

Saint Francis's encounter at Greccio in 1223:

"The gifts of the Almighty were multiplied at Greccio, and a wonderful vision was seen by a virtuous man who was present at the Mass. He saw the little Child lying in the manger seemingly lifeless, and then Francis, the holy man of God, went up to it and roused the child as from a deep sleep. This vision was not unfitting, for the Child Jesus, who had been forgotten in the hearts of many, was brought to life again by God's grace working through his servant Francis and was stamped deeply upon his memory. And when the solemn vigil of Christmas was brought to a close, each one returned home with unspeakable joy" (Celano, *First Life*, 86).



Madonna and Child with Saint Francis, and the donor Fra Jacopo da Montefalco and Saint Bernardino of Siena, by Benozzo Gozzoli, 1452. Source: wikiart.org

St. Francis's challenge to his father:

"And your life near its close, you're a fool to pile up travel supplies.
What was a help once to have, will shame you to have had;
For 'having' is a boon that is brief, while 'to have had' will mean Perennial penury.
So, lest you do things and miss your salvation,
Give up these false doctrines and become a learner once more.

Flee the world and its fortunes before the day they fly away; While there is time,
remember you can't have the world
As well as God to enjoy. As you walk away from the world, trip it up,
Or it'll trip you up. A shaky believing merits no glory,
And everything's shaky in this world of ours;
so let your trust in it be nil.

Rather, trust in the Lord, for happy is the one who trusts in him,
For he will suffer no loss and will go on living for ever."

(*The Versified Life of Saint Francis by Henri d' Avranches, The Third Book*)

Note: Based on Celano's biography, Henri puts to verse the life and spirit of St. Francis

General Constitutions, Chapter II, Title I The Form of Life, Article 11

Mindful that the Holy Spirit is the source of their vocation and the animator of fraternal life and mission, secular Franciscans should seek to imitate the faithfulness of Francis to His inspiration. They should listen to the exhortation of the Saint to desire above all things 'the Spirit of God at work within them'.

OFS Rule 11: Thus, in the spirit of 'the beatitudes', and as pilgrims and strangers on their way to the home of the Father, they should strive to purify their hearts from every tendency and yearning for possession and power.

OFS Rule 12: Witnessing to the good yet to come and obliged to acquire purity of heart because of the vocation they have embraced, they should set themselves free to love God and their brothers and sisters.

Reflection: Article 11 refers to none other than a Spirit of love, the Holy Spirit which unites all things in the one God. The Christ Child in the poverty of the manger reflects this love of God that came down to be with us in His poverty, powerlessness, and a distinct lack of possessions. To be free of all that hinders one from loving God and neighbour is the kind of true freedom that St. Francis was forever striving to live.

At Christmas, or perhaps it is more correct to say 'Christ Mass', we honor the enduring love of God, that love which surpasses all understanding, that which endures beyond all the trappings of this world, which Saint Francis was able to rise above, to grasp the real meaning of life. It is that which is most important, the eternal perspective. The clarity to be able to see beyond, to live from a perspective of that which endures beyond this world, for it is God's love and mercy that endures forever (cf. Ps. 136; Lam. 3:22).

Prayer: This Holy Christ Mass let us pray to our heavenly Father for the grace to be able to contemplate the enduring love of God in the Holy Christ Child and to not lose sight of that which is enduring, for we are pilgrims, journeying through this world. Amen.



Pope Francis adoring the Christ Child, Epiphany 2020. Source: Vatican News

NB: This is also enduring love that nearly 800 years after Greccio, another man of God, also named Francis, bows down to adore the Holy Christ Child.