

The Christmas Crèche

A Franciscan Tradition

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In the Nativity scene at my childhood home, Jesus was a fixture—and not just metaphorically. He was of a piece with the plaster straw-filled crib he rested in, and securely fastened to the middle of the little wooden shack that sheltered him. Setting up the Nativity scene was a three-part process: (1) remove from box; (2) blow off dust; (3) put it somewhere.

The first time I saw a Fontanini Nativity set, I was dumbfounded. All those beautiful (and expensive) pieces! There were the old standbys I knew well—Mary, Joseph, Jesus, a few shepherds, a handful of farm animals—but also a cast of characters new to me. There were villagers and angels and the three kings, and more and more. I remember scouring my illustrated Bible to find mention of some of these more obscure characters—did the Magi really have servants?—and having little success. I started looking for the crèche at friends' homes. Each was different. Why were some plain white porcelain and others multicolored plastic? Why were some so sparsely populated while others had a cast of dozens?

I found that my friends' thoughts on the Nativity scene were as diverse as the items themselves. Some put out the Nativity scene and held off on all other holiday decorations until Christmas Eve. Some set up the crèche but withheld the baby Jesus until Christmas Day. One family even had a tradition of moving the pieces around the house. Jesus would start out on a windowsill and end up in the crib Christmas morning, while the long-traveling wise men would hide out on the back porch until they showed up on Epiphany.

In any Nativity scene there are some non-negotiable characters. And whether he waits in his crib from the first day of Advent or shows up with the gifts Santa leaves, the star of the show is Jesus.



In the Beginning

This will be a sign for you; you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

—Luke 2:12

Most Americans are more familiar with this passage from repeated viewings of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* than from having read it for themselves in Scripture.

We take for granted the details of the Christmas story. But it appears in only two of the four Gospels. And those two stories differ quite a bit from one another.

For Matthew, the details explain how this child fulfills the words of the ancient Hebrew prophets. Only Matthew tells us of the mysterious visitors from the East.

For Luke, who emphasizes the way Jesus reached out to the poor and the oppressed, it was important to show that this birth took place in humble and difficult circumstances and that shepherds, ordinarily outside the accepted norms of society, were the first to witness the glorious event.

We happily blend all of these details in our nativity sets, and then add ordinary villagers drawn from the world of Jesus's parables or the various cultures that have celebrated the birth of Jesus through the centuries.

earthly father? To spend his first night on a bed of straw? The miracle of birth is too much for any of us to pretend to understand, but the miracle of this birth was on a different scale altogether. Mary did well to ponder these things in her heart.

If Mary had to contend with society's negative impression, Joseph may have had an even rougher road. Under the law of the time, Joseph had a couple of honorable ways to deal with the discovery of Mary's pregnancy. He could publicly denounce her and have her stoned, or he could quietly dissolve their betrothal and leave her to whatever consequences might befall her. Marrying her anyway was not one of these honorable options.

Because the Gospels describe Joseph as a "just" man, we know that doing the right thing was important to him. Because he favored the latter of the two honorable options, we might infer that he was also a kind man, or a man very much in love who wanted no harm to come to Mary, no matter what she had done.

The Holy Family reminds us that all families have in common the impossible, and impossibly sweet, burden of shared life.

The Holy Family

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

—Luke 2:6–7

I can relate to the image of Mary bent over her infant son in the Christmas crèche, marveling at this new life. But unlike that most perfect of mothers, I can well imagine what would fill my thoughts if I knew that my first moments with my eldest would be forever memorialized in the same way. *Unmarried and pregnant? What will people think? You put your newborn child in what? With all of those smelly animals around? What kind of mother are you?*

Surely, if any mother was "good enough," Mary must have known herself worthy of that label. But to be the mother of such a Son? And what was good enough for that child? To be born without an

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