

THE CRIB OF ARA COELI

The World's Most Beautiful Crib

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"And she brought forth her first-born Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in the manger."



HE simple meaning of the word "crib" is a manger or stall, where food for domestic animals is kept. When Mary, the mother of our Saviour, tenderly placed her Divine Child in the humble manger of Bethlehem's stable, she inseparably linked in the minds of the faithful the Nativity of her Son and the manger, Christmas and the Crib. The relics of the manger in which the Divine Babe was laid after His birth—the crib of all cribs—is still preserved in the Church of Mary Major at Rome. Pilgrims from all parts of the world journey thither to pay homage to these relics, attesting their faith in the eternal mystery of the Incarnation.

The tenderly appealing story of that Christmas night in the stable of Bethlehem has ever inspired the devotion of the faithful, but to St. Francis of Assisi is generally attributed the honor of giving to this devotion the tangible form it now enjoys. The biographers of the saint relate how at Christmas time, 1223, St. Francis with the approval of Honorius III, had a stable built at Greccio and within, a manger, with living sheep, oxen and asses grouped about it. This scenic representation of the historical setting of Christ's Nativity was the realization of a long-cherished desire "to make memorial of that Child who was born in Bethlehem and in some sort to behold with bodily eyes His infant hardships—how He lay in a manger on the hay, with the ox and ass standing by."

The Crib of St. Francis was probably the first of its kind in Italy, but we know that throughout England and France the custom of erecting a crib for the Christmas celebration was not uncommon. Generally, in these countries, a liturgical drama was enacted at the Crib. But the Crib of Greccio had a more emotional and imaginative appeal and to its simplicity and homeliness must be ascribed the eagerness with which the faithful seized upon this pious custom. Today every Catholic Church has

its own crib for the Christmas festival and the Sons of St. Francis have ever emulated the example of their holy founder in propagating this beautiful custom.

It is not surprising then to find the world's most beautiful crib in the Franciscan Church of Ara Coeli in Rome. The church originally belonged to the Benedictines, but in 1252, Pope Innocent the IV transferred it to the Franciscans. The name, Ara Coeli, is generally supposed to have been attributed to an altar erected by the Emperor Augustus to commemorate the Delphic oracle respecting the coming of the Saviour. This altar bore the inscription "Ara Primogeniti Dei." Others believe that the name is of more humble origin, dating from medieval times, when the church was called "Sta. Maria in Aurocoelio." The church itself is full of historical associations. On this site, Roman legends relate, Romulus built the temple of Jupiter Feretrius. Close by stands the Palace of the Senators, the same stair-case leading to the Atrium of the Palace and to the side-door of Ara Coeli. Here many a Roman Senator was slain as a result of the disputes within the palace. Here the victorious armies of the Empire halted, till from the Mamertine prison close by, the message was brought to the emperor or general that their noblest prisoner-of-war had paid the penalty of death for being the enemy of Rome. Here the great Caesar, returning after his first brilliant triumph, received the plaudits of a hero-worshipping populace.

These historical associations certainly enhance the fame of Ara Coeli, but it is the Crib and the miraculous Bambino that attract the majority of pilgrims to its doors. The Crib of Ara Coeli surpasses in beauty and splendor all other scenic representations of the Lord's Nativity. It occupies the whole of one of the side chapels, the Chapel of the Praeceptio, open to the faithful from the Eve of Christmas to the Feast of Epiphany (Jan. 6). In the foreground is a grotto, in which is seated the Virgin Mary, with the miraculous Bambino in her lap. Near her side is Joseph, while the shepherds and kings are kneeling in humble adoration close by. The ox and the ass complete the central group within the crib itself. Above the grotto, there is an image of God the Father, surrounded by choirs of Angels, and so realistic is the impression they give, that the words of the gospel narrative "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will" flash through our minds. In the center of the

chapel is a crystal fountain of glass and round about it sheep are grazing under the watchful eyes of shepherds. Still nearer the crib, women balancing baskets of fruit on their heads seem to be passing by. In the background, a scenic representation of a pastoral landscape, such as environed the stable of Bethlehem, completes the picture. The different figures are all carved from wood, appropriately dressed and vary in size according to their relative distances from the central group within the whole, the dis- spectives have and the effect is

The miracu- that the Virgin her lap, is a flesh- tightly swathed in which is crusted cent diamonds, bies. It was carved olive-tree in the Franciscan. Ow- to obtain the nec- the Bambino, his of making a life- Infant Saviour with failure. He prayer and in the find the image flesh-like color of The surmise of the

Borden, may not be far from the truth, when she says: "No one is left to tell whether or not the ancient olive-wood from which the Bambino is carved were the tree under which the Christ- made Man had agonized. Certain it is that from Olivet it came and with it, sweet tradition of power to heal and comfort." When the miraculous image was being sent to Italy, the ship was wrecked off the coast of Florence, and the image washed ashore. The Friars immediately brought it to the church of Ara Coeli, where it has remained ever since.

