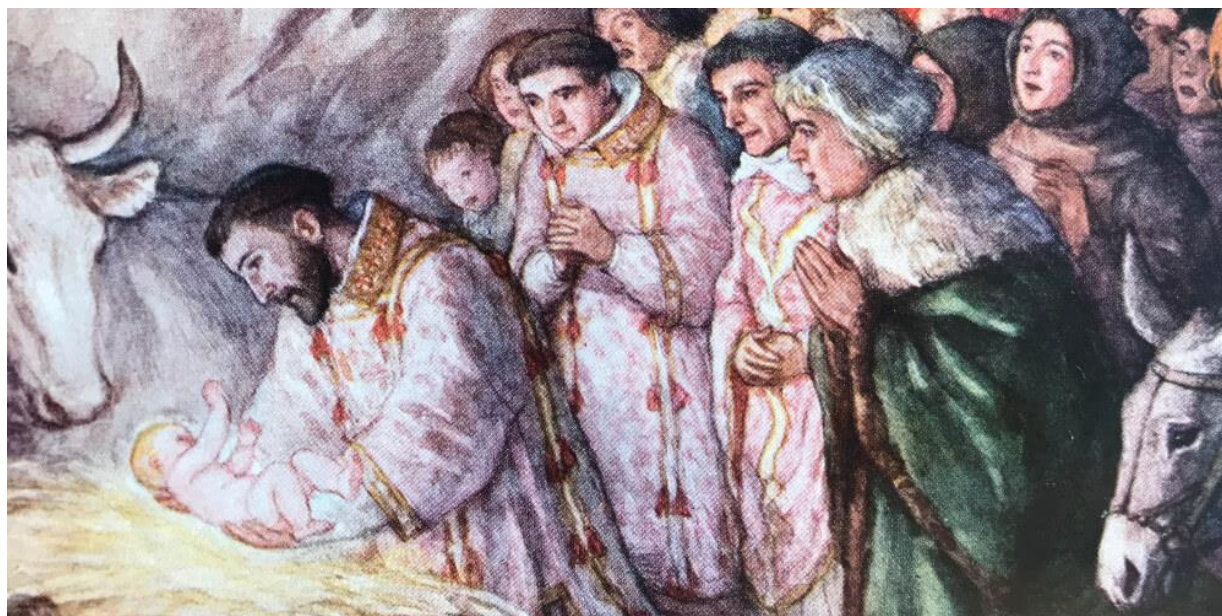


# 800 YEARS OF THE CHRISTMAS CRIB

1223-2023



2023 marks the 800 anniversary of the first nativity crib, created by St. Francis of Assisi in Greccio, Italy. In 1223, wanting to emphasize the humble circumstances of Jesus's birth and to inspire the local people to more deeply appreciate the Christmas story, St. Francis set up a live Nativity scene in a cave in the quaint Italian village of Greccio. The scene, also called a *crèche*, included live animals and a hay-filled manger to recreate the birth of Jesus as described in the Gospels.

St. Francis' meditations on the life of Christ led him to create the first-ever Nativity scene in Greccio, Italy, in 1223. It is believed Francis' inspiration to create a live representation of the birth of Jesus came from his time in the Holy Land in the years 1219 and 1220. Seeing the holy sites of Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection made them feel all the more real — and he wanted to recreate that experience. In November 1223, three years before his death, St. Francis was in Rome to await the pope's approval of the final rule of his friars. The friar and deacon was already very familiar with the hilltown of Greccio, about 50 miles north of Rome. He had first arrived there over a decade prior and would frequently return to preach to the people of the surrounding countryside. Eventually, a hermitage was built for St. Francis a short distance outside the town.

Ahead of his return to the hermitage, two weeks before Christmas, in 1223, St. Francis called on his friend John (Messier Giovanni) Velitta, a holy man held in high esteem. St. Francis said to him, "If you desire that we should celebrate this year's Christmas together at Greccio, go quickly and prepare what I tell you; for I want to enact the

memory of the Infant who was born at Bethlehem and how He was bedded in the



manger on hay between a donkey and an ox. I want to see all of this with my own eyes.”

The good and faithful man departed quickly and prepared everything that the Saint had told him. The Friars who had come from many communities, gathered around St. Francis as did the men and women of the neighbourhood. They bought candles and torches to brighten the night.

St. Francis arrived and saw that everything had been prepared. The crib was ready, hay was brought, the ox and the donkey were led to the spot. Greccio became a new Bethlehem.

