

Orantes

Newsletter of the Office for Divine Worship
of the Diocese of Worcester

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This Christmas edition of *Orantes* includes a reflection by Pope Francis on the manger (page 2) and reprints several resources which our readers have found helpful in preparing for the celebrations of the Nativity of the Lord.

These include commentaries on *The Manger in Church* (page 5), *The Christmas Tree in Church* (page 7) and other questions and answers on *Preparing for Christmas* (page 9).

We then present the Solemn Christmas Proclamation (page 11), which may be sung or proclaimed on December 24th at Evening Prayer or even before the beginning of the Christmas Mass during the Night. The musical notation is found in Appendix I of the *Roman Missal*.

Pope Francis on the Manger

A collection of Christmas reflections by the Holy Father has been published under the title, Christmas at the Nativity. Pope Francis' introduction to that work is published here for the benefit of our readers.

Twice I have gone to Greccio. The first time I went to learn about the place where St. Francis of Assisi invented the Nativity scene, something that also marked my childhood: in my parents' house in Buenos Aires, this sign of Christmas always was put up, even before the tree.

The second time I gladly returned to that place, in the province of Rieti, to sign the apostolic letter *Admirabile signum*, on the meaning and significance of the Nativity scene today.



On both occasions I felt a special emotion emanating from the grotto, where a medieval fresco can be admired, one side of it depicting the night of Bethlehem, and the other depicting the night of Greccio.

The excitement of that sight prompts me to delve deeper into the Christian mystery that loves to hide within what is infinitely small.

Indeed, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ remains the heart of God's revelation, although it is easily forgotten that its unfolding is so unobtrusive, to the point of going unnoticed. Littleness, in fact, is the way to encounter God.

On the tombstone of St. Ignatius of Loyola, it is written, *Non coerceri a maximo, sed contineri a minimo, divinum est* ("Not to be limited by the greatest, and yet to be contained in the tiniest—this is the divine"). In short, one should not be frightened of the big things; one should go forward and take into account the smaller things.

This is why safeguarding the spirit of the Nativity scene becomes a healthy immersion in the presence of God manifested in the small, sometimes trivial and repetitive, everyday things. Knowing how, in order to understand and choose God's ways, to renounce what seduces but leads down a bad path is the task we face. In this regard, discernment is a great gift, and we must never tire of asking for it in prayer.

The shepherds in the manger are those who welcome God's surprise and live in wonder at their encounter with him, adoring him: in littleness they recognize the face of God. Humanly we are all inclined to seek greatness, but it is a gift to know how to really find it: to know how to find greatness in that smallness that God so loves.



In January 2016 I met the youth of Rieti at the very haven of the Infant Jesus, just above the Nativity shrine. I reminded them, and everyone today, that on Christmas night there are two signs that guide us in recognizing Jesus. One is the sky full of stars. There are many of those stars, an infinite number, but among them all a special star stands out, the one that prompted the Magi to leave their homes and begin a journey, a journey that would lead them where they did not know. It happens the same way in our lives: at a certain moment some special "star" invites us to make a decision, to make a choice, to begin a journey. We must forcefully ask God to show us that star that draws us toward something more than our habits, because that star will lead us to contemplate Jesus, that child who is born in Bethlehem and who wants our full happiness.

