



An informational activity booklet on nativity scenes

For Redeemer families of all ages

The History of the Nativity Scene



This nativity set is done in what is called the Atlantic style. A version of the set has been in parishioner Sara Shelton's possession for a number of years. She recently tracked down the molds and found a ceramic studio that would make new sets. Their sale became a Redeemer fundraiser in 2011.

"St. Francis of Assisi is often credited with creating the first crèche scene on Christmas Eve, 1223. Other notable depictions show that representations of the Nativity have long been a part of the Christian tradition. Scenes of the adoration of the Magi, perhaps dating from the late second century, were found in Roman catacombs. From around 1290, nativity sculptures by Arnolfo di Cambio graced the first church dedicated to Mary, Mother of God,—Santa Mariae Maggiore in Rome—and parts of this sculptural grouping can still be found today. Di Cambio's work has traditionally been considered the earliest known three-dimensional crèche, although recent scholarship suggests that a crèche in a church in Bologna and another in Venice may date to 1250 or earlier. Though it began in Italy, the tradition of the three-dimensional depictions of the Nativity eventually spread throughout Europe. When this tradition was, in turn, brought to other parts of the world, it was further embellished and enhanced by local imaginations and artistic tastes."

—Art of the Crèche: Nativities from Around the World by James L. Govan

"In 1223, in a mountain region in Italy, Francis and some friends performed the first live nativity display, based on the description found in Luke 2. Francis insisted the reenactment be exactly like the night when Jesus was born, with only Mary and Joseph, a few animals, and no wise men....later a craftsman made a miniature version of the nativity scene."

*—Saint Francis and the Nativity,
written by Myrna A. Strasser and illustrated by Fausto Bianchi*

Crèche prayers for youth families

This Christmas, as we remember the birth of Jesus in a stable, we are reminded that hope comes in unexpected ways and in unfamiliar places. We give thanks for those times in our lives when something unexpected happened, bringing us joy and hope.

Wherever the world is in darkness, O God,
Let there be light.

This Christmas, as we remember the violence with which the soldiers, under Herod's orders, came searching for the child Jesus, we are reminded that conflicts still have devastating effects on children trapped between warring sides. We name before you, O God, those places where conflict exists, and pray for peace.

Wherever the world is in darkness, O God,
Let there be light.

This Christmas, as we remember the flight of Jesus' family to Egypt, we are reminded of the plight of the people forced to flee from homes and possessions. We pray for refugees and those seeking a safe haven.

Wherever the world is in darkness, O God,
Let there be light.

This Christmas, as we remember the homeless Holy Family, we are reminded of the millions of people now who have no shelter, or who face that possibility. We pray for all homeless people in our community or wherever they may be.

Wherever the world is in darkness, O God,
Let there be light.

This Christmas, as we remember those who went to the stable, we are reminded that we need to make a journey. We pray for ourselves that as you have come to us, O God, we may also come to know you, to know you and to love you more and more as we serve others as Jesus' disciples.

Wherever the world is in darkness, O God,
Let there be light.

May Almighty God, who sent Jesus to take our human nature upon him, bless us in this holy Season, scatter any darkness that threatens us, and brighten our hearts with the light of his holiness.
Amen.



Wood and paint crèche from Hungary.

Crèche activities

Creative & Kinesthetic

- Make your own nativity scene: out of gingerbread, paper, clay, yarn, etc.

Throughout the Christmas season, count how many different nativity scenes you see and note the materials used to make them:

Wood, wire, glass, clay, plastic, pewter, felt, braided straw, fabric, tin, lace, porcelain, cardboard, cookie or gingerbread dough, other material.

How many different crèche materials can you find used in this booklet?

- Don't be afraid to set up several different nativity scenes throughout your house. Multiple reminders of Jesus are always a good thing!



This crèche is cut out of a loaf of bread. The word Bethlehem is made out of the Hebrew words for "home" and "bread." Massachusetts origin.

Drama & Storytelling

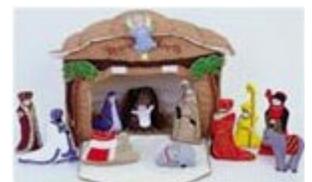
- Eight days before Christmas, put an empty stable and manger in the middle of a table. Each evening add a figure to the Nativity and read the appropriate scripture:



This indigenous Ecuadorian visitor to the manger scene is representative of many styles of crèches in which characters are wearing clothing native to the maker's culture or another local culture.

