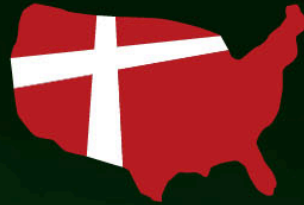


CATHOLIC



EXTENSION

Christmas at home



Meet Your creche

By John Shea

Christmas and the creche

It is December. We decorate our homes – trees, strings of lights, candles, boxes brightly wrapped – the whole roll out of concrete Christmas.

It is time to bring out the nativity scene, or crèche – on the mantle, on a table, under the tree – in some place where it can be seen and, if the moment is right, contemplated. Putting up the nativity scene can be a spiritual practice.

What if, in the Spirit of the season, the crèche characters began to talk? What if they asked us questions to bring home our faith, to encourage us into gratitude and commitment? **How would we answer?**

How to do this spiritual practice

The nativity scene spiritual practice has three steps.

- 1) Put out a nativity character.
- 2) Read the monologue for that character.
- 3) Respond to the question at the end of the monologue.

Step 1: Put out a crèche character.

Putting out the crèche characters as a spiritual practice does not insist on inserting time schedules into the arrival of the characters. But it does suggest putting out the characters one at a time. A piece-by-piece approach counters the temptation to put out all the characters at once and get it out of the way. “Christmas rush” is a powerful cultural influence and it can impact all activities. But putting the crèche up is not about getting it done. It is about doing it, the experience of acting and reflecting. In the process, you will deepen meaning and appreciation and truly “come home” to yourself in a new way.

Christmas is about homecoming.

Who goes first?

The suggestion is to begin with the **Wise Men** and end with the **Child in the Manger**. The **Child in the Manger** is the center of the scene. He is both a conclusion to the symbolism of the crèche as well as a beginning of what comes after. The child will grow into a man and the revelation, hinted at in his birth, will unfold into its full glory. **The Wise Men** and **The Child in the Manger** bookend the practice.

The middle of the practice can be random or ordered. If random, choose any of the characters and proceed from one to the other. **Mary** may come third or fifth. **Joseph** may be second or fourth. What is listed is merely a suggestion.

The suggested order

1. Wise Men
2. Shepherds
3. Joseph
4. Mary
5. The Child in the Manger

What if my nativity scene has extra characters?

5 characters of the nativity story are included in this practice, but your nativity set may have extra characters. Perhaps animals accompany the **Shepherds**, or an angel precedes the **Wise Men**. You may wish to ponder what questions these additional characters would have for you.

Step 2: Read the monologue for that character

This booklet contains 5 poems – one for each of the nativity characters. They say something about themselves – where they come from, why they find themselves in this crèche, and what wisdom they carry and want to communicate. However, they will say something about you as they tell about themselves

Step 3: Respond to the question at the end of the poem.

At the end of poem, the character will ask you a question. If the question resonates with you, respond. Reflect and speak about things that are important to you. Silence might be helpful. It makes room for the necessary inner reflection, time to become congruent with your thoughts and feelings.

You may do this alone, or with friends, or with family. Doing it with others is often more fun – and more meaningful. It can be a way to bring the family together around a different type of conversation. Instead of numbly undergoing Christmas, seize the season.

You and your family and friends may not be well rehearsed in talking about faith or spiritual truths. The crèche characters believe in spirit and how spirit elevates and interacts with mind, body, and the whole array of social interactions – from interpersonal love to the social distribution of wealth.

You and the **Wise Men**, you and the **Shepherds**, you and **Joseph**, you and **Mary**, and you and **The Child in the Manger** are dialogue partners. When the characters are let loose, they precipitate the internal reflection and conversation they know best – incarnation – how spirit becomes flesh.

The Three Wise Men

Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage."

When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet:

*'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
since from you shall come a ruler,
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'*"

Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage."

After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

Matthew 2:1-12



We are the Wise Men.
But we are not smart in the usual ways.
We cannot make a chair.
Our soups are regrettable.
We forget important facts.
How long, again,
can camels go without water?

What galvanizes us are big pictures -
how all things are held together
even though they look apart,
how an unseen logic directs
apparently random events.
For us, nothing is as it seems.
Appearance is not truth.

