



Christmas letter to the children in the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia



Dear Children,

Christmas is here, and you have probably prepared the Christmas tree and the Nativity scene in your homes. But do you know who invented and created the nativity scene, the crib, for the first time? It was St Francis of Assisi precisely eight hundred years ago in a small town called Greccio, located on a mountain in Italy.

A few days before Christmas 1223, St Francis called his friend Giovanni di Greccio a noble and generous man. He expressed his desire to see the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem with his eyes. This friend prepared everything as St Francis asked.

When Christmas Eve arrived, it happened precisely as the Saint of Assisi wanted: a manger with the donkey and the ox had been prepared. All the inhabitants of that country participated; everyone had brought what they could: a torch or a candle and many friars also arrived. In this

way, Greccio had become a new Bethlehem. St Francis was moved to think of how many hardships the infant Jesus had to endure to come into the world and bring us the love of God.

On that occasion, a Holy Mass was celebrated in the manger, and St Francis read the Gospel of the Nativity. He felt a deep sweetness like honey on his lips every time he proclaimed the name of Jesus. At the end of the celebration, a man looked into the manger and saw a child who seemed to be sound asleep and St Francis, who would wake him up. Through that nativity scene, Baby Jesus was being reborn in the hearts of everyone present. At the end of that celebration, everyone returned to their homes with immense joy.



Dear children, after eight hundred years, we still continue to prepare the nativity scene in our homes. Let's prepare the crib and the figurines of the shepherds, the donkey, and the ox. Let's prepare the lights. We place the statue of Mary and Joseph in the crib to finally add the most precious statue, that of Baby Jesus.

Why do we do all this? Because we want Jesus to be born today in our hearts and in our families and bring peace into this world. Let us remember in prayer, above all, those who suffered because of the war. May Christmas bring peace and reconciliation. Let us also sing the song of the angels: *Glory to God in heaven and peace on earth to people of goodwill.*

Merry Christmas to you, your parents, and your friends.

**+ Paolo Martinelli OFM Cap
Abu Dhabi, 25 December 2023**