



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#155 - December 1, 2021

A Best Practice: The Tradition of the Nativity Scene

On December 1, 2019, Pope Francis issued an apostolic letter on the meaning and importance of nativity scenes, calling for this “wonderful sign” to be more widely displayed in family homes and public places throughout the world.

“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,” Pope Francis wrote in *Admirabile Signum*, meaning “A wonderful sign” in Latin.

“With this letter, I wish to encourage the beautiful family tradition of preparing the nativity scene in the days before Christmas, but also the custom of setting it up in the workplace, in schools, hospitals, prisons and town squares,” he said.

Pope Francis traveled to the Italian town of Greccio — where St. Francis of Assisi created the first nativity scene in 1223 — where the pope signed the letter on the first day of Advent.

“In front of the crib we discover how important it is for our life, so often frenetic, to find moments of silence and prayer. The silence to behold the beauty of the face of the baby Jesus, the Son of God, born in a lowly stable,” Pope Francis said in Greccio on December 1st.

Focusing on Nativity sets

Throughout the years, various parishes and several organizations have helped people to pay attention to the many depictions of the Nativity story.

One of them was Holy Family, a Catholic Faith Community on a military base in Wiesbaden, Hessen, Germany. Michele Puehler, the Catholic Pastoral Life and Religious Education Coordinator, had been, for a while, intrigued and interested in offering an event.

The 2017 Offering

Because plans for many other events were already on the calendar, Michele decided to offer something simple, to test the waters for something more detailed in the future. The members of the faith community were invited to bring their Nativity sets to church to be blessed.

About 15 sets were brought for display: miniature sets; a play-mobile child’s set; wooden, ceramic and musical sets; traditional and modern sets; one from Korea and a beautiful statue of a pregnant Mary (for Las Posadas).



In the ceremony when the pastor blessed the nativity sets, there was also time to talk about Christian identity: that amidst all the Christmas decorations within our homes, a Nativity set should be in every Christian home, taking pride of place. People realized again the importance of passing on family faith traditions to the next generations.

At its conclusion, Michele reflected, “I could see great possibilities for a future session, conversations about devotions and practices from around the world, prayers and novenas, recalling childhood memories of Christmas, and the blessing of nativity sets.

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Women talk about the large baby Jesus figure, exchanging different traditions from Guam and Mexico, which were very similar.

The 2019 Offering

In early December 2019, Holy Family offered its first family gathering with an Advent Event. About 35 families, as well as some couples and a few single soldiers joined together for the gathering.

Family Gathering Advent Event
Friday, 06 December
Hainerberg Chapel
Begins with PotLuck Dinner at 1730

Jesse Tree Activity
Together we'll decorate a Jesse Tree with ornaments and learn more about Old Testament people who will tell us more about the events leading up to Jesus birth.

Blessing of Nativity Sets
Bring along your Nativity Scene to be blessed

EMAIL: MICHELE_PUEHLER@HOTMAIL.COM IF YOUR FAMILY WOULD LIKE TO ATTEND

As the families gathered and unpacked their Nativity sets (some of them new for this event), the tables were a magnet for others to gather, watch and ask questions:

- How long have you had this?
- Did someone give it to you?
- Where was it made?
- Do you have some special memories about this Nativity set?

The schedule for the evening included:

1730 – Pot Luck Dinner

1810 – Clean up and ready to move on to “Blessing of Nativity Sets”

1815 – Father McDermott: “Blessing of Nativity Sets”

Blessing of a Christmas Manger or Nativity Scene

In its present form the custom of displaying figures depicting the birth of Jesus Christ owes its origin to St. Francis of Assisi, who made the Christmas crèche or manger for Christmas Eve of 1223.



All make the sign of the cross as the leader prays:

Our help is in the name of the Lord.

All: Who made heaven and earth.

One of those present or the leader reads a text of Scripture, e.g., Luke 2:1-8 or Isaiah 7:10-15

Reader: The Gospel of the Lord.

