

## Christmas 2024 “Nativity Scenes”

Bishop Frank Schuster

How many of you have a nativity scene at home? The first time I visited Europe around this time of year, one of my favorite surprises was how some of the parishes have huge nativity scenes on display. I am not talking about the height of the figurines, although that was sometimes the case. I am talking about the sheer numbers. There were dozens, and sometimes hundreds of figurines filling up a lavish landscape, sometimes taking up a better part of a room to display. It is quite breathtaking. Some of the figures are just everyday people, oblivious to what was happening. Some of the figures are quite aware, calling us to do the same.

This memory came back to me after visiting St. John Vianney on Vashon Island last weekend. A parishioner recently donated such a nativity scene that is now on display in their narthex, with a hundred if not more figurines placed carefully throughout the diorama. It even has a figurine of their patron, St. John Vianney, snuggled into the landscape. It was like “Where’s Waldo” trying to spot him. It’s a fun game for both young kids and old kids alike.

Pope Francis wrote in his apostolic letter *Admirabile Signum*, given to us in December 2019, that with the manger, “great imagination and creativity is always shown in employing the most diverse materials to create small masterpieces of beauty.” I completely agree. Pope Francis celebrated how the manger scene helps to bring the Gospel alive. It is a living gospel, allowing us to experience the profound poverty of the Holy Family, the profound tenderness of God, and how the whole of creation, including the stars in the sky, rejoiced at his birth.

The Pope recalled how the origin of these Christmas scenes, also called a crèche, can be dated back to St. Francis of Assisi in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. You see after visiting the Holy Land, St. Francis came back inspired to make the Christmas story more real for the people of Assisi. He encouraged an artisan to put together such a scene with a stable, hay, a crib, a donkey, etc., with the help of his friars. Since he only gave them 15 days to put it together before that first Christmas, they didn’t have time to make statues for it and so they made it a living creche instead with locals playing the roles of Joseph, Mary, Jesus, the shepherds, you get the picture. It made such an impression that the tradition of setting up a nativity scene in churches and homes eventually became ubiquitous throughout the world.

I believe having a nativity scene in every parish this time of year, and in every home, if possible, helps us to remember the reason for the season. Coming to Mass like you are doing, reading scripture, spiritual reading, religious art, the choice of movies we watch, and something as lovely as a creche in our home can all play their part in helping us to remember why Christmas matters.

I mention it because, as much as I hope that this Christmas, and every Christmas, is a merry Christmas, we all know that this is simply not possible for everyone, or at the very least, an extremely tall order. We have essential workers who are working in our hospitals, and we

have our men and women in uniform overseas and at home keeping our communities safe. We have many who keep working through Christmas just in case we need to get something at the grocery store, or something as simple as a tank of gas, the list goes on. They all deserve our gratitude for their sacrifice for us.

In every parish, we also have parishioners who are hospitalized, or who are coping with a recent diagnosis for themselves or for a loved one, or who are perhaps suffering from a broken relationship at home, or who might be grieving the loss of a loved one this year. We also pray for those who live in fear this Christmas in the war-torn areas of our world as we also pray for those who are experiencing homelessness, and loneliness, closer to home.

This is why wishing a Merry Christmas is a nice hope, and a very good hope, but sometimes too much to ask of people. On the other hand, every single one of us can have a blessed Christmas. Every one of us can have a blessed Christmas. How? You see, I believe that no matter what life is throwing at us now, every one of us can have a truly blessed Christmas if we realize that celebrating Christmas makes absolutely no sense without our Easter hope. We do not celebrate Jesus' birth because he was a great thinker, or historical figure. We celebrate Christmas morning because Jesus is our savior. If Jesus did not die for our sins and offer us a path to eternal life, there would be no reason to celebrate Christmas at all. This is why the Gospel calls Jesus Emmanuel, a word that means, "God is with us". The name Jesus itself comes from a word that literally means "God saves".

Yes, my friends, come what may, every Christmas can still be a truly blessed Christmas if we can just see ourselves inside that Christmas nativity scene I have been talking about. What if you saw yourself and your life as playing out inside the Christmas scene, because it is! As a people of faith, that is where we all are. We are inside the story of our salvation. We are in it. Right now. Yes, my brothers and sisters, no matter what we are going through, if we realize that we are in fact part of Jesus' story, and Jesus is alive in our story, this can offer us a most personal relationship with him. This is Good News because only the light of Christ can triumph over whatever darkness might be going on in our hearts right now and he can even offer us the best Christmas gift we could ever wish for or desire. The gift of hope. In that Spirit, I pray that your Christmas this year will be truly blessed through Christ our Lord. Amen.