St. Francis, dressed in deacon's vestments, (out of humility he never attempted to become a priest) sang the Gospel. Then he preached a delightful sermon to the people. It is recorded that after the Mass, St. Francis went to the crib and stretched out his arms as though the Holy Child was there, and brought into being by the intensity of his devotion, the Infant Jesus appeared and the empty manger was filled with the radiance of the new born King.



# THE CHRISTMAS CRIB

## **Where does the term "crib" come from?**

The word "crib" means "manger" and refers directly to a text in the Bible which states that Jesus, at his birth, was laid in a manger by his mother, Mary. Because of the unusual nature of this birthplace, we still use it today to refer to a place where babies and young children are welcomed. The Bible also mentions shepherds and magi from far away bringing gifts.

## **What is the symbolism of the crib?**

The crib is a symbol of poverty, as Mary and Joseph sought refuge in an inn and found no place to stay, so they found a stable for shelter. It is also a prophetic symbol of Jesus being given as food for humanity. The crib depicts the birth of Jesus and also recalls the wonder and joy of welcoming a newborn child.

## **Where do nativity scenes in houses come from?**

The French Revolution was the origin of nativity scenes in homes. During this period, access to churches was difficult, so Catholics decided to invent domestic nativity scenes to celebrate Christmas at home.

## **Who created the Christmas crib?**

According to tradition, it was Saint Francis of Assisi who organised the first living crib in a grotto reminding him of the one he had seen in Bethlehem. This crib was created in Greccio, during the night of Christmas 1223. Later, under the influence of the Franciscans, the custom of living nativity scenes gradually spread throughout Europe. Wooden and earthen nativity scenes were gradually made. It was in the 16th century that miniature nativity scenes appeared in churches and convents. Later, they also appeared in homes as an element of decoration and prayer.

## **Why decorate your home with a crib?**

Decorating the home with candles, having meals with the whole family together, are all part of different traditions. The nativity scene, celebrating the birth of the baby Jesus, and thus the promise of a new era, joins this symbolism. The nativity scene allows families to bring in something that illustrates and dramatizes the arrival of Jesus and the hope of a new beginning. It also supports the Christian belief in this very important event in tradition and the Bible.

## **Who are the characters in the nativity scene?**

### **The baby Jesus**

The baby Jesus is the main character of the crib because it is organised around his birth. He is usually depicted in a manger, swaddled or naked.

### **Joseph and Mary**

Joseph and Mary are the two parents of Jesus and are therefore the main elements of the crib. They are depicted with a benevolent gaze on Jesus, Mary kneeling beside her son and Joseph standing with a staff in his hand.

### **The donkey and the ox**

The donkey and the ox also have an important place. The donkey having carried Mary to Bethlehem and the ox warming Jesus with its breath.

### **The Three Wise Men**

The Three Wise Men, Melchior, Gaspard and Balthazar, have come from far and wide to witness this event, guided by the shepherd's star. They bring gifts such as myrrh, incense and gold.

### **The shepherds and their sheep**

The nativity scenes also feature shepherds with their sheep, who were the first to know about Jesus' birth in the stable.

### **The Angel**

An angel is also often present in the crib, reminding us of the divine presence.

### **How should the figures be arranged in the crib?**

According to tradition, Mary is usually placed on the side of the donkey and Joseph on the side of the ox. The space between these two figures is reserved for the manger in which the baby Jesus will be placed from 25 December onwards: the moment of Jesus' birth. Mary is placed on the side of the donkey because it reminds us of her arrival in Bethlehem on the back of a donkey. It is also on the back of this same donkey that she will be able to flee to Egypt on the Way of the Holy Family.

The three Wise Men are placed far from the crib when it is set up; they will be brought closer together as the days go by to symbolise their journey. They will end up at the bedside of the newborn child at the time of the Epiphany.

(source: [www.palaisdurosaire.com](http://www.palaisdurosaire.com) and [www.catholicdoors.com](http://www.catholicdoors.com))

## Blessing of Nativity Scene

God of every nation and people, from the very beginning of creation you have made manifest your love: when our need for a Saviour was great you sent your Son to be born of the Virgin Mary.

To our lives he brings joy and peace, justice, mercy and love.

Lord, bless all who look upon this manger; may it remind us of the humble birth of Jesus, and raise up our thoughts to him, who is God-with-us and Saviour of all, and who lives and reigns for ever and ever. **Amen.**

## Blessing of Nativity Scene

God of Mary and Joseph,  
of shepherds and animals,  
bless us whenever we gaze on this manger scene.

Through all the days of Christmas  
may these figures tell the story  
of how humans, angels, and animals  
found the Christ in this poor place.  
Fill our house with hospitality, joy, gentleness,  
and thanksgiving,  
and guide our steps in the way of peace.  
Grant this through Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**