All: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Leader: God of every nation and people, from the very beginning of creation you have made manifest your love: when our need for a Savior was great you sent your Son to be born of the Virgin Mary. To our lives he brings joy and peace, justice, mercy, and love.

Lord, bless all who look upon this manger;

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may it remind us of the humble birth of Jesus,
and raise our thoughts to him,
who is God-with-us and Savior of all,
and who lives and reigns forever and ever.

All: Amen.

—From *Catholic Household Blessings & Prayers*

1820 - Introduction to Activity: Family Tree

1830 - Jesus' Family Tree: Each Family makes a Jesse Tree ornament

1850 - Your Family Ornament

1915 - Jesse Tree Prayer: decorate the tree with ornaments

1930 - Story of Saint Nicholas: Visit by St. Nick

2000 - Ending and clean up

Jesse Tree Resource

Jesse Tree Activity: Michele relates that “The Jesse Tree activity was amazing; many people were not aware of this tradition – or the many Old Testament figures.” The outline and all the directions can be found in the *Jesse Tree Whole Family Event Kit*: <http://pastoral.center/advent-christmas-eresources-jesse-tree-whole-family-gathering-eresource-whole-family-session-event-kit/>.

After the Advent Gathering, the Jesse Tree was placed in the sanctuary for the remainder of Advent.



Building Community

Conversations: An abundance of tables for the pot luck were not set up so that families would have a table to themselves; they needed to sit together. On these tables were placed “conversation cards,” encouraging people to share their thoughts, get to know one another a little more and building community. Some of the questions were:

- What do you like about Holy Family Catholic Faith Community?
- How long have you been a faith community member here?
- What changes have you noticed in the time that you have been a member?
- What are some of your best memories of coming to church here?
- Is there something you would like to see us do?



Learnings and Plans for the Future

- The parish staff agreed that this type of event was a wonderful way to build community and plan to do more Family Gathering Events in the future.
- This event was very low budget!

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- Michelle reflected, “If I had not done the Jesse Tree activity, I think I would have put more effort into just keeping the Nativity sets as the focus and built upon that theme.”

Some Organizations and Resources

- Friends of the Creche is a non-profit organization founded to promote the tradition of the crèche. (www.friendsofthecreche.org)
- The Mepkin Abbey, a Trappist monastery in Moncks Corner, SC have an annual 2 week Crèche festival. (<https://mepkinabbey.org/2019-creche-festival/>)
- In late summer of 1994, The Marian Library and International Marian Research Institute at the University of Dayton began an earnest effort to collect various contemporary cultural expressions of the Nativity scene. The collection currently holds more than 3,600 crèches from many parts of the world, some of them on permanent display in the Marian Library's Crèche Museum. (<https://udayton.edu/marianlibrary/art-exhibits/creche-collection.php>)
- A Nativity Collection Shows How Different Cultures Imagine Christmas (<https://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201712/nativity-collection-shows-how-different-cultures-imagine-christmas-31239>)

Some GEMS Wonderings

- How have you/might you call attention to Pope Francis’ letter, *Admirabile Signum*, for your parishioners?
- How might you/have you highlighted the Nativity scene at your parish? How might you highlight and share the Nativity scene of your parishioners?
- In his letter, Pope Francis gave his approval for children and adults who love to add to the nativity scene other figures that have no apparent connection with the Gospel accounts, as is a common practice in Italy and parts of Latin America. How might you

encourage that for your parishioners? How might you help them to reflect on the reasons why they would add new figures? What might those additions say about the reality of God-with-us?

- Each Nativity scene reflects a different meaning or aspect of the gift of the Incarnation, especially when the scenes come from various cultures. How might you help your parishioners explore diverse Nativity sets, reflecting on a deepened understanding of the Christmas mystery?



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at www.janetschaeffler.com

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found in:

- *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish*
<https://www.litpress.org/Products/4652/Deepening-Faith>
- *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*
 - <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/books.html>
 - https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons_of_aff_-_journal_special_issue.pdf