

Eyes, ears, noses, tongues, hands are all involved in “catching the Christmas spirit.” Christmas time above all other times of year entices all our senses—even during a pandemic. People are still putting up lights, decorating doorways, baking cookies, putting trees in our living rooms. All this involved every one of our senses.

One of the most beautiful Christmas traditions is setting up a **creche** during the Advent-Christmas season. A **creche** is a model of the scene of the first Christmas in the stable at Bethlehem. The word **creche** is from the French word for manger. A **crèche** appeals to our senses and tells the real meaning of Christmas.

St. Francis of Assisi had a special devotion to the Child Jesus, and he is credited with creating the first nativity scene on Christmas Eve of the year 1223. It is believed that St. Francis was first inspired by this idea after visiting the historical place of Christ's birth on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Later he told a friend why he desired to create the first nativity scene in his town. He said: *“I want to do something that will recall the memory of that child who was born in Bethlehem, to see with bodily eyes the inconveniences of his infancy, how he lay in the manger, and how the ox and ass stood by.”*

St. Francis set up an empty manger inside a cave, and even included a live ox and donkey beside the manger just as it was on that first Christmas night. Through these visual aids he wanted everyone to impress more deeply into their understanding how Christ came into the world to be touched and to touch, to be seen and to see, to be smelled and to smell, to be heard and to hear, to taste and to be tasted (the Eucharist).

In his biography of Francis, Saint Bonaventure described what happened that night of the first nativity scene: *“The brethren were summoned, the people ran together, the forest resounded with their voices, and that venerable night was made glorious by many and brilliant lights and sonorous psalms of praise. Francis stood before the manger, full of devotion and piety, bathed in tears and radiant with joy...”*

The Christmas **crèche** is a beautiful way to bring the true spirit of Christmas into your home. Hopefully, all homes of our parishioners have a **crèche** to go along with all the rest of the decorations at this time of year. Hopefully the story of the first nativity scene will inspire you to not look at your nativity set just as a pretty Christmas decoration, but as a tool of meditation on the humility, simplicity, and poverty of Christ that he took on out of his boundless love for us.

Gathering around the **crèche** is an easy way to promote family devotion and prayer. Nothing needs to be complicated—just a moment as a family being together looking at the Baby who came to bring all people together. Maybe sing a Christmas hymn (*Silent Night* would be more appropriate than *Jingle Bells.*); or, have the family's bedtime snack around the **crèche**. Little ones will want to handle and move around the figures of the **crèche**. That's alright too.

By His Incarnation, Jesus uses all human senses for us to come to know God the Father. Let us use our senses, then, to see, hear, smell, taste, and feel Christmas this year.