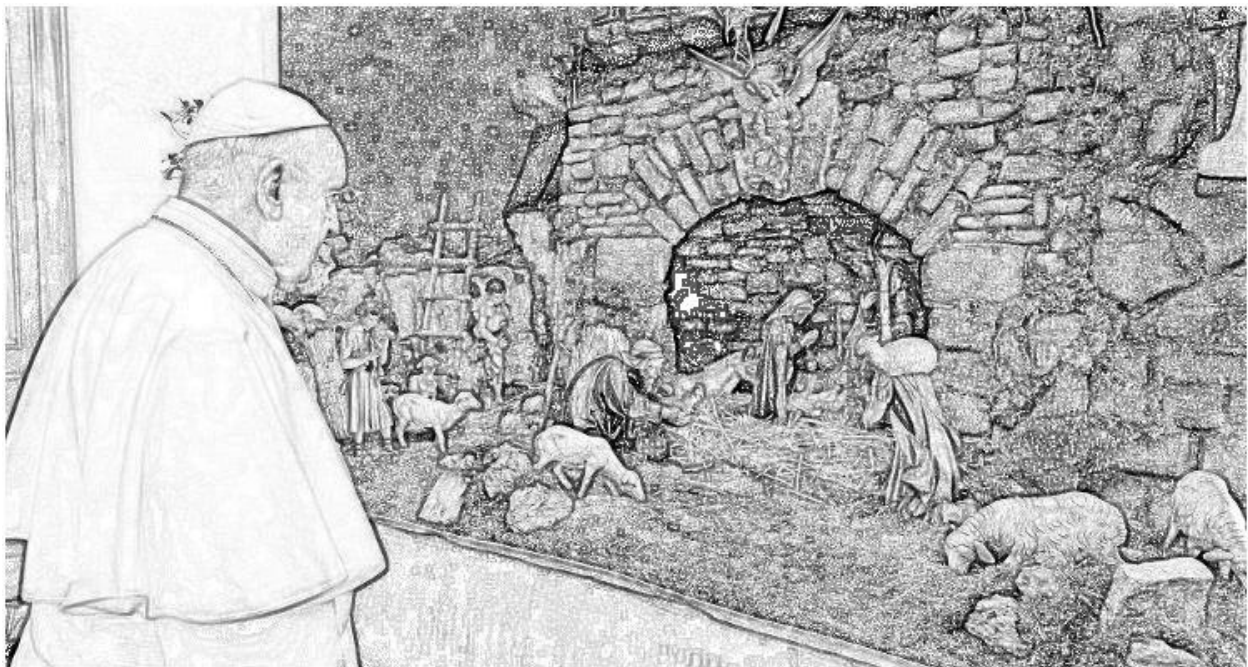
On that night, made holy by the Savior's birth, we find another powerful sign: the smallness of God. The angels point out to the shepherds a baby born in a manger. Not a sign of power, self-sufficiency, or pride. No. The eternal God is reduced to a helpless, meek, humble human being. God lowered himself so that we could walk with him and so that he could stand beside us, not above and far from us. Awe and wonder are the two feelings that move everyone, young and old, before the Nativity scene, which is like a living Gospel overflowing from the pages of Holy Scripture.

It is not important how the Nativity scene is set up; it can always remain the same or change every year; what matters is that it speaks to life.

The first biographer of St. Francis, Thomas of Celano, describes the Christmas night of 1223, whose eight-hundredth anniversary we celebrate this year. When Francis arrived, he found the crib with the hay, the ox, and the donkey. Before the Christmas scene, the people who flocked to the place manifested an unspeakable joy, never tasted before. Then the priest, at the manger, solemnly celebrated the Eucharist, showing the link between the Incarnation of the Son of God and the Eucharist. On that occasion, there were no figurines in Greccio: the Nativity scene was created and experienced by those who were present.

I am sure that the first Nativity scene, which accomplished a great work of evangelization, can also be an occasion today to summon forth awe and wonder. Thus, what the simplicity of that sign made St. Francis realize persists down to our own days as a genuine form of the beauty of our faith.

Vatican City, 27 September 2023



The Manger in Church

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The inclusion of a nativity scene or Christmas manger in Church stems from at least the thirteenth century with the account of Saint Francis and the manger in the Church of Greccio. The selection and arrangement of figures, while based on the Gospels, highlights particular stories from the Gospel as included in the readings and prayers of the Mass.

The following questions and answers are intended to assist parishes in the preparation of appropriate and effective settings of the Christmas mangers in a parish setting.



What is the purpose of arranging a Christmas Manger in a parish Church?

The *Book of Blessings* suggests two reasons for arranging a Christmas Manger in Church: to foster devotion to the Christmas mystery and to allow the faithful to gather before the manger.¹ Every priest is aware of the admirable custom of families gathering before the manger as they recollect and pass on the Christmas story to their children.

Where is the Manger scene properly placed in Church?

The practice of placing the Manger scene in front of the altar runs the risk of compromising the altar's role as "the center of the thanksgiving that is accomplished through the Eucharist"² and "the center toward which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns."³

For this reason, the *Book of Blessings* prohibits the placement of the manger in the sanctuary.⁴ It recommends instead that

¹ *Book of Blessings*, [BOB] "Blessing of a Christmas Manger or Nativity Scene," no. 1544.

² *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, [GIRM] no. 296.

³ GIRM, no. 299.

⁴ BOB, no. 1544.

the Manger be located “in a place which is suitable for prayer and devotion and is easily accessible by the faithful.”⁵

The Neapolitan practice of placing the manger near the entrance of the Church or in chapel explicitly devoted to gathering before the Nativity scene fulfills both of these requirements: it is suitable for prayer and easily accessible for the faithful. Alternatively, other devotional areas outside the sanctuary or even in the nave or vestibule of the Church may be chosen.



When should the blessing of the Nativity scene take place?

