

# The Nativity Scene

And the day of joy is coming, the time of exultation! Many friars from various parts have been summoned here for the occasion; rejoicing men and women arrive from the farmhouses of the region, each one bringing, according to his possibilities, candles and torches to illuminate that night, in which the star that illuminated all days and times lit up splendidly in the sky. Francis arrives at the end: he sees that everything is arranged according to his desire, and he is radiant with joy. Now the crib is arranged, the hay is placed in it and the ox and the donkey are introduced. In that moving scene, evangelical simplicity shines, poverty is praised, humility is recommended. Greccio has become like a new Bethlehem.

Thomas of Celano, *The Crib of Greccio*



## Who Is Happy in the Nativity Scene?

Let us look at the Nativity scene. Who is happy in the Nativity? I would like to ask you children, who love to look at the little figures ... and maybe even move them a bit, putting them in different places, angering your dad who arranged them with such care!

So, who is happy in the Nativity scene? Our Lady and Saint Joseph are full of joy: they look at the Child Jesus and they are

happy because, after a thousand worries, they have accepted this gift of God, with so much faith and so much love. They are “overflowing” with holiness and therefore with joy. And you will tell me: of course! They are Our Lady and Saint Joseph! Yes, but let us not think it was easy for them: saints are not born, they become thus, and this is true for them too.

Then, the shepherds are full of joy. The shepherds too are holy, certainly, because they responded to the announcement of the angels; they immediately rushed to the stable and they recognized the sign of the Child in the manger. It was not obvious. In particular, in Nativity displays there is often a young shepherd, who looks toward the scene with a dreamy, enchanted air: that shepherd expresses the astonished joy of those who welcome the mystery of Jesus with a child’s spirit. This is a trait of holiness: to preserve the capacity to be amazed, to wonder at the gifts of God, His “surprises,” and the greatest gift, the ever-new surprise, is Jesus. The great surprise is God!

Then, in some Nativities, the bigger ones, with so many characters, there are the trades: the cobbler, the water trapper, the blacksmith, the baker ... and so on and so forth. And everyone is happy. Why? Because they are “infected” by the joy of the event in which they participate, that is, the birth of Jesus. So their work is also sanctified by the presence of Jesus, by His coming among us....

So my wish is this: to be holy, to be happy. But not picture-postcard saints! Normal saints. Saints in flesh and blood, with our character, our faults, even our sins—let us ask for forgiveness and go ahead—but ready to let ourselves be “infected” by Jesus’ presence in our midst, ready to come to Him, like the shepherds, to see this Event, this incredible sign that God has given us. “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people” (Lk 2:10). Will we go see Him? Or will we be occupied with things?



## Saint Francis of Assisi, Who Invented the Nativity Scene

The enchanting image of the Christmas crèche, so dear to the Christian people, never ceases to arouse amazement and wonder. The depiction of Jesus' birth is itself a simple and joyful proclamation of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. The Nativity scene is like a living Gospel rising up from the pages of sacred Scripture. As we contemplate the Christmas story, we are invited to set out on a spiritual journey, drawn by the humility of the God who became man in order to encounter every man and woman. We come to realize that so great is his love for us that he became one of us, so that we in turn might become one with him.

I wish to encourage the beautiful family tradition of preparing the Nativity scene in the days before Christmas, but also the custom of setting it up in the workplace, in schools, hospitals, prisons, and town squares. Great imagination and creativity is always shown in employing the most diverse materials to create small masterpieces of beauty. As children, we learn from our parents and grandparents to carry on this joyful tradition, which encapsulates a wealth of popular piety. It is my hope that this custom will never be lost and that, wherever it has fallen into disuse, it can be rediscovered and revived.

The origin of the Christmas crèche is found above all in certain details of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, as related in the Gospels. The evangelist Luke says simply that Mary "gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (2:7). Because Jesus was laid in a manger, the Nativity scene is known in Italian as a *presepe*, from the Latin word *praesepium*, meaning "manger"....

But let us go back to the origins of the Christmas crèche so familiar to us. We need to imagine ourselves in the little Italian town of Greccio, near Rieti. Saint Francis stopped there, most likely on his way back from Rome, where on 29 November 1223 he had received the confirmation of his Rule from Pope Honorius III. Francis had earlier visited the Holy Land, and the caves in Greccio reminded him of the countryside of Bethlehem. It may also be that the “Poor Man of Assisi” had been struck by the mosaics in the Roman Basilica of Saint Mary Major depicting the birth of Jesus, close to the place where, according to an ancient tradition, the wooden panels of the manger are preserved.

