

Real presence focus of annual Franciscan Greccio



Ryan Morsberger, 15, left center, of Ellicott City, as Joseph, and Jenna Sweeny, 16, of Glenwood, MD, right center, as Mary, with the other members of the Greccio Living Nativity at the Shrine of St. Anthony in Ellicott City. (Stephanie S. Cordle | Special to the Review)

By Maria Wiering

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ELLICOTT CITY – A unique part of the Shrine of St. Anthony’s annual living Nativity scene is also many attendees’ favorite aspect: a few minutes dedicated to eucharistic adoration.

“It shows that Jesus is here with us and never leaves us,” said 13-year-old Theresa Balick, who sang in the living Nativity’s choir Dec. 6.

Her family, which attends St. Louis in Clarksville, has made the evening event an annual tradition. It was held two nights, Dec. 6 and 7.

Hosted by the Conventual Franciscans whose friary includes the shrine, the living Nativity alternated between carols and Scripture readings. Youth actors portraying Mary, Jesus, shepherds and wise men gathered around a manger, where a lifelike doll represented the infant Jesus.

The program also featured two videos. The first introduced the concept behind a living Nativity, which St. Francis first created in Greccio, Italy. The other presented the saint’s reflections on the relationship between the Incarnation and the Eucharist.

After the second video, the choir began “Oh Come All Ye Faithful.” As the congregation sang “oh come let us adore him,” Father Brad Milunski, the friars’ provincial vicar, processed up the chapel’s central aisle with a monstrance, a vessel that displays the Eucharist. Attendees knelt in adoration as he placed it in front of the manger, connecting the infant Jesus to the consecrated bread.

Balick’s father, 51-year-old Glenn Balick, said he has attended several living Nativities, but the shrine’s is his favorite.

“When the monstrance comes out, it’s the true presence of Christ right there,” he said. “How do you not just be in awe?”

St. Louis’ children’s choir has led carols at the Nativity for four years. Director Mary Theresa Suhar, 47, tells the young singers their role is the angelic chorus.

“I think the kids really get a lot out of it – more than they’re giving,” said Suhar,

whose children, Zachariah, 11, and Anja, 8, sang in the choir. "It's very powerful for them, because they're participating. When the Eucharist comes out, all the kids are focused."

The event's organizers credit their inclusion of adoration to St. Francis, who in 1223 re-created a Nativity scene in the context of Christmas Mass while visiting Greccio, 55 miles south of Assisi.

The Shrine of St. Anthony has been hosting a living Nativity for at least 35 years, said its director, Conventual Franciscan Father Michael E. Heine.

"Francis started it, and the friars want to continue his spirit of looking at the humanity of Jesus, to see that all humanity is good because of the Incarnation," he said. "The Eucharist shows us that Jesus continues to remain with us, disguised in bread."

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