

# The Church

## The Christmas Crib

**C**ERTAIN customs and practices have with singular appropriateness attached themselves to our principal Church feasts. One of these is the popular association of the Crib and Christmas. One can hardly visualize the Christmas Mass without including the Crib. It sets before us in a most vivid manner the scene of Christ's birth and the attending circumstances. It expresses in a tangible way the central thoughts of the Christmas season. The association of the feast and the custom is so natural that it finds a spontaneous response in us. Hence, the Crib has become inseparably linked with Christmas.

Very probably the real stable, the place of Christ's birth, at Bethlehem was a cave. At the present time a church is erected over the spot and in the grotto the exact location where Our Saviour was born is marked by a silver star surrounded by an inscription in Latin: "Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary." Tradition tells us that the place of Christ's birth served as a shelter for beasts of burden, so the usual representation of the birthplace of Our Redeemer as a thatched stable may not be very inaccurate.

The custom of erecting a crib in the church for the Christmas celebration has long been universal, but we are indebted to St. Francis of Assisi for popularizing the devotion. St. Francis conceived the idea of reproducing the place of the Nativity by scenic representations. He secured approval of his plan from Pope Honorius III and with the aid of others constructed his first Christmas Crib at Greccio on Christmas Eve, 1223. Here Mass was celebrated in the open air at midnight.

The coming of the Friars to the midnight celebration; the mountaineers with lighted torches wending their way down the passes to the open space; the peasants singing their Christmas carols along the road and through the woods; the meeting at the improvised altar; the viewing of the rough wooden crib, the figures surrounding it, the living oxen, sheep and asses that St. Francis had grouped around it—all this struck such a responsive

chord in human hearts that the custom thus born seems destined to endure as long as Christmas itself.

St. Francis, who never became a priest because he considered himself unworthy of the honor, acted as deacon at the midnight Mass and delivered a fervent Christmas sermon on the greatness and mercy of Christ, whom he lovingly called the "Child of Bethlehem." A beautiful legend is attached to this scene. It relates that St. Francis having sung the words of the Gospel: "and they laid Him in a manger" knelt down to meditate on the mystery and there appeared in his arms a child surrounded by a brilliant light.

The faithful eagerly seized upon the pious custom of erecting cribs and the practice spread rapidly to neighboring localities, was soon introduced into the monasteries and Franciscan churches and propagated in a special manner by St. Clara who established the devotion in all the houses of the Poor Clares. These were the beginnings and the devotion to the crib has since spread throughout the whole Christian world. From Christmas-eve until the octave day of the Epiphany (Jan. 13th) the crib is shown in all Catholic churches serving as a reminder of the mystery of the Incarnation and recalling the historical events connected with the coming of Christ.

As the custom of building Christmas Cribs spread the representation became more detailed and fanciful until now the group includes not only the Holy Family, but the angelic chorus, the shepherds and the Magi. The representations of the crib today are often very elaborate and beautiful, sometimes very simple and ordinary, and not infrequently grotesque; but no matter whether the display be artistic or bizarre it is an earnest and pious effort to visualize the central event of all time—the birth of Christ.

Probably the most beautiful and largest crib in the world is in the old Franciscan church of Ara Coeli in Rome. This church possesses the famous Santo Bambino, a figure carved from wood, representing the Infant Christ. This statue is covered with gold and adorned with many rich jewels. It is said to have come from the Holy Land. On the Feast of the Epiphany the Minister General of the Friars Minor carries this statue in solemn procession to the top of the stairs that leads to the main entrance of the Ara Coeli from which point the figure is raised in reverent benediction over the city.