



2014 AWARDS  
BY THE CATHOLIC PRESS ASSOCIATION

Best Essay  
Prayer and Spirituality

Second Place



## How the Church Has Changed the World: A Child Enthroned

by Anthony Esolen

The Apennines run along the peninsula of Italy like a spine, carved and turned by volcanic action beneath the earth. So it is that abrupt cliffs of fire-founded rock rise up, smoothed a little by the long ages, pitted with grottoes, covered on their gentler western slopes with rich soil for farming, and crowned, often enough, by the walls and tile roofs and spires of a medieval town.

And here, in one such grotto, beyond the walls of one such town, a little man in brown rough cloth is working quietly. You wouldn't know it to look at him, but he has been in himself something of a volcano, if that word can properly apply to one who, by all appearances, hardly ever raises his voice. He is leading a great lumbering ox and a donkey over to the grotto, to tether them there, in front of a very large trough filled with hay so they won't grow restless, and a cistern full of water. The animals seem unusually tame, or maybe he just has a way with them.

### The church of the earth

Two other men in brown are watching him.

"Brother Rufino, what is the master doing now?" It's never been easy for the followers to

catch up with him. It is like trying to hold still the flashing points of a fire.

"I don't know. He said something about the chapel being too small."

"Too small for an ox and a donkey?"

"No, Brother Giles. Too small for the crowd that will come to celebrate the vigil with us."

Rufino and Giles approach the master. He is now strewing cedar branches and laurel along the sides of the grotto, as if he were decorating a stage. "My little brothers!" he cries out to them. "Come and assist me. Now is the time when what is great is small and what is small is great."

So they assist him, as if they were trying to transfigure a mountain and deck it as a sanctuary; as if the earth itself could now be a church once more, at the coming of the Lord who made it. At first they don't know what the task is, but after a while the plan takes shape in their minds too, and they pitch themselves into it with a will. The afternoon soon fades into evening, for the days are short, and in the waning light the people come, most especially children, some of whom the master dresses in white robes, giving them country horns and pipes to play with. Men and women come too, leading sheep, and a frisking lamb or two, just

born this summer. Naturally, with the commotion come man's oldest and most loyal friends the dogs, wagging their tails and barking, as the good Lord made them to do.

"Master," says Rufino, a man who was always a little too touchy about boundaries, "may we do this thing? Have we permission? What will the bishop say?" Rufino is the sort who, if he missed a word while saying his paternoster, would repeat the prayer three times over to make up for it. The master has had to correct him at times for that.

"The bishop of all the bishops has had his say. I have asked him, and he has approved. Brother Rufino," he says, his eyes glinting upon his friend, "when have you ever known me to take upon myself the burden of a priest? You know that my back is too weak to bear it."

## A new thing in the world

It is now quite dark above, a winter sky with stars like flakes of fire. The master leads a little girl and a little boy by the arm, and instructs them to kneel in front of the feeding trough, their hands folded in prayer. Then he brings a statue of an infant boy, which he had hidden for just this moment. He kisses its forehead, and falls to his knees.

All the people, hundreds of them, fall to their knees.

What can we hear, in that grotto on the slopes of Mount Subiaco? The earth is not trembling. Angels do not trumpet their songs from the skies. Some of the people are muttering a prayer, *Magnificat anima mea*. One of the lambs gives a shy bleat. The ox and the ass look on, padding now and then in their places, snuffling at the hay, or looking upon the people with their large expressive eyes.

Then the master arises to his feet, and begins to sing. *Puer nobis nascitur: A boy is born for us!*

Song after song, some in Latin, some in the Italian dialect of Umbria, rises up from the men and women and children, from the brothers in their coarse brown tunics, and from the angels surrounding the grotto, made all the lovelier by

the occasional confusion of the animals, for they too partake of this glory. A few of the grandees of Assisi are present, but in this world, the real world, what is small is great and what is great is small, and not all their gay robes draw the eyes of the people as do the children in white, the ox and the ass and the sheep, the girl Mary and the boy Joseph, and the figure of the Holy Child.

Then, after the poetry of praise, and after a time of silence that even the dogs in their sagaciousness observe, the poor man of God, Francis Bernardone, steps before the people and preaches to them of the meaning of this night.

"This is a new thing in the world," he says. "This is perhaps the only new thing the world has ever seen." And he speaks to them of the child in the manger. It is not only that God has deigned to come among us in so humble a guise. It is that he is instructing us even now. Even from the manger does Christ preach, saying, "If you would enter the kingdom of heaven, you must become as I am, you must become as little children." The child has nothing; the Son does nothing but what he sees the Father do. And therefore the Father has robed him in splendor.

"See the swaddling bands that wind him about," says the master. "Whose hands wove the cloth? It was Mary, in the quiet house in Nazareth, who wove those bands for the child she was going to bear, along with her dearest friend and my beloved, the Lady Poverty, and she and Mary spoke of many things as they worked, and no one but God beheld them."

So for an hour and more did Saint Francis preach, and the people there at the second crèche in the history of the world—for the first was at the stable-cave in Bethlehem—listened, as they always did, as if his clear and boyish voice swept them from that hillside into the land where the boy Christ looks upon his own, and makes the lion lie down with the lamb, and, more remarkable than that, the rich man to bow in homage to the poor, and leads them to streams of living water.

## The whole world a grotto

And in the rushing of Francis' words, the people for a time forget themselves. They forget to lift the chin and throw back the shoulders and strut like foolish peacocks in a cage. They forget to be great, and seem as if they had returned to childhood themselves, their eyes bright with delight and their lips parted in that happy look that children have when they are all wonder and no self. For the whole world, from the stars above to the rock beneath their feet, is a grotto for just this moment, to which the people have been invited, if they would but bow their heads and become small enough to fit into the universe.

The Evangelists tell us that the earth shook on the day when Christ died upon the cross. But that was the great after-tremor of Jesus' first act of love, when in the silence of Mary's house he became flesh and dwelt among us, and then, on the night of the Nativity, first showed to Mary and Joseph, then to the humble animals, and only then to mere shepherds, his sacred face. The earth shook with the fire of love, and from that day unto this, wherever men and women still remember the name of Jesus and how he was born in a lowly stable, they will feel that tremor, and know, somehow, even if they have forgotten the words, that the meek shall inherit the earth, that the first shall be last and the last shall be first, and that all the pomp and glamour of the world will pass away, all its capitols and senates and universities and towering dynamos of business leave not one scorched stone upon a stone, but the child born in the manger will remain, and he alone can tell us the secret of who we are and where we must go.

Anthony Esolen is professor of English at Providence College, a senior editor of *Touchstone Magazine*, and a regular contributor to MAGNIFICAT. He is the translator and editor of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Random House) and author of *The Beauty of the Word: A Running Commentary on the Roman Missal* (MAGNIFICAT).