

An Infant Points to Our Mission

Greetings!

When I think back to Christmas during my childhood, the nativity scenes displayed in the homes of the friends and family members we visited during Advent and Christmas Time are easy to recall. Children are drawn to these imaginings of the birth of Jesus and will look at them for a long time, even when they are too fragile to touch or are not for playing.

The nativity scene originates with St. Francis of Assisi, who first put together a nativity with live animals in 1223, and stood there preaching and teaching about Jesus.

Catholic faith is an embodied one. We recognize the need to experience the unseen God through our senses. When we look upon a nativity scene, whether it is beautiful and ornate or composed of simple clay figures constructed by a child, we have an opportunity to reflect on the mystery of the incarnation: God with us, God one of us, experiencing the entirety of the human condition except sin. While putting up a nativity scene with children, parents and grandparents can help youngsters reflect on what it means that God came to be with us.

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In the incarnation, God does not do what one might expect. He chooses not a powerful family in which the child Jesus will be pampered and spoiled and brought up to understand his unique role as something to lord over others. Instead, a young girl and a just man will raise the Son of the Most High. You might discuss with a child the place he or she would think God would choose to be born. Human beings prefer to avoid discomfort and so if we were God, we would probably not decide the best thing was to be born into a family that, at that moment, did not have a room at all. And therefore, we must consider what it is that we are meant to see in that birthplace.



The nativity scene can bring a family to reflect together on God's vulnerability and the vulnerable in our community and world.

Servant of God Dorothy Day tells us, "If Mary had appeared in Bethlehem clothed, as St. John says, with the sun, a crown of twelve stars on her head and the moon under her feet, then people would have fought to make room for her. But that was not God's way for her nor is it Christ's way for Himself now when He is disguised under every type of humanity that treads the earth."

Jesus tells us that whatever we do for those who are most vulnerable, for those who are least protected, we do for him. Parents might ask the children what they think of a child being born outside. Ask also what connection that child's birth outside has to today.

Adults may want to reflect how the manger shows God's vulnerability—for what is more vulnerable than a new baby? We see too a call to run like the shepherds. We must run to those who, like the holy family, have no safe place to lay down and rest. We must bring gifts, like the Magi, gifts that are the very best things we can imagine.