While the *Book of Blessings* recommends the Vigil of Christmas as the most natural time to bless the Christmas manger, it allows for other suitable times according to pastoral circumstances,⁶ including outside of Mass.⁷

How is the Nativity scene blessed during Mass?

The blessing is found in numbers 1562-1564 of the *Book of Blessings* and takes place during the Prayer of the Faithful.

A sample formula for the introduction of the Prayer of the Faithful is provided, along with four sample intercessions. At the conclusion of the intercessions, the priest, with hands outstretched, says the prayer of blessing.⁸

The prayer addresses the “God of every nation and people,” who has manifested his love for us since creation and thus sent his Son as our Savior, by whose birth we have come to know “joy and peace, justice, mercy, and love.”⁹ The priest then asks God’s blessing upon the manger, that it might remind us of “the humble birth of Jesus...God-with-us and Savior of all.”

⁵ BOB, no. 1544.

⁶ BOB, no. 1542.

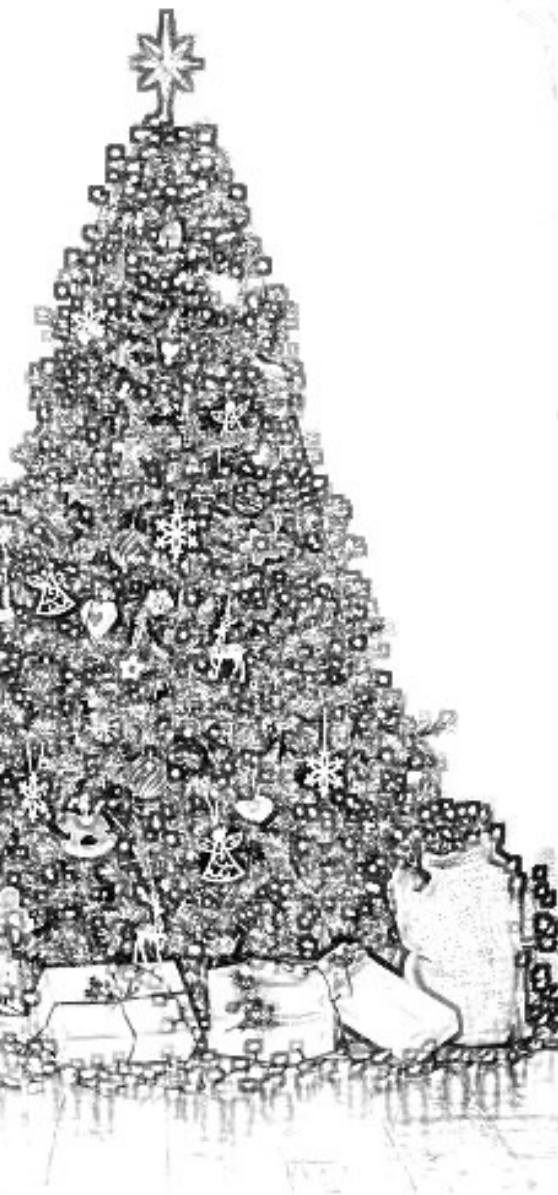
⁷ BOB, no. 1543.

⁸ BOB, no. 1564.

⁹ BOB, no. 1565.

The Christmas Tree in Church

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The decoration of the Christmas tree is usually traced to the Medieval Mystery Plays, in which the tree of paradise was decorated with apples (later replaced by round ornaments). In the course of time, these were supplemented and sometimes replaced with roses made of colored paper and candles, with electric lights, garlands, tinsel and candy canes making an appearance. At the top of the tree, invariably, is the Angel Gabriel, reminiscent of the Annunciation or the Star of Bethlehem, by which the Magi were led to the Christ Child.

The tradition of decorating a Christmas Tree arrived in the United States in the early nineteenth century. Because of its early use in German Lutheran households, it did not become popular in Catholic circles until the mid-twentieth century.

In the introduction to the “Blessing of a Christmas Tree,” the *Book of Blessings*¹⁰ begins by noting that while the Christmas Tree is primarily a domestic tradition, Churches may also set up and decorate trees from “just before Christmas” until the Epiphany.¹¹

The blessing is envisioned to take place during a Prayer Service or celebration of Morning or Evening Prayer and the lights of the tree are lit after the blessing.¹²

Two prayers of blessing are offered. The first¹³ is an extended reflection on God’s gift of light, beginning with creation of the heavenly lights and continuing to the promised light of the prophets. The Son of God, “Emmanuel, God-with-us, the Prince of Peace,” fills us with “the wonder of [his] love.” The

¹⁰ BOB, nos. 1470-1596.

¹¹ BOB, no.1471.

¹² BOB, no.1472.