Mary—Luke 1:26-38
Joseph—Matthew 1:18-25
Shepherds—Luke 2:8-20
Wise Men—Matthew 2:1-2
Angels—Luke 2:9-15
Sheep and Camels—Luke 2:8 and Matthew 2:9
The Star—Matthew 2:9-10
Baby Jesus—Luke 2:6-7

- Buy a child-friendly crèche so that even very young children can participate. (Crèches can be found everywhere: Amazon and Beulah Enterprises.org are two good places to find them).
- Talk about each piece of the Crèche, how the person or animal may have felt, and its importance to the Nativity as you set up the scene. Ask, "If Jesus was born today, who would be in the Nativity scene?"
- Put on a Nativity pageant in your own home.



A Beulah Enterprises soft crèche for young children.



An Egyptian crèche made out of clay.

Movement

- For Thanksgiving Dinner (or any other time) have guests help set up the Nativity:

Place a piece of the small Nativity set in the middle of the cloth napkin. Fold the napkin into a triangular shape, then fold the bottom points up to meet the top point. Fold vertically in half. Put a folded napkin at each person's plate. As the napkins are opened to begin dinner, have everyone place their Nativity piece in a crèche. The Christmas Story can then be read.

- Place the shepherds and camels and wise men at a distance from the Holy Family and move them closer to the crèche every Sunday of Advent. The Shepherds should arrive sometime after Christmas. The Wise men and Camels arrive by Epiphany, on January 6th.



Wood—Zimbabwe

- If possible, leave the crib empty until Christmas Eve.
- Pray a blessing over your manger:



A French baby Jesus.

Dearest Jesus, bless this crib that we have prepared in honor of your birth as a human being. During these next days, we will prepare a place for you in our hearts. Help each of us to make this a special time of waiting and wondering as we go about our plans to celebrate Christmas.

History, Tradition, and Legend

- Have your children ask their grandparents about their nativity scene growing up. How old is it? How did they get it? Did someone special make it? What materials were used to make it?



This livestock nativity piece is from Taiwan and made of bamboo.

- Tell children that camels are very important tools for transportation in Middle Eastern society. One Middle Eastern Christmas tradition says that on Christmas Eve the animals at the manger could actually talk like humans.
- The imagery of stable animals is not in the Gospel narratives, but derives from the prophet Isaiah, whose writing is read throughout Advent for its prophecy of the incarnation: “The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” (Isa 1:3).



This bronze crèche is from the Ivory Coast.

- Talk about the Magi. The visitors from the East are Magi (magicians and astrologers), which were not highly reputable professions in Hebrew culture, despite the Magi’s valuable gifts of gold, myrrh and frankincense. Discuss gifts for the Christ Child and what your children could give if they were visiting the manger today.
- Ask: If Jesus were to be born today, where would he be born, to whom, and who would visit him?



This crèche features Swedes in their native dress.

Culture and Diversity

- In the French tradition of Provence, crèches have *santons*, or figurines of rural French townspeople and trades people made of cloth or clay (since 1830).
- In the Spanish tradition, saints are added into crèches, but unlike the French, these additional persons are actual saints from Christian history.



A French village of santons, village tradesmen and women, surrounding the baby Jesus.

- Talk about the various names for nativity scenes in different languages.

Italian: *presepio*
 Spanish: *belen*
 German: *weihnachtskrippe*
 French: *crèche*



Straw-Belarus.

- For older children, discuss: During the French Revolution, Nativity displays were forbidden. Today crèches and other displays of religious imagery in the public square at holiday times are a subject of considerable debate. Ask you children about their thoughts on public displays of religious symbols of particular faiths.



Metal-Mexico.

Recommended Nativity Books

- *Nighty Night, Baby Jesus* by Molly Schaar Idle. (Infant)
- *The Most Precious Gift: A Story of the Nativity* by Marty Crisp and Floyd Cooper. (Older)
- *The Nativity from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* by Ruth Anderson. (Older)
- *The Christmas Story: From the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, by The Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Older)

Activities and information from:

- *Advent and Lent Activities for Children* by Sheila Kielly and Sheila Geraghty
- *The Nativity: Myth and Legend* by Geza Vermes
- *Art of the Crèche: Nativities from Around the World* by James L. Govan (all photos but two taken from this book)
- *Saint Francis and the Nativity*, written by Myrna A. Strasser and illustrated by Fausto Bianchi



Far Left: Singapore—Cinnamon wood.



Near Left: Tanzania—African blackwood.



Far Above: Egyptian palm tree made of clay.
 Near Above: Wood and paint—Moldova.
 Right: Olive wood crèche from the West Bank.



Above: Wood and paint—Jamaica.

Near Right: Powdered Metal—Iceland.

Right: Straw—Argentina.

