



St. Francis of Assisi at the Creche

Painting by Giotto, 1295-1399

In 1223, in a niche in the rock near the center of the small Umbrian town of Greccio, St. Francis of Assisi created the first Nativity Scene complete with a manger and live humans and animals. His purpose was to depict the birth of Christ as narrated in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, as a reminder of the simplicity and grandeur behind the celebration of Christmas.

According to St. Bonaventure's "Life of St. Francis", he first requested the approval of Pope Honorius III to do so, in order that this display be given the solemnity he felt it deserved. That Christmas Eve, he, his Friars and the townspeople, joined in celebrating Midnight Mass in the open air before the crèche, and in doing so, set the tradition for Christians for centuries to come.

Known as the "presepio" (crib) in Italian (the word crèche comes from the French adaptation of the name of the town of Greccio), the display was soon adapted to Christmas celebrations all over Europe, and later, the Americas. Eventually the humans and animals were replaced by statues and brought indoors because of the harsh winter weather, and some say, the difficulty of keeping the animals in place.

Today such displays are found everywhere---in Churches, Central Squares, even in the White House---not just on Christmas Day but for weeks, before and after, to remind us that the Shepherds and the Three Kings also came to visit.

Hence “Twelfth Night” or the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6th), is the traditional end of the Christmas Season and the date by which most displays are put away—until the following year.

Thank you St. Francis!

Submitted by

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