The *Franciscan Sources* describe in detail what then took place in Greccio. Fifteen days before Christmas, Francis asked a local man named John to help him realize his desire “to bring to life the memory of that babe born in Bethlehem, to see as much as possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, and how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he was laid upon a bed of hay.” At this, his faithful friend went immediately to prepare all that the Saint had asked. On 25 December, friars came to Greccio from various parts, together with people from the farmsteads in the area, who brought flowers and torches to light up that holy night. When Francis arrived, he found a manger full of hay, an ox and a donkey. All those present experienced a new and indescribable joy in the presence of the Christmas scene. The priest then solemnly celebrated the Eucharist over the manger, showing the bond between the Incarnation of the Son of God and the Eucharist. At Greccio there were no statues; the Nativity scene was enacted and experienced by all who were present.

This is how our tradition began: with everyone gathered in joy around the cave, with no distance between the original event and those sharing in its mystery.

Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of Saint Francis, notes that this simple and moving scene was accompanied by the gift

of a marvelous vision: one of those present saw the Baby Jesus himself lying in the manger. From the Nativity scene of that Christmas in 1223, “everyone went home with joy.”

With the simplicity of that sign, Saint Francis carried out a great work of evangelization. His teaching touched the hearts of Christians and continues today to offer a simple yet authentic means of portraying the beauty of our faith. Indeed, the place where this first Nativity scene was enacted expresses and evokes these sentiments. Greccio has become a refuge for the soul, a mountain fastness wrapped in silence...

Setting up the Christmas crèche in our homes helps us to relive the history of what took place in Bethlehem. Naturally, the Gospels remain our source for understanding and reflecting on that event. At the same time, its portrayal in the crèche helps us to imagine the scene. It touches our hearts and makes us enter into salvation history as contemporaries of an event that is living and real in a broad gamut of historical and cultural contexts.

In a particular way, 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 greatest need (cf. Mt 25:31-46)....

Standing before the Christmas crèche, we are reminded of the time when we were children, eagerly waiting to set it up. These memories make us all the more conscious of the precious gift received from those who passed on the faith to us. At the same time, they remind us of our duty to share this same experience with our children and our grandchildren. It does not matter how the Nativity scene is arranged: it can always be the same or it can change from year to year. What matters is that it speaks to our lives. Wherever it is, and whatever form it takes, the Christmas

crèche speaks to us of the love of God, the God who became a child in order to make us know how close he is to every man, woman, and child, regardless of their condition.



## The Nativity Scene Is Like a Living Gospel

It will be Christmas in one week. During these days as we rush to prepare for the feast day we can ask ourselves: “How am I preparing for the Birth of the celebrated One?” A simple, yet effective way to prepare oneself is to *set up a Nativity scene...*

Indeed, the Nativity scene is “like a living Gospel” (Apostolic Letter *Admirabile Signum*, n. 1). It brings the Gospel to the places where people live: in homes, schools, work and meeting places, hospitals, retirement homes, prisons, and in the squares. And in those places where we live, it reminds us of an essential thing: that God did not remain invisible in Heaven, but rather came to earth, became man, a child. To make a Nativity scene is to *celebrate God’s closeness*. God has always been close to his people but when he became incarnate and was born, he was very close, extremely close. To make a Nativity scene is to celebrate God’s closeness; to rediscover that God is real, concrete, alive and vibrant. God is not a distant lord or a detached judge but rather humble Love that descended upon us. The Child in the Nativity scene transmits his tenderness to us. Some small figurines portray the “*Bambinello*” with open arms to tell us that God came to embrace our humanity. It is beautiful then to stand before the Nativity scene and to confide our lives to the Lord, to speak to him of the people and situations that we have in our heart, to take stock with him of the year that is ending, to share our expectations and apprehensions.

We can see Mary and Joseph beside Jesus. We can guess the thoughts and feelings they had as the Babe was being born in

poverty: joy but also dismay. And we can also invite the Holy Family into our homes where there are joys and worries, where we wake up each day, we eat and sleep close to the people who are dearest to us. The Nativity scene is a “*domestic Gospel*.” The word “*presepe*” (Nativity scene in Italian) literally means “manger” whereas Bethlehem, the town of the Nativity scene, means “house of bread.” Manger and house of bread: the Nativity scene we set up at home where we share food and affection reminds us that Jesus is the nourishment, the bread of life (cf. Jn 6:34). He is the One who sustains our love. He is the One who gives our families the strength to carry on and forgive one another.

The Nativity scene offers us another life lesson. In today’s at times frenetic pace, it is *an invitation to contemplation*. It reminds us of the importance of pausing. Because only when we know how to recollect ourselves can we welcome what truly matters in life. Only if we leave the din of the world outside our home can we open ourselves to listen to God who speaks in silence...

The Nativity scene is more timely now than ever, when every day, throughout the world, so many weapons and violent images that penetrate our eyes and hearts are being produced. The Nativity scene instead is an *artisanal image of peace*. This is why it is a living Gospel...

I hope that setting up the Nativity scene will be for you all an opportunity to invite Jesus into your lives. When we make the Nativity scene at home it is like opening a door and saying: “Come in, Jesus!” It is making this closeness concrete, this invitation to Jesus to come into our lives. Because if he abides in our lives, life is reborn. And if life is reborn, it is truly Christmas.