

Salesian Missions

Trading under the name of
Salesians of Don Bosco
Box 3209 North Riding 2162
66 Nelson Road Booyens
Johannesburg 2091
Tel: 27 (0) 11 476 8315
missionoffice@bucknet.co.za
www.salesianmissions.co.za

SALESIAN SPOTLIGHT

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May the Peace and Love of the Christ child and His Mother be with you all this Christmas and in the year ahead. May you rest in the deep assurance that in knowing Him, you have everything. Happy Christmas. From Salesian Missions



APOSTOLIC LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER POPE FRANCIS ON THE MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF THE NATIVITY SCENE

“The enchanting image of the Christmas crèche, so dear to the Christian people, never ceases to arouse amazement and wonder. The depiction of Jesus’ birth is itself a simple and joyful proclamation of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. The nativity scene is like a living Gospel rising up from the pages of sacred Scripture. As we contemplate the Christmas story, we are invited to set out on a spiritual journey, drawn by the humility of the God who became man in order to encounter every man and woman. We come to realize that so great is his love for us that he became one of us, so that we in turn might become one with him.

The origin of the Christmas crèche is found above all in certain details of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, as related in the Gospels. The evangelist Luke says simply that Mary “gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (2:7). Because Jesus was laid in a manger, the nativity scene is known in Italian as a presepe, from the Latin word praesepe, meaning “manger”.

Coming into this world, the Son of God was laid in the place where animals feed. Hay became the first bed of the One who would reveal himself as “the bread come down from heaven” (Jn 6:41). Saint Augustine, with other Church Fathers, was impressed by this symbolism: “Laid in a manger, he became our food” (Sermon 189, 4). Indeed, the nativity scene evokes a number of the mysteries of Jesus’ life and brings them close to our own daily lives.

But let us go back to the origins of the Christmas crèche so familiar to us. Fifteen days before Christmas Francis asked a local man named John, to help him realise his desire “to bring to life the memory of that babe born in Bethlehem, to see as

much as possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of His Infant needs, how He lay in a manger, and how with ox and an ass standing by, he was laid upon a bed of hay”. At this, his faithful friend went immediately to prepare all that the Saint had asked. On 25 December, friars came to Greccio from various parts, together with people from the farmsteads in the area, who brought flowers and torches to light up that holy night. When Francis arrived, he found a manger full of hay, an ox and a donkey. At Greccio there were no statues; the nativity scene was enacted and experienced by all who were present.

This is how our tradition began: with everyone gathered in joy around the cave, with no distance between the original event and those sharing in its mystery. Setting up the Christmas crèche in our homes helps us to relive the history of what took place in Bethlehem. Naturally, the Gospels

remain our source for understanding and reflecting on that event. At the same time, its portrayal in the crèche helps us to imagine the scene. It touches our hearts and makes us enter into salvation history as contemporaries of an event that is living and real in a broad gamut of historical and cultural contexts.

In a particular way, from the time of its Franciscan origins, the nativity scene has invited us to “feel” and “touch” the poverty that God’s Son took upon himself in the Incarnation. Implicitly, it summons us to follow him along the path of humility, poverty and self-denial that leads from the manger of Bethlehem to the cross. It asks

us to meet him and serve him by showing mercy to those of our brothers and sisters in greatest need (cf. Mt 25:31-46).

I would like now to reflect on the various elements of the nativity scene in order to appreciate their deeper meaning. First, there is the back-



ground of a starry sky wrapped in the darkness and silence of night. The landscapes that are part of the nativity scene also deserve some mention. With what emotion should we arrange the mountains, streams, sheep and shepherds in the nativity scene! As we do so, we are reminded that, as the prophets had foretold, all creation rejoices in the coming of the Messiah.

The angels and the guiding star are a sign that we too are called to set out for the cave and to worship the Lord.



Unlike so many other people, busy about many things, the shepherds become the first to see the most essential thing of all: the gift of salvation. It is the humble and the poor who greet the event of the Incarnation.

6. It is customary to add many symbolic figures to our nativity scenes. First, there are the beggars and the others who know only the wealth of the heart.

From the manger, Jesus proclaims, in a meek yet powerful way, the need for sharing with the poor as the path to a more human and fraternal world in which no one is excluded or marginalized.

Children – but adults too! – often love to add to the nativity scene other figures that have no apparent connection with the Gospel accounts. Yet, each in its own way, these fanciful additions show that in the new world inaugurated by Jesus there is room for whatever is truly human and for all God's creatures. From the shepherd to the blacksmith, from the baker to the musicians, from the women carrying jugs of water to the children at play: all this speaks of the everyday

holiness, the joy of doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way, born whenever Jesus shares his divine life with us.

Gradually, we come to the cave, where we find the figures of Mary and Joseph.

Mary is a mother who contemplates her child and shows him to every visitor. The figure of Mary makes us reflect on the great mystery that surrounded this young woman when God knocked on the door of her immaculate heart. In her, we see the Mother of God who does not keep her Son only to herself, but invites everyone to obey his word and to put it into practice (cf. Jn 2:5).

At Mary's side, shown protecting the Child and his Mother, stands Saint Joseph. He is usually depicted with staff in hand, or holding up a lamp. Saint Joseph plays an important role in the life of Jesus and Mary. He is the guardian who tirelessly protects his family.

When, at Christmas, we place the statue of the Infant Jesus in the manger, the nativity scene suddenly comes alive. God



appears as a child, for us to take into our arms. Beneath weakness and frailty, he conceals his power that creates and transforms all things. It seems impossible, yet it is true: in Jesus, God was a child, and in this way he wished to reveal the greatness of his love: by smiling and opening his arms to all. The birth of a child awakens joy and wonder; it sets before us the great mystery of life. Seeing the bright eyes of a young couple gazing at their newborn child, we can understand the feelings of Mary and Joseph who, as they looked at the Infant Jesus, sensed God's presence in their lives.

God's ways are astonishing, for it seems impossible that he



should forsake his glory to become a man like us. To our astonishment, we see God acting exactly as we do: he sleeps, takes milk from his mother, cries and plays like every other child! As always, God baffles us. He is unpredictable, constantly doing what we least expect. The nativity scene shows God as he came into our world, but it also makes us reflect on how our life is part of God's own life. It invites us to become his disciples if we want to attain ultimate meaning in life.

Kneeling before him, they understand that the God who with sovereign wisdom guides the course of the stars also guides the course of history, casting down the mighty and raising up the lowly. Upon their return home, they would certainly have told others of this amazing encounter with the Messiah, thus initiating the spread of the Gospel among the nations.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Christmas crèche is part of the precious yet demanding process of passing on the faith. Beginning in childhood, and at every stage of our lives, it teaches us to contemplate Jesus, to experience God's love for us, to feel and believe that God is with us and that we are with him, his children, brothers and sisters all, thanks to that Child who is the Son of God and the Son of the Virgin Mary. And to realize that in that knowledge we find true happiness. Like Saint Francis, may we open our hearts to this simple grace, so that from our wonderment a humble prayer may arise: a prayer of thanksgiving to God, who wished to share with us his all, and thus never to leave us alone." Given in Greccio, at the Shrine of the Nativity, on 1 December in the year 2019, the seventh of my Pontificate.



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