacred Scripture. As we contemplate the Christmas story, we are invited to set out on a spiritual journey, drawn by the humility of the God who became man in order to encounter every man and woman. We come to realize that so great is his love for us that he became one of us, so that we in turn might become one with him.

With this Letter, I wish to encourage the beautiful family tradition of preparing the nativity scene in the days before Christmas, but also the custom of setting it up in the workplace, in schools, hospitals, prisons and town squares. Great imagination and creativity is always shown in employing the most diverse materials to create small masterpieces of beauty. As children, we learn from our parents and grandparents to carry on this joyful tradition,

which encapsulates a wealth of popular piety. It is my hope that this custom will never be lost and that, wherever it has fallen into disuse, it can be rediscovered and revived.

2. The origin of the Christmas crèche is found above all in certain details of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, as related in the Gospels. The evangelist Luke says simply that Mary "gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (2:7). Because Jesus was laid in a manger, the nativity scene is known in Italian as a *presepe*, from the Latin word *praesepe*, meaning "manger".

Coming into this world, the Son of God was laid in the place where animals feed. Hay became the first bed of the One who would reveal himself as "the bread come down from heaven" (*Jn* 6:41). Saint Augustine, with other Church Fathers, was impressed by this symbolism: "Laid in a manger, he became our food" (*Sermon* 189, 4). Indeed, the nativity scene evokes a number of the mysteries of Jesus' life and brings them close to our own daily lives.

But let us go back to the origins of the Christmas crèche so familiar to us. We need to imagine ourselves in the little Italian town of Greccio, near Rieti. Saint Francis stopped there, most likely on his way back from Rome where on 29 November 1223 he had received the confirmation of

his Rule from Pope Honorius III. Francis had earlier visited the Holy Land, and the caves in Greccio reminded him of the countryside of Bethlehem. It may also be that the “Poor Man of Assisi” had been struck by the mosaics in the Roman Basilica of Saint Mary Major depicting the birth of Jesus, close to the place where, according to an ancient tradition, the wooden panels of the manger are preserved.

The *Franciscan Sources* describe in detail what then took place in Greccio. Fifteen days before Christmas, Francis asked a local man named John to help him realize his desire “to bring to life the memory of that babe born in Bethlehem, to see as much as 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 was laid upon a bed of hay”.^[1] At this, his faithful friend went immediately to prepare all that the Saint had asked. On 25 December, friars came to Greccio from various parts, together with people from the farmsteads in the area, who brought flowers and torches to light up that holy night. When Francis arrived, he found a manger full of hay, an ox and a donkey. All those present experienced a new and indescribable joy in the presence of the Christmas scene. The priest then solemnly celebrated the Eucharist over the manger, showing the bond between the Incarnation of the Son of God and the Eucharist. At

Greccio there were no statues; the nativity scene was enacted and experienced by all who were present.^[2]

This is how our tradition began: with everyone gathered in joy around the cave, with no distance between the original event and those sharing in its mystery.

Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of Saint Francis, notes that this simple and moving scene was accompanied by the gift of a marvellous vision: one of those present saw the Baby Jesus himself lying in the manger. From the nativity scene of that Christmas in 1223, “everyone went home with joy”.^[3]

3. With the simplicity of that sign, Saint Francis carried out a great work of evangelization. His teaching touched the hearts of Christians and continues today to offer a simple yet authentic means of portraying the beauty of our faith. Indeed, the place where this first nativity scene was enacted expresses and evokes these sentiments. Greccio has become a refuge for the soul, a mountain fastness wrapped in silence.

Why does the Christmas crèche arouse such wonder and move us so deeply? First, because it shows God’s tender love: the Creator of the universe lowered himself to take up our littleness. The gift of life, in all its mystery, becomes all the more wondrous as we realize that the Son of Mary is the source and sustenance of all life. In Jesus, the Father has given us a brother who comes to seek us

out whenever we are confused or lost, a loyal friend ever at our side. He gave us his Son who forgives us and frees us from our sins.

Setting up the Christmas crèche in our homes helps us to relive the history of what took place in Bethlehem. Naturally, the Gospels remain our source for understanding and reflecting on that event. At the same time, its portrayal in the crèche helps us to imagine the scene. It touches our hearts and makes us enter into salvation history as contemporaries of an event that is living and real in a broad gamut of historical and cultural contexts.

In a particular way, from the time of its Franciscan origins, the nativity scene has invited us to “feel” and “touch” the poverty that God’s Son took upon himself in the Incarnation. Implicitly, it summons us to follow him along the path of humility, poverty and self-denial that leads from the manger of Bethlehem to the cross. It asks us to meet him and serve him by showing mercy to those of our brothers and sisters in greatest need (cf. *Mt 25:31-46*).

