

THE CHRISTMAS CRECHE

One of the popular traditions observed by people in the Christmas season is the display of a Christmas creche, sometimes called a crib or manger scene. They can be found inside homes, outside homes as part of decorations and light displays, in Churches, store fronts and sometimes in public locations. Given that these displays depict the Christmas story as told in the Biblical accounts, it is no surprise that they are a regular feature of Christmas celebrations. However, for how long has the creche been a part of it all? Do you know the origins of the Christmas creche?

THE CRECHE OVER TIME

Tradition has told us that the first creche was set up by St Francis of Assisi in 1223 in the Italian town of Greccio. It has been suggested that he wanted to stimulate more interest in the celebration of Christmas among the local population. He wanted to focus on the humble nature of Jesus's birth rather than have displays of gold, silver and jewels as was sometimes common.



St Francis and the Christmas creche
(stlawrenceseminary.org)

He may have wanted to create a diversion or attraction for pilgrims enroute to the Holy Land. Whatever his motivation, his manger was “acted” by live people and animals in a cave at the time of Midnight Mass. The display idea was so new that he had to obtain papal permission to do it.



First known Nativity Scene, Santa Maria
Maggiore (CNA.com)

The practice of having live representations of the Christmas story grew to become a popular event throughout Italy and spread further over time. Eventually, statues and figurines replaced live people and animals in the scenes, leading to what we see today. Some say that the oldest crèche in Italy is a group of marble figures housed in Rome's Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore and attributed to the sculptor Arnolfo di Cambio; the figures have been variously dated from 1284 to 1289.

There have been some very elaborate creches over time, such as the one below from Germany.

These can be searched and found on the internet.



(catholicoutlook.org)

Statues and figurines are readily available nowadays for anyone to purchase for display. Constructing figures for the crib as a craft activity has become popular in schools, parishes and in many homes. Generally, live manger scenes are no longer used, although Nativity plays have become traditional in some areas, and schools and churches often have them as part of Christmas celebrations. Some parishes have a real baby, Mary and Joseph as part of a “children’s Mass” on Christmas.

You can get many ideas on a creche to use in your home and classroom by searching on the internet. Your creche can be as simple or complicated as you like.