Conjunctions, symmetries, balances
between heaven and earth
capture our detective attention.
A star moves across the sky
and we are in the saddle,
convinced the birth of the predicted
has occurred.

Our gifts are star-inspired,
We bring gold
 because he will bring people into their true worth.
We bring incense
 because he will reconcile people to God.
We bring myrrh
 because his death will be a path to new life.
These deeper meanings were what we wanted to find.

They are also why we are in your creche.
We hope our journey activates
the search lurking beneath your surface,
beneath your practical plans
and minor achievements
that promised you more
than they were able to deliver.

What deeper meanings move you?



The Shepherds

Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear.

The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest/and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child.

All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

Luke 2:8-20

We are the Shepherds.
We stand watch at night
and care for the sheep.
Vigilance is our game.
That is why
when the angels on high came
with the news of the newborn,
we knew what we had to do.

A child was born to us, they said,
to our keeping.
Of course,
we would watch over him.
We brought the sheep
so he would feel at home.

The angels said the child had titles –
Savior, Messiah, Lord.
But it was not the titles
that moved us.

It was angels' song -
bursting words of God's glory
manifesting as peace among people.
They touched a place of good will in us,
a place where spirit,
unable to be contained, overflows.
We ran to find him.

And we did.

We found what the angels said –
a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and
laid in a manger.
But the angels did not tell us
what the finding would do to us.

How green pastures and restful waters
would calm our minds,
how the valley of the shadow of death
would lose its terror,
how we knew we were known by name
and held by love,
how we, the Shepherds,
would suddenly become the sheep
because the Good Shepherd
had arrived.

We are in your creche
because our destiny
is to invite you to experience
what happened to us.

Where do you find peace?



Joseph

Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit.

Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly.

Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus.

Matthew 1:18-25

I am Joseph.
You may have me kneeling with a staff,
my eyes unwaveringly downward on the child,
a portrait of commitment and readiness.
Or I might have my hands
on the reins of a donkey,
showing my willingness to journey
to keep mother and child safe.
Or I might be standing to the side,
indicating a supportive but secondary role.

I am hard to properly place.
Wherever you put me is fine.
I know what I have to do.

I am an inheritor of dreams.
My ancient namesake
saved his people from famine
by interpreting in the day
the communications of the night.
I do the same.

My heart stays awake while my body sleeps.
I listen while the sounds of the earth are silent.
The angels of dreams only whisper commands.
“Take Mary for your wife.”
“Take the mother and child and flee.”
“Take the mother and child and return.”

My obedience has taught me
to see through scandal.
What grows in Mary
is the work of the Spirit –
fragile, vulnerable –
pursued by the sword.
Life needs protection
until life is ready to serve.
And I protect.

That is what you need to know about me
and what you need to know about yourself.

Perhaps in your crèche
you have a figure of me
with a staff that blossoms,
flowers sprouting from the top
of the long, lean stick.
It tells my truth best.

How does your strength serve love?



Mary

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary.

And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?"

And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God."

Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:26-38

I am Mary.
I have more titles than I need.
I am the queen of this and the mother of that.
But I want to tell you
I am most at home in your crèche.
It is here,
as I contemplate my Son
I have the time
to treasure all these things in my heart.
It is here
I realize the truth of the virgin mother,
the one who conceived in the Spirit
and brought forth in the flesh.

My son will say as much.
When a roadside woman
will bless my womb and breast,
he will praise my ability
to hear the Word of God
and bring it to fulfillment.

