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Dramatic Publishing

THE SHEPHERDS OF SAINT FRANCIS

The Story of the First Christmas Pageant in 1223

**A New Nativity Play in Five Scenes
(with audience participation)**

by

LOWELL SWORTZELL

Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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(THE SHEPHERDS OF SAINT FRANCIS)

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**For Mary Starnes
and Issac, Mickey, Creme, Lotte and Kurt**

A PROGRAM NOTE

The idea for writing *THE SHEPHERDS OF SAINT FRANCIS* came about as the author stood in the Giotto Chapel in the Upper Church of San Francesco at Assisi looking at a series of frescoes depicting scenes from the life of Saint Francis. One painting shows a gathering of the town fathers of Greccio as Francis presents them with a creche, a small-scale model of the nativity scene. Immediately, a number of questions came to mind. Why did Francis create the creche? Why are the onlookers so fascinated by the gift? What is the story behind this dramatic scene? But when the playwright began to seek answers to these questions, he found still more to ponder about what really happened in 1223. Some historical accounts indicated that rather than a miniature depiction of the first Christmas, Francis actually had staged the nativity scene in a cave on a hillside outside Greccio. Local citizens, according to tradition, marched from the town on Christmas eve, carrying candles and bringing with them their barnyard cows, donkeys, sheep and goats. Once there, they witnessed the first recorded re-enactment of the holy night in Bethlehem, as performed by their neighbors and friends.

But the questions still remained. What happened there to inspire Francis to start a tradition that has become a part of Christmas celebrations throughout the world? A number of possible answers are the basis of the play you are about to see—the story of the first Christmas pageant. Once more, Francis will stage his play, and this time *you* will be in it!

THE SHEPHERDS OF SAINT FRANCIS

A Nativity Play in Five Scenes (with audience participation)
For 5 Men, 3 Women, flexible extras

CHARACTERS

BROTHER FRANCIS the famous Friar, in his early 40s
LEONE a villager, just turning 20
A SHEPHERD in his 20s
HIS WIFE about the same age
THE SQUIRE a robust man of middle years or older
THE LORD OF THE MANOR . . . in his late 50s or early 60s
THE LADY OF THE MANORhis wife of similar age
A FARMER'S WIFE in her 40s

Roles in the Pageant

JOSEPH, played by the Shepherd

MARY, played by the Shepherd's Wife

AN ANGEL OF THE LORD, played by the Farmer's Wife

SHEPHERD ONE, played by Leone

*SHEPHERD TWO

*THE THREE WISE MEN

KING HEROD, played by the Squire

SHEEP, COWS, DONKEYS, and GOATS, played by
members of the audience

* These roles may be played either by actors cast by the director or by members of the audience recruited as they arrive for the performance. If the latter choice is made, Leone will guide them on stage, place them in their positions for the pageant and speak their lines. When members of the audience are used in these roles, they should not be costumed but appear in the clothes they are presently wearing.

TIME AND PLACE

December 1223

Near, in and around the town of Greccio, Italy.

THE SCENES

Scene One: In a church in a small Italian town

Scene Two: On the road to Greccio

Scene Three: In the Shepherd's hut

Scene Four: The council chamber of the Lord of the Manor

Scene Five: Inside and outside of the Shepherd's hut

THE SHEPHERDS OF SAINT FRANCIS

SCENE ONE

AT RISE: Down the center aisle of a church, or of the space in which the play is being performed, a FRIAR sweeps his way toward the high altar. His broom is made of dried rushes, with a handle of a gnarled and knotted stick. BROTHER FRANCIS, now in his early forties, clearly enjoys what he is doing—sweeping vigorously.

When he gets about halfway, LEONE, a young native of the town, enters from the back and hurries to BROTHER FRANCIS. Over one shoulder he carries a bundle of clothes and in his arms he holds a pack of candles tied together by a heavy piece of string. His face is flushed with excitement and an eagerness to share some important news.

LEONE. Brother Francis, what are you doing?

FRANCIS. Isn't it apparent? Sweeping, vigorously.

LEONE. You mustn't.

FRANCIS. The congregation will be arriving in a few minutes. We aren't ready.

LEONE. Others can clean. Not you.

FRANCIS. I want to. Nothing pleases me more than a spotless church. *(Sweeping faster.)*

LEONE. Then give me the broom.

