

Catholic 101

The Manger Scene

Some call it a Manger Scene; others call it by the French word Crèche, still others a Nativity Set. They are made out of clay and porcelain, and wood, even rubber duckies. Some families have sets that have dozens and dozens of pieces, all kinds of animals and angels; and some people's Manger Scenes are just baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Whatever you call it and no matter how big or small it is, they all do the same thing, bring us right back to the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. The first Manger Scene was set up in 1224 with real live people and animals. It was the idea of St. Francis of Assisi. He wanted to create a "living" recreation of the birth of Jesus. He thought it would be a good way to bring the Christmas spirit to the villagers; something fun and devotional at the same time. It is said he got the inspiration one night when he was on his way to a little Italian town named Greccio, it was dark, but the moon was very bright, and he saw shepherds watching their flocks and it made him think of the Christmas story. As it got closer to Christmas, St. Francis got some people together to play the roles of Mary and Joseph, and shepherds, angels, wise men, and live animals. One of the friars made first century costumes and set up the scene outside a cave on the out skirts of the town of Greccio. But they didn't use a real live baby for the role of the infant baby Jesus, they made a life sized wax figure of a baby instead; Francis didn't think it was safe to use a real baby because their lives in the 13th century were so precarious. On Christmas Eve, families traveled from all over the country side (mind you this was back in the days when vigil masses for Christmas were not allowed) to see the spectacle that everybody had been talking about. When everyone was there, St. Francis got very excited and urged the people to rejoice and sing hymns. He urged the people to really think about what it meant for God to become one of us, to really appreciate what the incarnation meant, that because of the birth of Christ, God is in our flesh and dwelling with us in the world forever, and can be seen even in the poor, the sick and the elderly. He urged the people to remove hatred from their hearts and embrace all people as they would the Christ child. After that first event, the "presepio" as it was called in Italian became very famous and popular, other towns held their events around the Manger Scene. Eventually the live version was fashioned into art. People made, or had made, Nativities of their own for their homes. For some cultures, for example South America, the Manger Scene, not the Christmas tree is the primary Christmas decoration. Whatever it is made of, no matter how grand or humble, it has become a beloved symbol of Christmas that reminds us that God chose to come to us in the humblest way imaginable, born to a peasant girl, in a borrowed barn, and laid in an animal food trough. The idea of St. Francis always takes us back to that holy night.