4. I would like now to reflect on the various elements of the nativity scene in order to appreciate their deeper meaning. First, there is the background of a starry sky wrapped in the darkness and silence of night. We represent this not only out of fidelity to the Gospel accounts, but also for its symbolic value. We can think of

all those times in our lives when we have experienced the darkness of night. Yet even then, God does not abandon us, but is there to answer our crucial questions about the meaning of life. Who am I? Where do I come from? Why was I born at this time in history? Why do I love? Why do I suffer? Why will I die? It was to answer these questions that God became man. His closeness brings light where there is darkness and shows the way to those dwelling in the shadow of suffering (cf. *Lk 1:79*).

The landscapes that are part of the nativity scene also deserve some mention. Frequently they include the ruins of ancient houses or buildings, which in some instances replace the cave of Bethlehem and become a home for the Holy Family. These ruins appear to be inspired by the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* of the Dominican Jacobus de Varagine, which relates a pagan belief that the Temple of Peace in Rome would collapse when a Virgin gave birth. More than anything, the ruins are the visible sign of fallen humanity, of everything that inevitably falls into ruin, decays and disappoints. This scenic setting tells us that Jesus is newness in the midst of an aging world, that he has come to heal and rebuild, to restore the world and our lives to their original splendour.

5. With what emotion should we arrange the mountains, streams, sheep and shepherds in the nativity scene! As we do so, we are reminded that, as the prophets had

foretold, all creation rejoices in the coming of the Messiah. The angels and the guiding star are a sign that we too are called to set out for the cave and to worship the Lord.

“Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us” (*Lk 2:15*). So the shepherds tell one another after the proclamation of the angels. A beautiful lesson emerges from these simple words. Unlike so many other people, busy about many things, the shepherds become the first to see the most essential thing of all: the gift of salvation. It is the humble and the poor who greet the event of the Incarnation. The shepherds respond to God who comes to meet us in the Infant Jesus by setting out to meet him with love, gratitude and awe. Thanks to Jesus, this encounter between God and his children gives birth to our religion and accounts for its unique beauty, so wonderfully evident in the nativity scene.

6. It is customary to add many symbolic figures to our nativity scenes. First, there are the beggars and the others who know only the wealth of the heart. They too have every right to draw near to the Infant Jesus; no one can evict them or send them away from a crib so makeshift that the poor seem entirely at home. Indeed, the poor are a privileged part of this mystery; often they are the first to recognize God’s presence in our midst.

The presence of the poor and the lowly in the nativity scene remind us that God became man for the sake of those who feel most in need of his love and who ask him to draw near to them. Jesus, “gentle and humble in heart” (*Mt 11:29*), was born in poverty and led a simple life in order to teach us to recognize what is essential and to act accordingly. The nativity scene clearly teaches that we cannot let ourselves be fooled by wealth and fleeting promises of happiness. We see Herod’s palace in the background, closed and deaf to the tidings of joy. By being born in a manger, God himself launches the only true revolution that can give hope and dignity to the disinherited and the outcast: the revolution of love, the revolution of tenderness. From the manger, Jesus proclaims, in a meek yet powerful way, the need for sharing with the poor as the path to a more human and fraternal world in which no one is excluded or marginalized.

Children – but adults too! – often love to add to the nativity scene other figures that have no apparent connection with the Gospel accounts. Yet, each in its own way, these fanciful additions show that in the new world inaugurated by Jesus there is room for whatever is truly human and for all God’s creatures. From the shepherd to the blacksmith, from the baker to the musicians, from the women carrying jugs of water to the children at play: all this speaks of the everyday holiness, the joy of doing

ordinary things in an extraordinary way, born whenever Jesus shares his divine life with us.

7. Gradually, we come to the cave, where we find the figures of Mary and Joseph. Mary is a mother who contemplates her child and shows him to every visitor. The figure of Mary makes us reflect on the great mystery that surrounded this young woman when God knocked on the door of her immaculate heart. Mary responded in complete obedience to the message of the angel who asked her to become the Mother of God. Her words, “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (*Lk 1:38*), show all of us how to abandon ourselves in faith to God’s will. By her “fiat”, Mary became the mother of God’s Son, not losing but, thanks to him, consecrating her virginity. In her, we see the Mother of God who does not keep her Son only to herself, but invites everyone to obey his word and to put it into practice (cf. *Jn 2:5*).

