

## St. Francis and the Christmas Creche

### What is the origin of the Nativity Scene (crèche)?



The documented origin of the Christmas crèche rests with St. Francis of Assisi. In the year 1223 AD, St. Francis, a deacon, was visiting the town of Greccio, Italy to celebrate Christmas. Greccio was a small town built on a mountainside overlooking a beautiful valley. The people had cultivated the fertile area with vineyards. St. Francis realized that the chapel of the Franciscan hermitage would be too small to hold the congregation for Midnight Mass. So he found a niche in the rock near the town square and set up an altar. However, this Midnight Mass would be very special, unlike any other Midnight Mass.

St. Bonaventure (d. 1274) in his *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, tells the recollection best:

*“ ... It happened in the third year before his death, that in order to excite the inhabitants of Greccio to commemorate the nativity of the Infant Jesus with great devotion, [St. Francis] determined to keep it with all possible solemnity; and lest he should be accused of lightness or novelty, he asked and obtained the permission of the sovereign Pontiff. Then he prepared a manger and brought hay, and an ox and an ass to the place appointed. [As the people gathered, St. Francis] stood before the manger, full of devotion and piety, bathed in tears and radiant with joy. ... “*

Although the story is long old, the message is clear for us. Our own Nativity scenes which rest in our parish churches [outside the sanctuary area for all to marvel], front lawns or under our Christmas trees are a visible reminder of that blessed night when Our Savior was born. May we never forget to see in our hearts the little Babe of Bethlehem, who came to save us from sin. We must never forget that the wood of the manger that held Him so securely, would one day give way to the wood of the Cross. May we too embrace Him with all of our love as did St. Francis.

(SR: <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/st-francis-and-the-christmas-creche.html>)