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HISTORY
OF THE
CRIB

Universalis Fœderatio Præsepistica

FIRST DEPICTIONS OF THE NATIVITY

2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. - The first images and symbols related to the Birth of Jesus appear in the catacombs in frescoes and funerary slabs (Catacombs of Domitilla and Priscilla)

Year 313 A.D. - Edict of Constantine, by which the Emperor, converted to Christianity, allowed all Christians to practise their religion publicly. Constantine Emperor of the West and Licinius Emperor of the East agreed in Milan to recognise Christianity as *religio licita*.

WHY IS CHRISTMAS CELEBRATED ON DECEMBER 25th?

Because from December 17th to 25th the Roman Empire celebrated the Saturnal Holidays, ending on December 25th with the festivity called *DIES NATALIS SOLIS INVICTI*, i.e. the 'day of the birth of the unconquered, invincible sun'.

Pope Liberius in the 6th century replaced this feast with the feast of the light and sun, metaphor of the birth of Christ.

The Prophet Malachi defines *Christ as the light of the world and the sun of justice*.

John the Evangelist calls him *the Light that enlightens every man*.

St Cyprian refers to him as *The True Sun*.

St Ambrose says Christ is *The New Sun*.

ICONOGRAPHIC FEATURES OF THE FIRST NATIVITY SCENES

For many centuries, the iconographic scheme of the Nativity of Christ has remained substantially unchanged:

Mary appears stretched out as a Junoesque Roman Madonna.

St Joseph, a *pater familias*, is depicted as an old Roman senator with a long beard.

The shepherds, full of idyllic naturalism, are inspired by Greek Alexandrian art.

The Angel is also taken from mythical Greek winged figures. In the Bible it is never mentioned that the Angel has wings.

Finally, according to Isaiah's prophecy, the snouts of the adoring animals - the **ox** and the **donkey** - sprouted up behind the Child in swaddling clothes.

By assembling all the characters described above, the traditional Nativity scene is created and so will it remain unchanged until the 13th century.

SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE IN ROME

The Papal Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome is also called *Santa Maria ad Praesepe* or Bethlehem of the West, since the precious relic of the Holy Cradle of the Child Jesus has been preserved there since the 7th century. Today it is placed under the high altar, originally in the Oratory of the Crib, built by Pope Theodore I (642-649).

Under the pontificate of the Franciscan Pope Nicholas IV (1288-1292), Arnolfo di Cambio sculpted one of the first artistic nativity scenes in the world.

THE NATIVITY SCENE - DEFINITION AND ORIGIN

The Nativity scene is the plastic representation of the Nativity of Jesus. It is surrounded by a series of characters and figures called 'shepherds', whose scenography takes into account the blend of the Gospel narrative and local popular traditions. This representation can be composed with the most varied materials, linked in particular to their availability in the territory.

The Nativity scene is thus a Christian sign, which brings together a set of values and knowledge, an exceptional heritage of creativity, craft techniques, history, art and culture, both cultured and popular.

The crib tradition has been widespread for several centuries in Europe and in the world. We have inherited it from the past, we are cultivating it in the present to pass it on to future generations. Hence the Nativity scene is a ritual custom that is perpetuated every year, in the family and in public and religious spaces, fostering creativity, craftsmanship and art, transforming them into spirituality and culture.

SACRED TROPES, SAINT FRANCIS AND THE GRECCIO MASS IN 1223

The conception of the first nativity scene is often attributed to St Francis of Assisi in 1223 in Greccio (Rieti), but this episode was an entirely isolated event, which was not immediately reflected in the spread of the nativity scene. The origins of its representation are therefore uncertain. The Saint of Assisi drew inspiration from a tradition already present in previous centuries. As a matter of fact, between the 9th and 10th century it was customary in many parts in Europe to create 'sacred dramas,' called 'tropes,' which were initially linked to the liturgical cycle of the Catholic Church. The trope - a liturgical and paraliturgical theatrical representation - arose with the aim of helping the predominantly illiterate population to 'see' and better understand the episodes narrated in the Gospel, which were read in Latin. They entered the places of worship gradually, as an appendix and visual image of the episodes that the priests and deacons read from the sacred texts. The 'tropes' re-proposed episodes from the life of Jesus in a theatrical form, and among these there were the narration of the Birth, with the Office of the Shepherds, and the Epiphany scene, with the Office of the Star, as well as numerous other episodes covering the whole life of Christ up to the Passion and Resurrection. As time passed, alterations and improper parts were introduced. The church initially separated the trope from the sacred celebration, forbidding its performance inside places of worship, but allowing it to be performed in public spaces such as squares and churchyards. It was to be Pope Innocent III in 1207, a few years before the Greccio episode, who banned them completely in all places.