FRANCIS (*playfully*). Get your own. (*Using the broom as a weapon to hold LEONE off.*) This one's mine.

LEONE. But I must talk to you, Brother Francis, before everyone gets here.

FRANCIS. After the service, my son, we'll have a nice long visit.

LEONE. It's *very* important.

FRANCIS. But can wait, I'm sure.

LEONE. No, Brother, I'm desperate to tell you something.

FRANCIS. What can be more important than to re-open this church after so many years?

LEONE. Yes, I know. A new building has risen from the ruins. (*Looking about and pointing.*) The walls freshly painted. The roof sealed and safe. Doors repaired. Windows replaced. The altar restored. It's a miracle.

FRANCIS. Of God's love and mankind's hard work. And no one in the village has done more than you, my son. You've earned my everlasting thanks.

LEONE. Do you really believe that, Brother Francis?

FRANCIS. Leone, have you ever known me to lie?

LEONE. Of course not. But—

FRANCIS. Something does trouble you!

LEONE. That's why we must talk. NOW. Before they come. It can't wait.

FRANCIS. Very well. But place those candles on the altar while I sweep here.

LEONE (*as he inserts candles in holders throughout the altar*). Are you ready? Brace yourself.

FRANCIS. My broom will support me if I feel faint. Go ahead, tell me.

LEONE. Very well. Last night the Lord spoke to me in my dreams.

FRANCIS. No doubt to thank you for all you've done in His service. He must be very pleased to see this house is His own again.

LEONE. Perhaps He is. He didn't say so, at least not exactly in those words. Well, maybe He did. I'm not sure.

FRANCIS. What did He say, exactly? Tell me. *His* words.

LEONE (*laboring each word*). He said that when you leave here today...

FRANCIS. I didn't know I was leaving...Today? Are you certain?

LEONE. Yes, right after the service...You're to move on to find others who need you. (*Proudly.*) And *I* am to go with you.

FRANCIS. YOU! YOU!

LEONE. I was afraid you'd have this reaction.

FRANCIS. You're only a boy! Wet behind the ears.

LEONE. I'm as old as you were when you were called.

FRANCIS. You can't be, still living at home with your parents.

LEONE. You were living at home with *your* parents. It's no reason to refuse me.

FRANCIS. But I had no choice. God spoke to me. I had to obey.

LEONE. He's spoken to me, too. That's what I'm telling you!

FRANCIS. You're not even a priest!

LEONE. Neither were you when you began, Brother Francis. Have you forgotten?

FRANCIS (*angered, he shakes his broom at LEONE*). Now just one minute, young man. What's going on here? How do you know so much about me?

LEONE. Your fame has spread far from Assisi, even to small towns like this. And the rest God told me.

FRANCIS. So you want to be famous? That's it! You want people to say, "Here comes the man from Assisi and his followers." "Aren't they weird?" "Aren't they strange?" "Just look at them."

LEONE. No, I want to come with you, and if I prove worthy, become one of your Brothers and do the Lord's work. You said I had earned your everlasting thanks.

FRANCIS. And so you have, dear boy. I'm touched by your offer to join me. And I must appear ungrateful when I say you can't accompany me. Yet I must.

LEONE. You couldn't possibly refuse the Lord. Not you, Brother Francis. *(He's on the verge of tears.)*

FRANCIS. Come over here, son. You're right. This is much more important than a well-swept floor. *(He puts his broom aside and places his arm around LEONE's shoulder, comforting him.)* You must understand that you're needed here, to keep *this* church open and to keep *this* congregation coming, day after day, week after week. That's how you can help me.

LEONE. Others can do that. Now that you have showed them how.

FRANCIS. But you don't know what you ask. Just look at you, in your fine suit with gold buttons.

LEONE. The tailor will take it back. I know him. *(He unbuttons and removes his jacket, stripping as fast as he can.)*

FRANCIS. You'd be embarrassed to go about dressed as I am.

LEONE. No, I wouldn't. I'll hold my head high, just as you do.

FRANCIS. My robe is patched on the inside as well as the outside. All over.

LEONE. So is mine. *(He takes a similar robe from the bundle and quickly puts it on, removing his trousers at the same*

time.) And with this piece of string as a belt, I must look the way you did twenty years ago when you left home. (*He ties the string that had bound the candles around his waist and stands before FRANCIS.*)

FRANCIS. Amazing! My youthful mirror.

