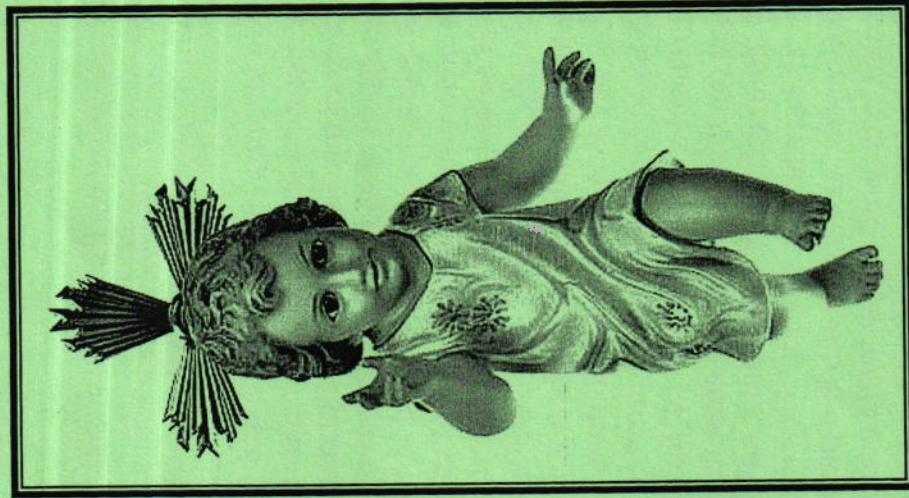


The Tradition of the Christmas Crib

_____ Pope Benedict XVI _____

Following a beautiful and firmly-rooted tradition, many families set up their crib immediately after the feast of the Immaculate Conception, as if to relive with Mary those days full of trepidation that preceded the birth of Jesus. Putting up the crib at home can be a simple but effective way of presenting faith, to pass it on to one's children. The crib helps us contemplate the mystery of God's love that was revealed in the poverty and simplicity of the Bethlehem Grotto. Saint Francis of Assisi was so taken by the mystery of the Incarnation that he wanted to present it anew at Greccio in the living nativity scene, thus beginning an old, popular tradition that still retains its value for evangelization today. Indeed, the crib can help us understand the secret of the true Christmas because it speaks of the humility and merciful goodness of Christ, who *though he was rich he made himself poor* for us (2 Cor 8:9). His poverty enriches those who embrace it, and Christmas brings joy and peace to those who, like the shepherds in Bethlehem, accept the angels' words: *Let this be a sign to you: in a manger you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes* (Lk 2:12). This is still the sign for us too, men and women of the third millennium. There is no other Christmas.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT



BLESSING OF THE BAMBINELLI

BENEDICT XVI
ANGELUS

St Peter's Square

Third Sunday of Advent, 13 December 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We have now reached the Third Sunday of Advent. Today in the liturgy the Apostle Paul's invitation rings out: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.... The Lord is at hand!" (Phil 4: 4-5). While Mother Church accompanies us towards Holy Christmas she helps us rediscover the meaning and taste of Christian joy, so different from that of the world. On this Sunday, according to a beautiful tradition, the children of Rome come to have the Pope bless the Baby Jesus figurines that they will put in their cribs. And in fact, I see here in St Peter's Square a great number of children and young people, together with their parents, teachers and catechists. Dear friends, I greet you all with deep affection and thank you for coming. It gives me great joy to know that the custom of creating a crib scene has been preserved in your families. Yet it is not enough to repeat a traditional gesture, however important it may be. It is necessary to seek to live in the reality of daily life that the crib represents, namely, the love of Christ, his humility, his poverty. This is what St Francis did at Greccio: he recreated a live presentation of the nativity scene in order to contemplate and worship it, but above all to be better able to put into practice the message of the Son of God who for love of us emptied himself completely and made himself a tiny child.

The blessing of the "Bambinelli" [Baby Jesus figurines] as they are called in Rome, reminds us that the crib is a school of life where we can learn the secret of true joy. This does not consist in having many

things but in feeling loved by the Lord, in giving oneself as a gift for others and in loving one another. Let us look at the crib. Our Lady and St Joseph do not seem to be a very fortunate family; their first child was born in the midst of great hardship; yet they are full of deep joy, because they love each other, they help each other and, especially, they are certain that God, who made himself present in the little Jesus, is at work in their story. And the shepherds? What did they have to rejoice about? That New-born Infant was not to change their condition of poverty and marginalization. But faith helped them recognize the "babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" as a "sign" of the fulfillment of God's promises for all human beings, "with whom he is pleased" (Lk 2:12, 14).

This, dear friends, is what true joy consists in: it is feeling that our personal and community existence has been visited and filled by a great mystery, the mystery of God's love. In order to rejoice we do not need things alone, but love and truth: we need a close God who warms our hearts and responds to our deepest expectations. This God is manifested in Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary. Therefore that "Bambinello" which we place in a stable or a grotto is the centre of all things, the heart of the world. Let us pray that every person, like the Virgin Mary, may accept as the centre of his or her life the God who made himself a Child, the source of true joy.

Blessing of the Bambinelli (Infant Jesus figures)

Originated by Pope Paul VI in 1969, the blessing takes place each year in Rome on the third Sunday of Advent. Children bring the Christ Child (Bambinelli) from their family nativity scene for a blessing from the Holy Father. Throughout the years, many Catholic churches worldwide have participated in this unique and beloved tradition, which reinforces the true meaning of Christmas: the birth of Jesus Christ.