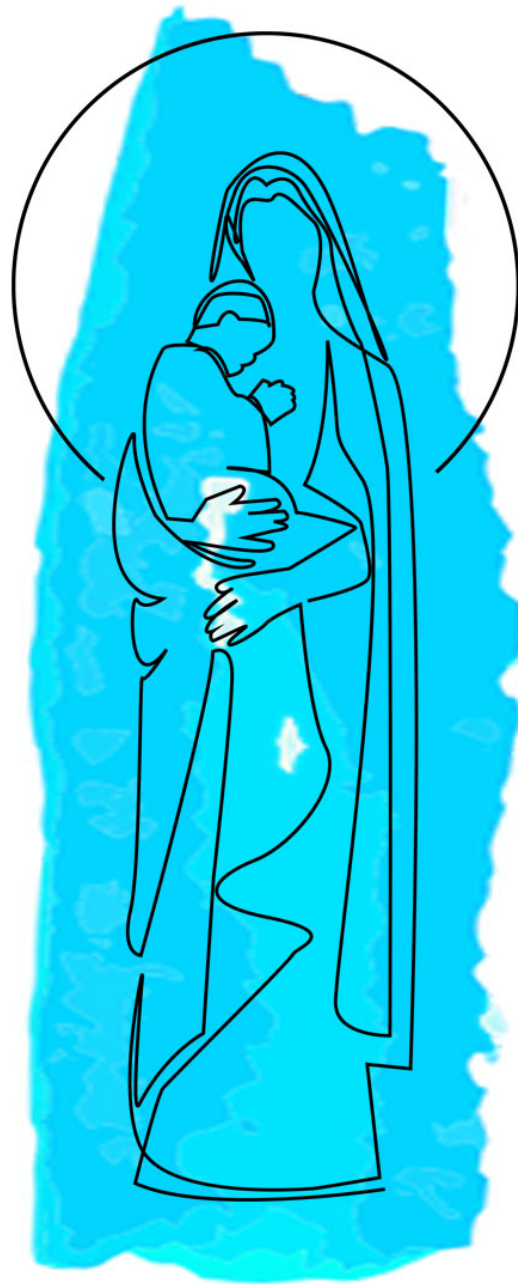
It is what I learned from Gabriel.
He saw in me
more than I saw in myself
and troubled my ordinariness
with the announcement
of a full and unfolding grace.
I became both cooperater and observer.
The moment I said, "Yes,"
I swam in rivers
not of my own making.

How little we know!
How much we have to trust!

Hold my hand.
I will take you to the place
where the spirit rejoices,
where the umbilical cord to God is uncut,
where lowliness becomes largeness,
where all space and time is pregnant,
where the center has no circumference,
where the divine child lays his head
upon the breast of your earth.

My question is the answer I found
when I said, "Let it be!"

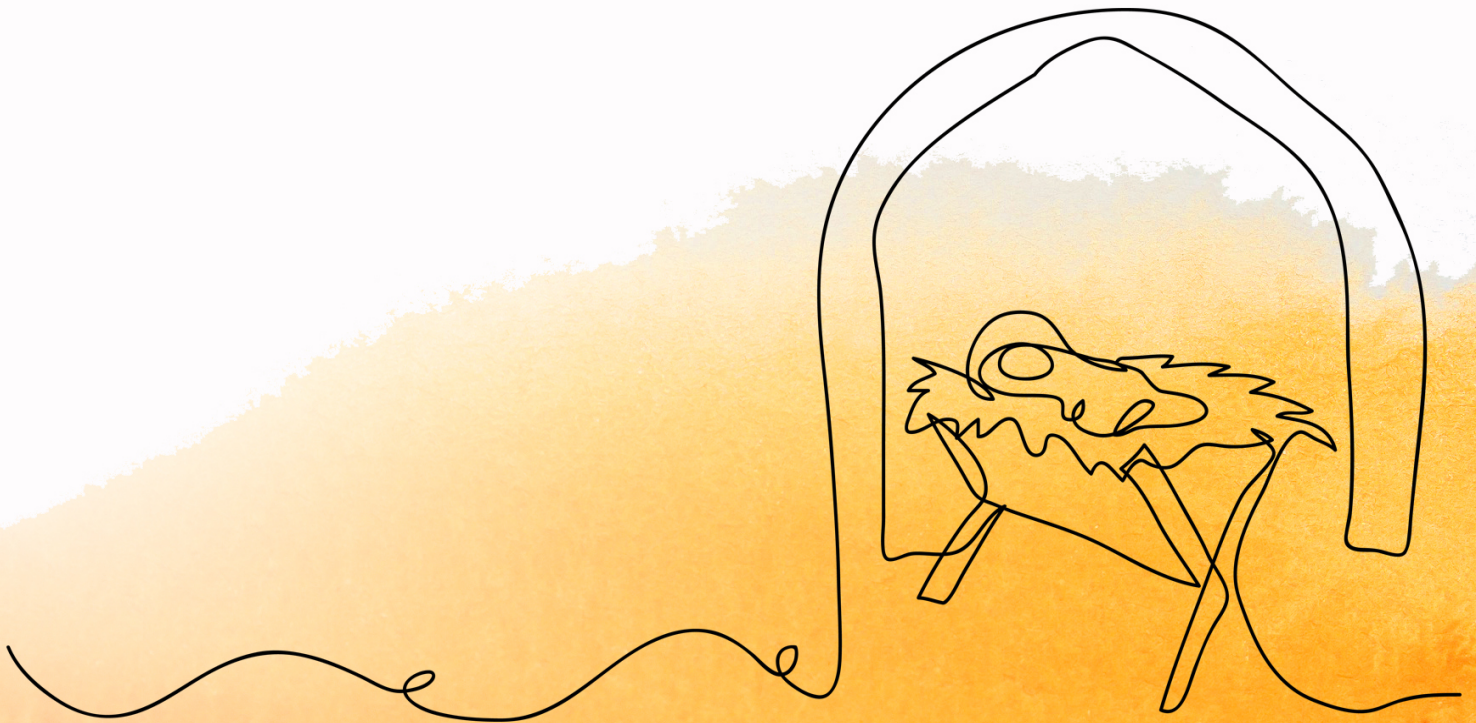
How do you treasure life?