LEONE. And what do you see when you look at me?

FRANCIS. A young man, well fed, well supported by his parents, well respected by his friends, well adjusted to his world...a young man who deserves to remain so.

LEONE. Not at all. Look again. Before you stands a young man ready to give up his past for a life of poverty, to serve God by serving the poor, as a beggar...

FRANCIS. You don't know what it is to beg.

LEONE. Don't I? Then how did I get these candles? This altar has not been graced with candles since before I was born. Now look at them. Aren't they beautiful? (*Placing the last of them.*) God told me to get them, just as He once told you.

FRANCIS. What do you mean? He once told me?

LEONE. The first time you ever begged it was for candles to light a church.

FRANCIS. You know that? I've never told that to anyone. Did God really speak to you, Leone?

LEONE (*imitating the way FRANCIS stated this earlier*). Have I ever lied to you, Brother Francis?

FRANCIS. Of course not. I'm ashamed to have doubted you, my boy. Forgive me.

LEONE. Now will you let me accompany you?

FRANCIS. My life's not always so easy as it's been here. Sometimes my brothers and I are stoned, driven off like thieves. Sometimes laughed at and called fools. Sometimes locked up in an asylum. Leone, there are those who think we're crazy.

LEONE. It doesn't matter. I don't care. I'll go where you go, and if it happens, I will suffer your pain. Gladly. And, also, like today, share your joy. Do whatever I must to make your message known far and wide.

FRANCIS. Not *my* message. I have no message but to obey God's command, fully, strictly, purely.

LEONE (*kneeling before him*). That's all I ask. Please, Brother Francis. I'll give my best.

FRANCIS. All you ask? *All*, you understand, is nothing. My brothers and I have nothing and want nothing, nothing but hard work. We seek nothing except that we give to the poor. Keep nothing but the patches which cover our patches. We possess nothing but the peace of God. That's our *all*, our nothing that becomes our everything.

LEONE. You play with words. Remember I'm a village boy with much to learn.

FRANCIS. As I was a cloth merchant's son who learned from bolts of brocades and embroidery.

LEONE. What did they teach you?

FRANCIS. Vanity, pride and all the other deadly sins. Until one day when I was almost lost forever, God spoke to me.

LEONE. Just as He has spoken to me.

FRANCIS. Yes, I'm convinced He has. Then say farewell to your village and bid good-bye to your church. We'll set out as soon as the service ends. (*Shaking his hand.*) Welcome!

LEONE. Thank you, Brother Francis, thank you.

FRANCIS. God must have a special job for us. Did He give you any indication what it might be?

LEONE. Just to go with you. Nothing more.

FRANCIS. Clearly He thinks I need help. So, it must be something significant. (*Bells ring in the tower of the church. And soon murmuring voices can be heard approaching.*)

LEONE. Listen, the people are coming to worship. To claim this church as their own.

FRANCIS. Leone, let's open the doors and welcome them. But, first, take a look at your work and be grateful.

LEONE (*turning toward the altar*). I am. (*Bows.*)

FRANCIS. Thank you, Leone. Thank you, God. (*Bows. Then he picks up the broom and takes it to the altar.*)

LEONE. What are you doing, Brother Francis? It's too late to sweep the altar. They're here.

FRANCIS. Giving them the only thing I have. In honor of this great moment. (*Kisses the broom and stands it upright on the altar.*)

LEONE. Look, it's your statue. The people will know it comes from you and will think of you, always.

FRANCIS. Use it in good faith, my brethren. And pray for me and Leone as we seek our new assignment. (*Bowing, they back away from the altar, then turn and run down the aisle towards the doors and the gathering congregation. As the bells continue to ring louder and louder, the lights fade, leaving only the broom illuminated like a statue. After a few seconds, it, too, disappears into the darkness.*)

SCENE TWO

SCENE: *A road through the hilly countryside, outside the small town of Greccio, Italy. A cold, dark night. In the silence, we hear occasional "baas" from the sheep occupying these slopes.*

AT RISE: *BROTHER FRANCIS and LEONE emerge out of the inky darkness, clearly not certain of their way. They pause, looking about.*

LEONE. Brother, the road divides just ahead. Which direction shall we take?

