



DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE
OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

Christmas 2024

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

Merry Christmas to you and your families!

Last Christmas, we celebrated the 800th anniversary of that glorious and historic night when St. Francis of Assisi arranged the first Nativity creche scene in a small cave outside the Italian village of Greccio in Italy.

St. Francis was inspired to do this after visiting the historical place of Christ's birth on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land – the humble stable in a Bethlehem cave.

The large creche set in St. Peter's Square last year commemorated this 800th anniversary by having the figure of St. Francis of Assisi expressing adoration, awe and wonder across the Crib from Mary and Joseph.

Last September, we celebrated the 800th Anniversary of St. Francis receiving the gift of the "stigmata" – the mystical wounds of Christ in his hands, feet and side. In 2026, we will celebrate the 800th anniversary of St. Francis' death.

There is always a powerful connection between the Manger Crib and the Golgotha Cross of our Savior. St. Francis of Assisi lived this connection so powerfully.

In *Admirabile Signum*, Pope Francis writes: "Indeed, the place where this first nativity scene was enacted expresses and evokes these sentiments...from the time of its Franciscan origins, the nativity scene has invited us to 'feel' and 'touch' the poverty that God's Son took upon himself in the Incarnation. Implicitly, it summons us to follow him along the path of humility, poverty and self-denial that leads from the manger of Bethlehem to the Cross. It asks us to meet him and serve him by showing mercy to those of our brothers and sisters in great need (cf. Matthew 25:31-46)." (3)

As we spiritually draw near to Bethlehem at the end of this year, we pray for those who suffer in the Holy Land and the Middle East, in Ukraine and all war-torn areas of the world.

We pray too for the persecuted Church around the world and we pray for religious liberty in our country and in all countries.

St. Francis of Assisi understood the problems of the world and more than 800 years later, after he created the first creche, he is still close to the Church and to the world.

Many of you have seen the bronze statue of Atlas directly across from St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.

It was created by the sculptor Lee Lawrie and installed in 1937. The sculpture portrays the mythical ancient Greek Titan Atlas holding the burden of the heavens on his shoulder.

St. Francis of Assisi is no myth, but at times he has been compared with Atlas in how, through the centuries, he carried the burdens of the Church on his shoulders with his radical and pure Gospel witness.

In fact, Pope Innocent III, after meeting St. Francis, had a dream that St. Francis was holding up St. John Lateran Basilica, the visible sign and symbol of the universal Church, amidst the storms and earthquakes of history and crisis.

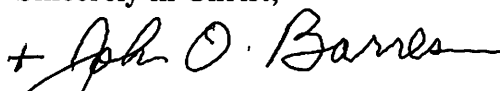
Configured to Christ crucified and having lived daily with the stigmatic wounds of Christ, St. Francis helps to animate and inspire the mission of mercy of the Catholic Church through the centuries.

St. Francis of Assisi intercedes for each of us at every moment to help rebuild the Biblical and Eucharistic evangelizing mission of the Church that Jesus Himself founded on Long Island and beyond.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to you and your families!

May the Light and Love of the Christ Child animate and guide our global Catholic Missionary Spirit this Christmas and throughout the New Year.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John O. Barres". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

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