

From the desk of Fr. Jim

Advent 3 – Standing at the Crib

The details of the narrative of the Birth of Jesus are some of the most complicated in Scripture. Equally, our celebration at Christmas, and the use of a plethora of symbols during the season is filled with a complicated historical development. In fact, if we were to enumerate all the customs of this season we would still not be inclusive. Our own personal ways of celebrating the season would fill volumes.



Even still, those details found in the Scriptures are probably not merely historical memorabilia. They are intended to teach, to open us to the most sublime truth ever disclosed. While the Gospels are certainly not primitive or unsophisticated writings, it is important for us to remember that this is among the first written expressions of faith in Jesus Christ. The concerns here are timeless, but they also originated in a particular context. Questions are being addressed with the details that are included. They are not abstract or theoretical.

Perhaps we can take a few of those details and attempt to flesh them out and apply them:

Certainly one of the most popular symbols in the narrative is the manger. The range of popularity of devotion to the Christmas Crib is enormous. St. Frances, in the 13th century, brought immense popularity to the scene of Christ's birth by creating the first "living nativity scene." He placed a village baby in the feeding trough of the animals so that all could see. In the seventh century, the relics of the true manger were brought from Palestine to Rome to protect the first place in which the holy child was laid. Even today, the crib can be seen in the crypt under the altar of St. Mary Major in Rome. It is an awe-inspiring moment to view this relic, one of the most famous of all of our Church.

But what does it mean that the Savior is placed here, in a feeding trough? Actually there are several different possibilities. We need to digress for just a moment and say again that there are several different levels of meaning for the symbols in the Scripture. They are meant to teach, quite obviously, but there may be many different intended meanings. For example, we might assume that the manger is a symbol of the poverty that Joseph, Mary and Jesus accepted.

While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6-7)

The traditional images that we have formed for the manger, interestingly, include two animals seen in the verse from Isaiah that are applied to the birth of Christ:

“An ox knows its owner, and an ass, its master’s manger; But Israel does not know, my people have not understood.” (Isaiah 1:3)

The verse is the traditional origin for the inclusion of these animals, but it is more. It is a lament of God for his people who do not know him.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem has an awesome comment on the image of the manger:

“[God] found that man had become a beast in his soul, and so He is placed in the manger, in the place of fodder, that we, changing our animal way of living, may be led back to the wisdom that becomes humanity: stretching out not towards animal fodder, but to the heavenly Bread for the life of this body.”
(Cyril of Jerusalem, d. 386 A.D., Catechetical Lectures)

The focus is not necessarily the poverty of Jesus, but the need we have for God, which he satisfies in the Mass. Of course, he satisfies this by accepting the most abject circumstances, another reminder of His love for us. Still, it is perhaps St. Francis’ picture of the Lord’s birth that is the most powerful. Here is the description of his first manger scene:

The manger is ready, hay is brought, the ox and ass are led in. Simplicity is honored there, poverty is exalted, humility is commended and a new Bethlehem, as it were, is made from Greccio. Night is illuminated like the day, delighting men and beasts. The people come and joyfully celebrate the new mystery. The forest resounds with voices and the rocks respond to their rejoicing. The brothers sing, discharging their debt of praise to the Lord, and the whole night echoes with jubilation. The holy man of God stands before the manger full of sighs, consumed by devotion and filled with a marvelous joy. The solemnities of the Mass are performed over the manger and the priest experiences a new consolation. **(Thomas of Celano, “The First and Second Lives of Saint Francis”)**