FRANCIS. Let's go where we're needed most. (*Pauses to consider.*) What do you think? Left or right?

LEONE. Among the shepherds of these hills, both left *and* right, I suspect.

FRANCIS. Be patient. Something will tell us. You'll see.

LEONE. When I'm with you I don't doubt we'll find our way. But it's quiet now...(*Shivers*)...and cold...

FRANCIS. Cold, Leone?

LEONE (*quickly changing his tune*). Not me, of course. No, no, no! I'm not complaining...not for a minute. How can I, when you wear no sandals at all? Forgive me.

FRANCIS. I simply tell my feet they're warm and they believe me.

LEONE. Mine are harder to convince. Even in sandals.

FRANCIS. Just walk like the animals. It's simple.

LEONE. But, Brother, animals have hooves to protect them.

FRANCIS. And I have the skin and bones God gave me. That's enough.

LEONE. You'll catch cold, my friend.

FRANCIS. Do sheep sneeze? Do cows cough? Neither do I.

LEONE. I gladly follow you throughout all of Italy and beyond, dear Brother, but, thus far, I must keep my sandals on.

FRANCIS. And so you should...until your feet feel God's warmth.

LEONE (*shivering again*). Well, that doesn't seem likely on this December night.

FRANCIS. Don't be too certain. God may amaze you. He constantly astounds me.

LEONE. Has He told you which way to go? (*Points to the two roads ahead.*)

FRANCIS. He will. He will. Be patient. *(At this point, a small rock is thrown at them. It misses but nonetheless takes them by surprise.)*

LEONE. What was that?

FRANCIS. A stone. *(Picking it up.)* From over there.

LEONE *(covering FRANCIS)*. I'll stand in front of you, Brother.

FRANCIS. Why should you?

LEONE. Let them strike me.

FRANCIS. I'm used to withstanding stones, my friend.

LEONE *(looking about)*. I don't see anyone.

FRANCIS. Someone must be here. *(Another stone is thrown.)*
Watch out! *(Stands aside to miss it.)*

LEONE. Brother, I think we should run.

FRANCIS *(calling out)*. Who's there?

LEONE. I don't want to know.

FRANCIS. Friend or foe?

LEONE. It's a strange friend who pummels us with stones.

FRANCIS. If I have an enemy in these hills, I want to face him. *(Calling.)* Step forward, whoever you are.

(From out of the shadows appears a SHEPHERD.)

FRANCIS. Why do you want to harm us?

SHEPHERD. You'll not steal my sheep. *(Lifts his arm to throw another stone.)*

FRANCIS. Do we look like thieves?

SHEPHERD. Who else would come this way? At this time of night?

LEONE. We're friars, bringing peace to the countryside.

FRANCIS. This is my friend Leone; we mean no harm.

SHEPHERD. I'll protect my sheep, all the same. Thieves come in many disguises. *(Lifts arm again.)*

FRANCIS. Throw away your stones.

LEONE. Over there. (*Pointing.*) *Way* over there.

FRANCIS. And join us.

SHEPHERD. How do I know I can trust you?

LEONE. Recognize my brother and you will.

SHEPHERD. I can't see his face.

LEONE. My fellow friar is known as the French one because once long ago he learned a little French.

SHEPHERD. Francis? Brother Francis?

FRANCIS. Yes, you need no stones for us.

SHEPHERD (*now greatly concerned and apologetic*). I hope I didn't hurt you. My wife comes from Assisi and often speaks about you.

FRANCIS. She's not said I'm a thief, I hope.

SHEPHERD. She tells me you beg for bricks to repair the churches and for oil to light them.

FRANCIS. I beg for everything, my friend, and I steal nothing.

SHEPHERD. Surely you know it's dangerous to travel these roads at night.

FRANCIS. Now we do.

SHEPHERD. Forgive me, Brother Francis. I just wanted to frighten you.

LEONE. You succeeded.

SHEPHERD. To chase you away. Not harm you.

FRANCIS. We're quite all right, I assure you.

SHEPHERD. Why don't you stay here and continue your journey after sunrise? When it's safe.

FRANCIS. I want to find a church where we can celebrate Christmas. Is this the road to Greccio?

SHEPHERD. Yes, but you needn't hurry. Christmas is just another day there.

LEONE. Why is that?