



The First Christmas Crèche

Did you know that the Christmas custom of displaying figures depicting the birth of Jesus, owes its origin to St. Francis of Assisi over 800 years ago?

You see, Francis had a special devotion to the Child Jesus. This devotion inspired him to create the first Nativity scene (or Christmas crèche) on Christmas Eve in 1223. It is believed that the idea first struck St. Francis on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land after he visited the original birthplace of Christ at the humble stable in the town of Bethlehem.

So, within a cave in the medieval town of Greccio, Italy, Francis decided to stage that scene of Christ's birth. There he set up an empty manger. The animals' feeding trough became Jesus' crib, with hay and a live ox and donkey, just as it was believed to have happened on that first Christmas night.

Through these visual aids, he wanted to deeply impress into everyone's hearts and minds exactly how Christ came into our world in true poverty, humility, and simplicity.

*Francis then organized a special ceremony and Mass to mark this solemn night, and invited his fellow friars and the villagers to come and gaze upon the holy scene, while he preached about "the babe of Bethlehem." Witnesses among the gathered crowd reported that Francis included a carved infant figure that **"miraculously seemed to be awakened from slumber when the blessed Father Francis lovingly lifted and embraced Him in both arms."***

The Nativity scene's popularity took off from there. Soon every church in Italy had its own Nativity scene. The devotion then spread throughout Europe, to private homes, and into modern times, so much so that it's now impossible to imagine Christmas without a Nativity scene to behold, even in secular public spaces!

Hopefully, this retelling of the first nativity scene will inspire you to see your nativity set with new eyes and devotion, as was St. Francis' intention some 800 years ago.