The Nativity: Birth of Faith
Christmas Message 2013
Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Dear Friends,
Peace be with you! As I gaze at the beautiful nativity crèche here near the baptistery of St. Paul Cathedral – this Church where I was baptized as an infant; I cannot help but recall the beautiful life-size nativity that graces the Church where our family baptism records go back to 1389. It’s the Church of St. Luzen in the southwest German town of Hechingen built by the Franciscans in 1304. Chances are that if I’ve spoken German to any of you here at St. Paul Cathedral it’s in the local dialect of that region that a few of us have preserved through migration, famine and war.

All the more reason to take in the beauty of our nativity crèche for, like the nativity crèche of St. Luzen it’s a tradition that goes straight back to St. Francis himself. Indeed, his first biographer, Thomas of Celano notes the following about St. Francis: “More than any other feast, he celebrated Christmas with indescribably joy…. He said this was the feast of feasts, for on this day God became a little child and sucked milk like all human children. Francis embraced with great tenderness and devotion the pictures of the child Jesus and stammered words of tenderness, full of compassion, in the way children do. On his lips, the name of Jesus was sweet as honey.”

So enamored was St. Francis that responding to a vision, in 1223 – some 80 years before the construction of our own Franciscan village Church in Hechingen Germany – St. Francis re-enacted the nativity using live animals on an abandoned rural piece of property in rural Umbria – what is today central Italy. He even brought in a real ox and a real ass to simulate the precise condition of Jesus birth thus bringing to life in the fullest possible way these Gospel scriptures we just heard proclaimed in the Gospel of Luke.

We might ask ourselves why St. Francis was so devoted to this nativity scene and why has this become such a central part of our home and church environments Christmas after Christmas?

I love the answer that U2 rock bandleader – Bono – gave to an interviewer at Rolling Stone magazine some years back. Bono said that he found it “artistically appropriate” that Jesus was born in “straw poverty.” “Straw Poverty!” God specifically chose to reveal his very self – not amidst pomp and splendor – but in “straw poverty.”

Even more blunt might be the insight of Cyril of Alexandria who said that Jesus was laid in a manger like fodder for people who act like beasts! Might this be the real reason we need to notice and pray before the crèche?

Indeed several years back our own English language scripture translators were ready to translate the word “manger” as “feedbox” to capture the original French root of this word–manger – to eat! But the pastoral musicians, clergy, and parish catechists began to wonder about whether we all would be forced to switch the words of that famous Christmas carol from “Away in a Manger” to “Away in a Feedbox” so ultimately we’ve stayed with the word “manger.”

Humor aside, St. Francis’s devotion to the nativity crèche does have a serious warning for all of us today. His warning is about who notices the birth of Christ. It’s not King Herod who’s still plotting in his palace! It’s not the “people of Jerusalem” surrounding King Herod
and noted in St. Matthew’s Gospel. It's not the census takers of Cesar Augustus in tonight’s Gospel of St. Luke as he tried to figure out how to count the undocumented! No! It’s the itinerant shepherds of the field – the migrant workers of the first century – who lack land and roots. It is they who notice and it is that reality of who comes and who shows up that St. Francis wants us to most notice too. This, this nativity crèche warrants from us – not simply devotion – but imitation. Christ comes for all. But do we notice? Will we imitate the scene and place ourselves at this crèche?

My hope and prayer for you these days of our Christmas season is that amidst all the activity of family, friends, presents and fellowship that you find time to notice Christ – and notice well how he comes: Christ comes – as food even for those who act like beasts! Christ comes – especially amidst the straw poverty of our world! Christ comes – as a bright light that shines in our human darkness! Christ comes – because in the daily migration of our spiritual lives we loose our way! Christ comes – as a beacon of love even with our failures and sins! Thus taken together Christ comes to each and every one of us if we but take time to notice!

What more can I say? Welcome to the crèche! Welcome to your home! Welcome to your parish church that is home to the crèche! May your local parish be for you what this Cathedral is for me – the place of your spiritual birth this Christmas! Peace be with you!