At Mary’s side, shown protecting the Child and his Mother, stands Saint Joseph. He is usually depicted with staff in hand, or holding up a lamp. Saint Joseph plays an important role in the life of Jesus and Mary. He is the guardian who tirelessly protects his family. When God warned him of Herod’s threat, he did not hesitate to set out and flee to Egypt (cf. *Mt 2:13-15*). And once the danger had passed, he brought the family back to

Nazareth, where he was to be the first teacher of Jesus as a boy and then as a young man. Joseph treasured in his heart the great mystery surrounding Jesus and Mary his spouse; as a just man, he entrusted himself always to God's will, and put it into practice.

8. When, at Christmas, we place the statue of the Infant Jesus in the manger, the nativity scene suddenly comes alive. God appears as a child, for us to take into our arms. Beneath weakness and frailty, he conceals his power that creates and transforms all things. It seems impossible, yet it is true: in Jesus, God was a child, and in this way he wished to reveal the greatness of his love: by smiling and opening his arms to all.

The birth of a child awakens joy and wonder; it sets before us the great mystery of life. Seeing the bright eyes of a young couple gazing at their newborn child, we can understand the feelings of Mary and Joseph who, as they looked at the Infant Jesus, sensed God's presence in their lives.

“Life was made manifest” (*1 Jn 1:2*). In these words, the Apostle John sums up the mystery of the Incarnation. The crèche allows us to see and touch this unique and unparalleled event that changed the course of history, so that time would thereafter be reckoned either before or after the birth of Christ.

God's ways are astonishing, for it seems impossible that he should forsake his glory to become a man like us. To our astonishment, we see God acting exactly as we do: he sleeps, takes milk from his mother, cries and plays like every other child! As always, God baffles us. He is unpredictable, constantly doing what we least expect. The nativity scene shows God as he came into our world, but it also makes us reflect on how our life is part of God's own life. It invites us to become his disciples if we want to attain ultimate meaning in life.

9. As the feast of Epiphany approaches, we place the statues of the Three Kings in the Christmas crèche. Observing the star, those wise men from the East set out for Bethlehem, in order to find Jesus and to offer him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These costly gifts have an allegorical meaning: gold honours Jesus' kingship, incense his divinity, myrrh his sacred humanity that was to experience death and burial.

As we contemplate this aspect of the nativity scene, we are called to reflect on the responsibility of every Christian to spread the Gospel. Each of us is called to bear glad tidings to all, testifying by our practical works of mercy to the joy of knowing Jesus and his love.

The Magi teach us that people can come to Christ by a very long route. Men of wealth, sages from afar, a thirst for the infinite, they set out on the long and perilous

journey that would lead them to Bethlehem (cf. *Mt* 2:1-12). Great joy comes over them in the presence of the Infant King. They are not scandalized by the poor surroundings, but immediately fall to their knees to worship him. Kneeling before him, they understand that the God who with sovereign wisdom guides the course of the stars also guides the course of history, casting down the mighty and raising up the lowly. Upon their return home, they would certainly have told others of this amazing encounter with the Messiah, thus initiating the spread of the Gospel among the nations.

10. Standing before the Christmas crèche, we are reminded of the time when we were children, eagerly waiting to set it up. These memories make us all the more conscious of the precious gift received from those who passed on the faith to us. At the same time, they remind us of our duty to share this same experience with our children and our grandchildren. It does not matter how the nativity scene is arranged: it can always be the same or it can change from year to year. What matters is that it speaks to our lives. Wherever it is, and whatever form it takes, the Christmas crèche speaks to us of the love of God, the God who became a child in order to make us know how close he is to every man, woman and child, regardless of their condition.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Christmas crèche is part of the precious yet demanding process of passing on the faith. Beginning in childhood, and at every stage of our lives, it teaches us to contemplate Jesus, to experience God's love for us, to feel and believe that God is with us and that we are with him, his children, brothers and sisters all, thanks to that Child who is the Son of God and the Son of the Virgin Mary. And to realize that in that knowledge we find true happiness. Like Saint Francis, may we open our hearts to this simple grace, so that from our wonderment a humble prayer may arise: a prayer of thanksgiving to God, who wished to share with us his all, and thus never to leave us alone.

Given in Greccio, at the Shrine of the Nativity, on 1 December in the year 2019, the seventh of my Pontificate.

FRANCIS

[1] Cf. Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, 84; *Franciscan Sources*, 469.

[2] *Ibid.*, 85; *Franciscan Sources*, 469.

[3] *Ibid.*, 86; *Franciscan Sources*, 470.