The Child in the Manger

*And the Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory as of the Father's only Son,
full of grace and truth.*

From his fullness we have all received.
John 1:14-15



I am the Father of the Child.
My Son is too young to speak.
So I will say a few words
to help you place him
at the center of your crèche
and, as you do it, allow him
to place himself in the center of you.

How many have I courted seekers
in dreams and deserts
only to be forgotten
in the demands of day?
They put me on a throne,
so you must kneel.
They say I withhold blessings,
so you must beg.
They claim I punish,
so you must be afraid.

Then my Son came out of the water
and swallowed my Word from the sky.
The dove of love descended
and my pleasure ran through him.

He never looked back,
but looked everywhere else
and saw what no one else did.

When people cried from the crowd,
he turned.
When people hid in their sins,
he forgave.
When people lost their way,
he pursued.
When people were shunned,
he reached out.
When people were in pain,
he touched.
When people did not understand,
he explained.
He gave himself away
like one who lays
in the feeding trough of the manger
as food for every hunger.
He knows Me well.

Yet no one could thin a crowd
like my Son.

His parables were mirrors.
People saw themselves
and did not like what they saw.
His actions were scandalous attacks
on the conventions of separateness.
His arguments silenced adversaries.
The cry of the child in the manger
became the voice of the prophet.

My word of mercy was never so strong,
yet never so rejected.
My word of love was never so perseverant,
yet never so avoided.

Of course, they came for him
with clubs and swords and lies
and he met them with Me.
I was always his welcome
for those who do not know,
drawing light from their darkness,
life from their death.
In him, I Am Who I Am.
You see,
he is Me among you.

So my question to you
will be no surprise.

How do you listen my Son?



Putting Away the Crèche

Some keep the nativity scene up until after the feast of the Epiphany in early January. Epiphany is liturgical feast when the Wise Men arrive. So it seems appropriate to wait for the last of the crèche characters to arrive before they are returned to storage. Others, who are not as liturgically inclined, take the crèche down right after the first of the year. The festivities of Christmas have run their course. People have had enough. The plainness of January is welcomed. Whenever it happens, the nativity scene has to be put away because it is a seasonal practice and the season is over.

You might have experienced this practice as a stretch. The questions not the stuff of ordinary conversations. They may have triggered in you more silence than speech. The words that stumbled out may appear to you to be thin, underdeveloped, a first try. You might not be satisfied with them.

But they have done what they are supposed to do. They have opened up a way of thinking, feeling, and acting that you may be interested in pursuing. There is enough in what you have said to know there is more that you want. Hunger is the spiritual outcome of the season of abundance. The Christian Tradition is clear about how to feed this hunger.

Follow the life of the child in the manger.

About John Shea:

Catholic Extension is honored to publish Advent reflection from renowned author, theologian, and storyteller John Shea.

John Shea is a consultant to dioceses, parishes, and faith-based organizations and former director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Mundelein Seminary.

About Catholic Extension:

The presence of the Catholic Church is a guiding light in many places darkened by poverty and conflict. Catholic Extension uplifts faith communities and supports individuals who bring the light of Christ to the most forgotten areas of our country.

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