



DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE
OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

Christmas 2020

To the People of God of the Diocese of Rockville Centre:

When he was elected as a Successor of St. Peter on March 13, 2013, our Holy Father chose the name *Francis*. It was a weighty decision with a prophetic message. Especially now, seven years later and with the publication of his latest encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* from the tomb of St. Francis of Assisi on October 3, 2020, the significance of the choice is clear: Pope Francis connects his papacy to St. Francis.

Through the ministry of our Holy Father, St. Francis of Assisi is close to the Church in these times. Therefore, as we draw near to Bethlehem at the end of this difficult year, I wish to recall two points Pope Francis highlights from the life of St. Francis. One will help us celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord; the other indicates a grace for which to pray during the holy season.

First, in his 2019 Apostolic Letter *Admirabile Signum: On the Meaning and Importance of the Nativity Scene*, Pope Francis emphasizes St. Francis of Assisi's foundational role in our celebration of Christmas. The Holy Father recalls the origins of the crèche and the first nativity scene inspired by the holy friar in 1223, by which the saint sought "to bring to life the memory of that babe born in Bethlehem." Importantly, the remembrance of Christ's birth that St. Francis desired to convey was brought alive in Greccio, a small village in Italy, not by statues but by people from the surrounding towns and countryside. Together with St. Francis, his friars, an ox and a donkey, they gathered at a cave to behold a manger full of hay over which the Eucharist was celebrated. That Christmas night, almost 800 years ago, Pope Francis reminds us, "the nativity scene was enacted and experienced by all who were present." That night, there was "no distance between the original event and those sharing in its mystery." (2) Encountering Christ, there was simply joy and hope.

This Christmas, in our world laden with the Crosses of COVID-19, political and economic turmoil, racism, financial hardship, and so many other societal ills and challenges – challenges that impact us on Long Island – let us remember this lesson from Greccio: Christmas is an event to be lived. It demands our participation. Like the women and men who embodied that first crèche, we must be present to Christ who is born for us. We must behold and receive Him.

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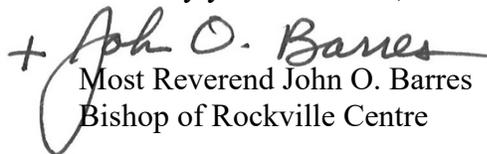
Second, in *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis shows St. Francis as an icon of Christocentric-listening. With great humility and charity, the saint reverently listened to others. He was present to the various voices in his life – the voice of God, the voice of his neighbor, the voice of the poor, the voice of the sick, the voice of nature – and by truly hearing them, he was an instrument of peace, healing, and understanding. How different it can be for us! The Holy Father says well what we know: “Today’s world is largely a deaf world...At times, the frantic pace of the modern world prevents us from listening attentively to what another person is saying.” Aware of this fact, the Pope encourages us, in the midst of our hectic and polarized world, to be like St. Francis and “not lose our ability to listen.” (48)

This Christmas, when we approach the crib, let us ask for the grace to be attentive listeners. Let us ask for the grace to be like St. Francis, so that we may hear the voice of God and the voice of our neighbor and respond with the radical charity he exhibited.¹

Like Pope Francis, may we be moved by the example of St. Francis, and may St. Francis of Assisi’s love for the Mystery of the Nativity, his ecstatic mysticism, his love for the poor, and his spirit of universal fraternity animate our celebration of Christmas this year.

May God bless you and your families this Christmas.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ John O. Barres
Most Reverend John O. Barres
Bishop of Rockville Centre

¹ Cf. Bishop John O. Barres October 8, 2020 Statement, “The Compelling Figure of St. Francis of Assisi in the Pontificate of Pope Francis and his New Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*.”