Outside of the Christmas season, the Bambino stands in a niche in the Sacristy, where it can be viewed by admiring pil-



from the central crib. On the tances and per- been finely guaged admirable.

lous Bambino, Mother holds in colored image, a white dress, over with magnifi- emeralds and ru- from wood of an Holy Land by a ing to his inability essary colors for cherished design like image of the was threatened had recourse to morning awoke to tinted with the an infant babe. novelist, Lucille

grims. Oftentimes it is driven through the streets of Rome to the bedsides of the sick and infirm. Devout peasants always kneel as the "Santissimo" passes by. Formerly the holy image was left on the bed of the sick for some hours in the hope that a cure might be effected. Now it is never permitted to leave the church unattended.

Thomas Bailey Aldridge in his "Legend of Ara-Coeli" strikingly describes the occurrence which caused this change. At one time, a woman, desiring to possess the sacred Bambino as her own, had another image made similar in size and appearance, and

so like the child
Of Ara Coeli, you'd not have told,
Had both been decked with jewel and chain,
And dressed alike in a dress of gold
Which was the true one of the twain.

She then feigned sickness and the holy friars brought the Santo Bambino to her bedside. As soon as they had withdrawn, she clothed the false image in the regal splendor of the Bambino and sent it back to the convent. The fraud was not discovered; but all that night a terrible storm, accompanied by thunder and lightning, raged throughout Rome. The Friars, unable to sleep, were quietly praying in their cells, when above the roar of the gale, they distinctly heard a thunderous rapping on the doors of the church and the tolling of the church bell. Hastening to the church,

the brothers stood
Huddled together, pallid and mute,
By the massive door of iron-clamped wood,
Till one old monk, more resolute
Than the others—a man of pious will—
Stepped forth, and letting his lantern rest
On the pavement, crouched upon his breast
And peeped through a chink there was between
The cedar door and the sunken sill,
At the instant a flash of lightning came,
Seeming to wrap the world in flame.
He gave but a glance, and straight arose
With his face like a corpse's. What had he seen?
Two dripping little pink-white toes!

Tugging at the bolts and flinging down the chain, the old friar swung back the door, and there on the threshold, dripping wet, stood the naked image of the real Bambino. Since that time, the miraculous image has never been trusted out alone, but now has

attendants to accompany it wherever it goes. The Santo Bambino of Ara Coeli has ever been the object of the faithful's devotion, but at no period throughout the year is it more manifest than during the ceremonies of the Christmas season.

Christmas days at Ara Coeli are days never to be forgotten. Vast crowds can be seen daily climbing the broad stair-case of the Quirinale Hill, passing through the lanes of merchants selling their Madonna wares. It is indeed a cosmopolitan crowd. Pilgrims of every nationality intermingle with the native Romans, all hastening to secure vantage-points within the church. The church itself is packed with a vast throng of the faithful. Some are kneeling before the shrine of the Madonna, while others crowd about the chapel of the Praesepio, but the Christmas sermonettes of the children are what appeal to the great majority of the people.

It is the novelty of this whole performance that grasps the attention of the people. The innocence and sincerity of the children, their self-consciousness and nervousness, the spirit of faith and devotion that animates them, all play upon the heart-strings of the faithful. From the pulpit opposite the chapel of the Praesepio the little piping voices of the children are raised in exhortation to come and adore with them the New-born Babe. Sometimes the hardships of the Infant Saviour are pityingly portrayed; at other times, the joy and glory the Saviour brought into the hearts of men by His birth. Every conceivable aspect of Christ's Nativity is treated and all in an original way. The gestures are both natural and graceful, as would be expected of a Latin race, but frequently fright seizes upon an up-raised hand and leaves it suspended in mid-air or causes the memory to falter and the lips to stammer. One day is set apart for the crippled and infirm children, and then it is awe-inspiring and thought-provoking to hear the sentiments of resignation and patience that characterize the sermons of these little afflicted children of God. As child after child ascends the pulpit, we become more and more convinced that Christmas is indeed the feast of little children and that to participate in the joys of Christmas, we must become like unto them—simple, pure and trusting in the goodness of the Divine Babe of Bethlehem.

The closing ceremony on the Feast of the Epiphany is in harmony with the whole Christmas celebration. The Bambino

is taken from the Crib and reverently carried in procession to the top of the broad stair-case leading to the church.

At Epiphany,
If the holy winter day prove mild,
It is shown to the wondering, gaping crowd
On the church's steps—held high aloft—
While every sinful head is bowed,
And the music plays, and the censers' soft
White breath ascends like silent prayer.

The people drop to their knees as the holy image is raised aloft and his blessing impored upon all the faithful. The procession then returns to the Sacristy, the Bambino is placed in its customary niche, and the Christmas ceremonies of Ara Coeli are over.

Stripped of its brilliant pageantry, the grandeur of its Crib and the novelty of its ceremonies, the Christmas festivities of Ara Coeli do not differ from that of the humblest chapel in the far-off mission lands of China. It is the worship of the New-born Saviour that underlies both. It is the profession of faith in the divinity of that Child who was born of the Virgin Mary in the humble stable of Bethlehem. It is the manifestation of the joy and gladness of men's hearts in welcoming Him in their midst who was both God and man. In every Catholic Church throughout the world, the strains of the Christmas anthem can be heard—*Laeti triumphantes, venite adoremus Dominum*—and the faithful, rejoicing in the Eucharistic presence of the Divine Babe on their altars, hasten to adore and to receive Him into their hearts.

