

A nativity for all

I have treasured it for a long time. Many years ago, I found in a small shop in Nashville, Tennessee, a Nativity set from France. I bought it, and it has been a beloved part of Advent and Christmas for me since then.

What is unusual about a French Nativity set? Actually, it might be called a Southern European Nativity set. Italians have similar depictions of the Lord's birth.

Most of the representations familiar to Americans put the Holy Family in a stable. With them are animals, a cow or two, a donkey and a few sheep. The shepherds are in the scene, as are the Magi. Completing the setting is an angel.

It is all directly from the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, and it lifts the heart with the memories of what it was when Jesus was born of Mary in Bethlehem 20 centuries ago.

The French and Italian Nativity scenes are different because they go further in telling the story. Jesus, the Son of God, was born into human space and time not just to be here for 33 years and to meet a limited group of people, but to be the Lord, who rose from death, lives forever, in any human heart that accepts the Gospel, at any time, in any place.

To tell this very important part of the salvation story, Nativity sets from France and Italy surround Jesus, Mary and Joseph not just with the shepherds and Magi, but with a great multitude of people in contemporary dress.

My set, for example, has a baker, a school teacher, the mayor of the town, an elderly couple, children, a police officer, a fisherman with his catch of the day and even a homeless person. A priest is in the group, in the priestly cassock distinctive to the Church in France, and a nun, a Daughter of Charity. Nothing could be more typical of French Catholicity

than a Daughter of Charity.

This is the message. Jesus came into the world as Savior for everybody, male and female, young or old, in every walk of life.

To emphasize the point, buildings that would be found in any small French village encircle the stable.

Italian Nativity scenes tell an additional story. The Holy Family is not within a stable but in a setting with broken, classical columns all around. What does this mean? The paganism, and defiance of Christianity, that engulfed the Roman Empire in the Church's first centuries are broken and forgotten. This once mighty empire, and its culture of greed and vice, is in ruins.

Jesus has triumphed.

Each December, I carefully unpack the figures in my set and put them on display. I look at the mail carrier and think, the Lord was born, and died, for you. I look at the seamstress and think the same. I look at the firefighter and think the same.

I look at the buildings and remember that the Lord came not only to Bethlehem, or to the people alive at the time, but to us all, wherever we are, whatever we do.

The sight humbles me and challenges me. The Son of God came to this earth that I might live. I whisper the prayer of Mary, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

If ever you are in New York in December, go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue. As you enter the building, there is a stunning Nativity scene from Southern Italy staged as a centerpiece in the great foyer.

Going to the museum is worth the trip just to see this Nativity. Dozens upon dozens of figures appear all around the Holy Family. They represent every condition and occupation in

life. They are magnificent in themselves, each a work of art.

They tell the meaning of the birth of Lord thrillingly. The Lord was born for us, lived for us and died for us.

Merry Christmas!

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