¹³ BOB, no.1586.

tree is then blessed and lit, praying that “all who delight in this tree come to the knowledge and joy of salvation.”

The second prayer of blessing¹⁴ begins by describing the joy experienced by those who have been rescued from the darkness of sin by the cross, “the tree of life and light.” The prayer concludes by asking that the tree remind us of “the life-giving cross of Christ,” that we might “always rejoice in the new life that shines in our hearts.”



¹⁴ BOB, no.1587.

Preparing for Christmas

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The following questions and answers are provided in order to help in the preparation of various aspects of the Christmas solemnities.



Is it appropriate for children to perform a Christmas play during the Gospel at the Vigil Mass on Christmas?

The question is addressed directly by the *Lectionary for Masses with Children*, no. 53, which explicitly states that “care should be taken, especially at Christmas and during Holy Week and the Easter Triduum, not to stage the various liturgies as plays. At the same time, a reenactment of the Christmas story by children could be held prior to or after the Christmas liturgies. Such a reenactment during the liturgy, however, is explicitly forbidden by liturgical law.

What color vestments can be used at Christmas?

While the color white is proper to Christmas time, on more solemn days, festive, that is, more precious, sacred vestments may be used even if not of the color of the day.¹⁵

What about Christmas decorations, flowers and plants?

“Plans for seasonal decorations should include other areas besides the sanctuary. Decorations are intended to draw people to the true nature of the mystery being celebrated rather than being ends in themselves. Natural flowers, plants, wreaths and fabric hangings, and other seasonal objects can be arranged to enhance the primary liturgical points of focus. The altar should remain clear and free-standing, not walled in by massive floral displays or the Christmas crib, and pathways in the narthex, nave, and sanctuary should remain clear.”¹⁶

¹⁵ GIRM, no. 346g.

¹⁶ *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship*. [BLS] (USCCB, 2000), no. 124

When are the seasonal decorations removed?

“...Seasonal decorations are maintained throughout the entire liturgical season. Since the Christmas season begins with the Vigil Mass on Christmas Eve and ends with the Baptism of the Lord, the placement and removal of Christmas decorations should coincide with these times.”¹⁷ Care should also be taken to cut back and remove dead flowers as the season progresses.

What other kinds of ritual enhancements are proper to the Christmas season?

During the recitation of the Nicene Creed at the Christmas Masses, the ministers and assembly kneel at the words, “and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man” as an acknowledgment of the mystery of the incarnation. The *Gloria* should be sung throughout the Octave of Christmas, where possible. Finally, if Eucharistic Prayer I is prayed, the insert for Christmas is used throughout the Octave.

What resources can I recommend to parishioners for the celebration of Christmas in their homes?

[The USCCB website](https://www.usccb.org/prayer-worship/liturgical-year/christmas) provides a series of helpful resources, including blessings of a Christmas Manger, Christmas Tree and the blessing of households on the Feast of the Epiphany.¹⁸



¹⁷ BLS, no. 125.

¹⁸ <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-worship/liturgical-year/christmas>

The Solemn Christmas Proclamation

The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Twenty-fifth Day of December, when ages beyond number had run their course from the creation of the world, when God, in the beginning created heaven and earth, and formed man in his own likeness;

When century upon century had passed since the Almighty set his bow in the clouds after the Great Flood, as a sign of covenant and peace; in the twenty-first century since Abraham, our father in faith, came out of Ur of the Chaldees; In the thirteenth century since the People of Israel were led by Moses in the Exodus from Egypt; Around the thousandth year since David was anointed King; in the sixty-fifth week of the prophecy of Daniel;

In the one hundred and ninety-fourth Olympiad; in the year seven hundred and fifty-two since the foundation of the City of Rome; in the forty-second year of the reign of Caesar Octavian Augustus,

The whole world being at peace,
JESUS CHRIST,
eternal God and Son of the eternal Father, desiring to consecrate the world by his most loving presence, was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and when nine months had passed since his conception, was born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem of Judah, and was made man:

**THE NATIVITY
OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST
ACCORDING TO THE FLESH.**

Diocesan Prayer for Eucharistic Revival



Lord Jesus Christ,
who by the gift of your Body and Blood,
are really present in our lives,
hear the prayers of the Church in Worcester.

Give us the faith of your Church, confident
in your presence in our Masses, our
tabernacles and our lives.

Give us the faith
to offer our lives to you,
joined with the perfect sacrifice,
which you offered on the altar of the Cross.

Good and loving Shepherd,
teach us how to lead your children home,
that we might long together
to glorify your name
at the Supper of the Lord.

For you are Lord, forever and ever. Amen.

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