

## Sinnopskornið Christmas 2021

One of the blessings of Christmas is the tradition of praying at the crib. A few days before Christmas, Sister Louisa and her volunteers build the crib in church and populate it with various statues, so that you and I can look at the people who are at the centre of the feasts we are celebrating.

When St. Francis of Assisi created the first Christmas crib during the Christmas of 1223 in the forest near Greccio, it was with a clear intention: "I want to set before our bodily eyes the hardships of his infant needs, how he lay in the manger, how with an ox and ass standing by he lay upon the hay". He proclaimed the message of a compassionate God in whom the oppressed and the poor can seek refuge again.

When Pope Francis asked us in 2019 to consider what a remarkable sign the crib is, he mentioned the various elements of the nativity scene. He was probably thinking of the remarkable cribs that are set up every year in churches in Rome. People have a tradition of going as families to visit the various cribs all around the city. Some are quite big, and they all have a fantastic amount of detail, with angels transported on wires across the sky, music playing in the background, all sorts of buildings and water flowing in artificial streams, not to mention the figures of people and animals. The church of Saints Cosmas & Damian usually wins (unofficially)!

Pope Francis started by mentioning the starry sky in the background. The darkness of the night speaks to us of times in our lives when we ask many questions: What is my life about? Why is there so much suffering in the world? What will happen to me, my family, my friends? But we see that out of the darkness came the fantastically bright light that is Jesus. Many of the Roman cribs have mountains and fields where there are streams, sheep and shepherds: this reminds us that Saint Francis of Assisi believed that not just humanity, but the whole of creation rejoices when the Messiah comes. Many cribs include models of poor people and beggars, because God became man for the sake of those who feel most in need of his love and ask him to draw near to them. Herod's palace is in the background, but it is closed and deaf to the tidings of joy. The birth of Jesus in a manger is the only true revolution, the revolution of tenderness. At the centre are the figures of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. The crib scene reminds us of what happened when God knocked on the door of Mary's heart, and how generously she responded. Saint Joseph says nothing but stands with a staff, a sign of his firm dedication to his vocation: to look after the child and his mother. The figure of Jesus brings many things into our minds and hearts - the joy and mystery of the birth of every baby, born in weakness and frailty.... In this way we are drawn into the feelings Joseph and Mary had as they looked at Jesus. At the Epiphany, we add the figures of the wise men who came from the East, bearing gifts on their journey to pay homage to the infant king. There was no celebration of Christmas for three centuries (birthdays were a pagan celebration), and everything focused on this feast, when Jesus appears as the Light of the World.

A German mystic called Angelus Silesius (born 25 December 1624) wrote some short verses about the crib. It is worth thinking about them:

- If Christ were born in Bethlehem a thousand times and not in thee thyself; then thou art lost eternally
- All things are now reversed. The castle is the cave. The crib becomes the throne, the night brings forth the day. The Virgin bears a Child.
- If only your heart would become a crib, God would once again become a child on this earth.

In the Sinnopskornið last Christmas, I hoped (foolishly) that Corona would have been sorted out by now. Instead, we have had to learn to live with it; it will probably never go away. Some of you have had the virus, which hits some people very hard. The Sisters have so many contacts in the islands

that there is a stream of people who ask them to pray for them, and often those intentions are included in our celebrations of Mass. You can always ask to be prayed for, and normally these prayers are confidential, unless people ask for them to be made public. There are people in the parish who are seriously ill, at home or in hospital: please keep them in your prayers. Several parishioners have been bereaved in the last year. That loss is never easy to bear, but many of you have offered support in many ways. Several of our Filipino parishioners have been very worried since a typhoon struck a week before Christmas, because communication was impossible and they could not find out how their loved ones are. Let us keep praying for them, perhaps especially when we visit the crib.

Father Peter