In the Rieti valley and precisely in Greccio, on the occasion of Christmas 1223, St Francis wanted to make an outward sign with the celebration of the Midnight Mass by looking through *'the eyes of the heart'* at the Birth of the Divine, evoking the 'True Bethlehem', enriched by the Sacrament of the Eucharist. So it was that on a simple stone altar with hay placed underneath in the manger, St Francis asked for the Eucharist to be celebrated. There was no Child, no Madonna and no St Joseph. Instead, there was the ox and the donkey. With few elements and in an impassable place: at night, in a cave transformed into a stable, lost in the mountains far from Assisi, on a makeshift altar with a manger at its feet, *'evangelical simplicity shines forth, poverty is praised, humility is recommended. Greccio has become the new Bethlehem'*.

The centre of the whole scene is the Eucharist, the table is reduced to the essential. For St Francis, the Mystery of the Incarnation and the Passion are closely linked. Celebrating the Sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharist, through the sign of the crib and the hay, united these two truths of faith in a plastic manner. Bethlehem in fact is everywhere! It is in every altar in every church. The Greccio Christmas completely overturns the past of the 'tropes' and stands as a crossroads for an inner renewal in the approach to the Mystery of the Incarnation. Symbolically, the manger in a cave can be seen as a real tomb, where Jesus' swaddling clothes allude to the shroud. The sleeping child is 'placed' - as if 'laid'. Thus, a watershed was created in Greccio: from then on, a new 'representation of the Nativity of Christ' began to spread, but not yet the crib.

INVENTION OF THE NATIVITY SCENE

Consequently it can truly be said that the plastic nativity scene is not an invention of a single person in a specific context and period, but rather it can be considered as the synthesis of various events. Certainly the Sacred Tropes and the sacred representation in Greccio played a fundamental role in the plastic re-enactment of the Nativity and should be considered as essential stages in understanding the origin and spread of this tradition. However, they did not immediately follow the custom of composing the nativity scene during the Christmas season. Even the component of religious art, represented in thousands of paintings, frescoes, sculptures, bas-reliefs, silverware, ceramics, ivories, capitals, stained glass windows, etc., which from the 4th century onwards became one of the dominant themes in art, gives us an idea of how much over the centuries, and still today, the Nativity theme has been a source of inspiration. So rich in symbols, it has always easily conquered the hearts and imaginations of both artists and all mankind, so much so that it would be represented in ever more sublime works.

Until the beginning of the 16th century, the nativity scene was created exclusively as an artistic or decorative element in places of worship (churches, monasteries, convents, chapels, oratories). Most significant examples are still in existence: for instance in Bologna, a polychrome wooden nativity scene by an unknown artist (approx. 1250) in the Church of Santo Stefano; in Rome, the beautiful marble Nativity scene by Arnolfo di Cambio (1289-90) in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore; in Venice, the scene with the Adoration of the Magi attributed to the Master of the Months of Ferrara (before 1240), stone-carved for St Mark's Basilica, now in the Patriarchal Seminary Museum. Two more nativity scenes, dating back to a later period, are preserved in the Cathedral in Modena: the one in polychrome terracotta by Guido Mazzoni (1482) and the one in natural terracotta by Antonio Begarelli (1527).

ST. GAETANO AND THE COUNCIL OF TRENTO

It was not until the 16th century, thanks to St Gaetano di Thiene (1480-1547) and shortly afterwards the Council of Trent (1545-1563), that a profound transformation in the production of nativity scenes took place. St Gaetano had understood the importance of the crib as an educational, social and apostolic tool. That is why from 1523, when he moved from Rome to Naples, until his death, he had asked the ministers of his order (the Theatine Regular Clerics) and all the people in Naples to set up the crib during the Christmas season. It was his idea to combine the scene of the Nativity with episodes from daily life, setting them in the streets populated by characters dressed in contemporary clothes of the time.

