

The Origin of the Nativity

At some point in our childhood, many of us would have donned a blue shawl or a fake beard and acted out the Nativity Scene along with our Sunday School companions in front of our doting parents and grandparents as they sang appropriate Carols.

But when did this tradition begin?

It was a creation of St. Francis of Assisi who had a special devotion to the Child Jesus, and he put together the first nativity scene on Christmas Eve of 1223 AD.

It is stated that St. Francis was first inspired by this idea after visiting the historical place of Jesus' birth while on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land - the humble stable in a Bethlehem cave. It is likely that this event deepened his devotion to the Child Jesus, who was born into the world in such **Poverty, Humility, and Simplicity**. In fact, St. Francis founded his new religious Order to imitate these very virtues.

The First Nativity Scene

St. Francis recreated the scene of Jesus' birth in a special ritual and Mass he held inside of a cave in Greccio, Italy, inviting both his fellow friars and the town's people to join in the celebration. Later he told a friend why he desired to create the first nativity scene in his town:

"I want to do something that will recall the memory of that Child who was born in Bethlehem, to see with bodily eyes the inconveniences of his infancy, how he lay in the manger, and how the ox and ass stood by."

He set up an empty manger (the feeding trough of farm animals which served as Jesus' crib) inside a cave, and even included a live ox and a donkey beside the manger just as it was believed to have happened on that first Christmas night. Through these visual aids he wanted to influence everyone more deeply into their understanding how Jesus came into the world in such poverty and simplicity.

It is also recorded that St. Francis - who was radically devoted to the virtue of evangelical poverty - was inspired to recreate the original nativity scene to overcome the rampant **greed and materialism prevalent** at that time in Italy.

What a beautiful scene! Each time we meet at our churches for a nativity pageant or live nativity scene, or around a nativity decoration for a time of prayer, we are participating in a centuries old Christian tradition.

St. Bonaventure, a contemporary of St. Francis, in a address about St. Francis of Assisi's personal devotion to the Baby Jesus that sparked this event had said:

"This man of God (St. Francis) stood before the manger, full of devotion and piety, bathed in tears and radiant with joy; the Holy Gospel was chanted by Francis, the Levite of Christ. Then he preached to the people around the nativity of the poor King; and being unable to utter His name for the tenderness of His love, He called Him the Babe of Bethlehem."

The Spread of The Devotion

St. Francis' recreation of that First Christmas night became so popular that soon every church in Italy had its own Nativity Scene. The devotion also spread to private homes, and today we even see it secular institutions, so much so that it's now impossible to imagine Christmas without a Nativity Scene to behold.

Hopefully this story of the first nativity scene will inspire you to see your nativity set in a much more meaningful way than just as a pretty Christmas decoration. It is a historic Christian Tradition and a tool for **meditation on the humility, simplicity, and poverty of Jesus Christ**; a form that He took from the moment of His Incarnation out of His boundless love for His lost sheep – you and I.

Nativity sets also make great Christmas gifts and have become a treasured family heirlooms. They spread religious devotion, and encourage families and friends to have an authentic and prayerful devotion to the **Holy Family**, the **Child Jesus**, and contemplate on the **Mystery of the Incarnation**.



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