

## The Christmas Crib Tradition

Pina Ford



St Francis of Assisi is credited with initiating the tradition of the Christmas crib. In 1223 he visited the Holy Land and was moved by his experience of Bethlehem's nativity cave. When he returned to the Italian village of Greccio he wanted to celebrate Christmas in a way that would touch people's hearts with a deeper understanding of the mystery of Christ's birth.

The Church's celebration of Christmas began in the fourth century, about the time that the theology of the Incarnation, the divinity and humanity of Jesus, was clarified at the Council of Nicea (325 AD). Francis himself had a special devotion to the feast of Jesus' birth. Having chosen abject poverty, he keenly understood the God who had humbled himself not only by his death on the Cross but also in his birth as a little child in a stable. "I wish to recall," he told his friend John Vellita, "the memory of the little child who was born in Bethlehem. I want to set before our bodily eyes the hardships of his infant needs." (MacGregor, 2000, p.49)

Francis secured permission from the Pope for his celebration signalling his solemn goal. On Christmas Eve, in a natural grotto on a hillside outside the village, Francis created a living nativity scene to accompany midnight Mass:

Then he prepared a manger, and brought hay, and an ox and an ass to the place appointed. The brethren were summoned, the people ran together, the forest resounded with their voices, and that venerable night was made glorious by many and brilliant lights... The man of God stood before the manger, full of devotion and piety... The Holy Gospel was chanted by Francis... Then he preached to the people around the nativity of the poor King... the Babe of Bethlehem. (MacGregor, 2000, p.49)

The worshippers were thrilled and moved. The simple, evocative scene, with its earthy sights, sounds and smells, enabled them to experience Bethlehem. The experience of one person, who is said to have seen the figure of Jesus moving in the manger as though Francis were awakening him, speaks of the extent to which Christ was reawakened in the hearts of those present. Abstract theology was made concrete and accessible regardless of levels of belief, education and age. He created, as John Paul II said in his Letter to Artists (1999), "a bridge to religious experience". As Neil MacGregor has said, "The high mystery of the Incarnation becomes, in Francis's Christmas crib, the easily comprehensible but utterly astonishing moment when, quite simply, God becomes a baby." (2000, p.52)

St Francis' success inspired others and the tradition of the Christmas crib spread throughout the Christian world. Within a hundred years of his death, virtually every church in Italy displayed a nativity scene at Christmas. Living scenes were generally replaced by static ones and they varied from the most simple to exceedingly elaborate affairs filled with numerous figures on intricate landscapes. In some instances local characters and events merged with the biblical ones, placing the Christmas events within the events of the daily life of every season.

Nativity cribs continue to be displayed around the world in churches, homes and public places, including St Peter's Square where children also bring their own mangers to be blessed. One can even interpret the occasional challenge to the public display of nativity cribs as an affirmation of their meaningfulness. Amongst the trivial images of bells, sleighs, snow and Santas, the crib remains a distinctive and unequivocal Christian image inspired, however liberally, by the birth narratives of the Gospels.

St Francis' crib not only created a tradition still observed nearly 800 Christmases later, it also influenced the way artists portrayed the Incarnation. The fourteenth century fresco depicting Francis' nativity in the grotto at Greccio shows the direction this would take: Mary holds a nursing infant needing the nourishment of her milk, rather than a miniature King of Kings. Artists began depicting Jesus as a naked baby boy, his human vulnerability exposed, even while they employed techniques, like the subtle use of light illuminating his body or radiating from his face, for example, to image his divinity (see amongst many examples, *The Nativity at Night* by Geertgen Tot Sint Jans, 1490).

A newborn child not only needs love and care, but offers his love indiscriminately in return and is disarmingly approachable. Children's fascination for the Christmas story and especially for baby Jesus shows how easily they understand this. At the heart of Francis' simple crib was a humble God who readily revealed himself to the little ones of this world. The lowly shepherds were increasingly depicted in the nativity cast, reclaiming their scriptural role alongside the Wise Men who had long held the spotlight. Rembrandt's famous *Adoration of the Shepherds* (1646) shows the power of the humble presence of the shepherds in the nativity scene.

The dynamism in the way the nativity has been imaged in Christian history is what one would expect from a story whose central message is that "the Word became flesh and lived among us." (John 1:14). Francis' crib tradition is one important way in which this truth has been appropriated and brought to life. By helping to make Jesus' birth more real it has shown that all can participate in the mystery of salvation by welcoming and loving the vulnerable child and allowing themselves to be loved by him.

Watching young children with a nativity crib reveals how readily they enter into its drama: identifying with different persons or animals, curious about certain details, providing explanations from their own experience or quietly musing when something touches them that they do not fully understand. Children, like the child within all of us, engage the nativity with the heart's sure knowledge that we don't need to go far to attend Jesus' birth: "Bethlehem is where we live. The stable is in our town, Christ is being born now, here, and we should pay attention." (MacGregor, 2000, p.59)

## References

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