- *... if one wants to know the spread of these artistic and moving Nativity scenes, which are exhibited on the Lord's Christmas feasts, the author of these Nativity scenes was Gaetano, when he lived in Naples.*
- *The Saint felt encouraged to build a material Nativity scene, visible to everybody, to renew each year the memory of the great privilege he had obtained in Rome and to make the flames of divine Love more alive in his spirit, which he then intended to spread in the hearts of others. [...]*
- *What Gaetano did was so appreciated by the city of Naples, that in the following years it was also introduced in other churches, and going from place to place today this custom is practised everywhere, even in private homes...*

<https://www.facciamoilpresepe.it/san-gaetano-inventore-presepe-napoletano/>

A few years later, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) decreed the important role of the nativity scene as 'an expression of popular religiosity and an instrument of catechesis'.

This beautiful tradition, in a short time, spread mainly thanks to the impetus given by religious orders - Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites, but also Theatines and Jesuits - from Italy throughout Europe and later to other continents. The nativity scene began to be practised spontaneously from 'place to place', from 'people to people', becoming - through scenic narration - a vector of universal values such as the acceptance of one's neighbour, the defence of the family and respect for human dignity.

EVOLUTION OF THE NATIVITY SCENE, BIRTH OF ASSOCIATIONS

The representation of the nativity scene has changed over time, dressing the clothes of every era and land it has passed through. Its realization has used every kind of technique, in every possible setting: the most daring, the most dramatic.

The tradition of the nativity scene has been consolidated over the centuries, succeeding in linking different countries, peoples and ethnic groups all over the world, bringing them into cultural dialogue, both nationally and internationally. It recounts all those qualities that protect human dignity and the inestimable value of every birth, starting with the family and ending with the creation of opportunities for encounters among peoples in defence of Peace.

From the mid-19th century, the first Associations were created in Europe (Austria and Spain) to spread the art of the nativity scene. In Rome, in May 1953, the Italian Association of Friends of the Crib was founded (www.presepio.it). In Gozo in October 1985, the Association of Friends of the Crib of Gozo-Malta, named Ghaqda Hbieb Tal-Presepju - Gozo-Malta, was established. All the associations bring together hundreds or thousands of people, with the aim of keeping alive the tradition, art and history of the crib through exhibitions, displays, technical courses, conferences, publications, conventions and congresses.

THE INTERNATIONAL FRIENDS OF THE CRIB FEDERATION (UN. FOE. PRAE.)

In 1952, the Universalis Foederatio Præsepistica, the International Friends of the Crib Federation (www.unfoeprae.org) was founded in Barcelona, bringing together all the national or regional associations from all over the world. Presently 20 national-level associations are members of the Federation. The Un Fœ. Præ. is international, has no party affiliations, is ecumenical and aims to pursue public benefit purposes.

The articles of association of the International Federation state:

All friends of the Crib, that is to say, all men of good will who feel the emotion of the Crib, have a moral duty to keep alive the tradition of this noble art.

The federated Associations are present not only in Europe, but also in the Americas, and others have applied to join in the worldwide association dedicated to develop the Crib heritage. The objectives pursued by the Associations aim to promote the knowledge, conservation and nurturing of the Nativity as an important religious tradition, but also its folkloristic and artistic aspects, recognising the diversity of individual cultural traditions. The main crib schools have developed a production that differs not only in style, but also in the materials used (terracotta, wood, papier-mâché, plaster, stucco, coral, natural stone materials, paper), as well as in the production methods (serial or artistic) and, lastly, in the types of users (religious orders, public bodies, families). All of this reflects the corresponding artistic richness of the different realities and makes it possible to highlight the fundamental elements so as to properly define a composition as 'nativity scene'.

The International Friends of the Crib Federation organises an International Congress every four years and promotes meetings, publications and specific activities to spread the crib heritage.

THE NATIVITY SCENE - CONCLUSIONS

In the light of all the above, the nativity scene can still today be considered topical, alive, boundless, modern and global, as every year it has the capacity to regenerate itself despite the society in which we live with all its ethical changes.

Every year, Christmas gives us moments of fascination that enchant even those who do not believe. This particular time of the year leads us to contemplate for a few moments that Child lying in the crib. A defenceless Child, but capable of emanating a splendid light, giving peace and hope to all the people.



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