

THE NATIVITY SCENE AND FIDELITY IN THE FAMILY. AN EXPRESSION OF FAITH

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The author discusses how the nativity scene – as presented in churches, monasteries, and in the homes of both rich and poor – was and remains a very important part of Slovenian history, culture, and folklife, and especially part of religious tradition. As Slovenian families accept and live their faith, they construct nativity scenes and preserve ritual practices.

Keywords: *nativity scene, family, faith*

Avtor razpravlja o tem, kako so in so bile jaslice, ki jih postavljajo v cerkvah, samostanih, domovih bogatih in revnih, zelo pomemben del slovenske zgodovine, kulture, ljudskega življenja in še posebej religiozne tradicije. Slovenske družine, ki sprejemajo in živijo vero, postavljajo jaslice in ohranjajo ritualno prakso.

Ključne besede: *jaslice, družina, verovanje*

The Slovenian researcher Niko Kuret (1906–1995) wrote that, in the past, Slovenians knew how to provide themselves with spiritual wealth according to the liturgical year. Festivities were celebrated not only in church, before the altar, but the spirit of celebration was also brought into their homes. The nativity had a special role because it captured certain brief moments of Christmas worship and kept the family at home. For Slovenians, the nativity represented the richness of the Christmas experience, and peace and joy in their homes. Families that set up a Christmas crèche did not forget about the newborn Christ and his message, which came from the humble crib.¹

What is the nativity scene? The *Mala splošna enciklopedija* [MSE, Small General Encyclopedia], states that ‘nativity scene’ (*jaslice*) is a representation of Christ’s birth, a popular Christmas custom [1975: 158]. The nativity scene expresses God’s love that came to man when Jesus Christ was born.

The nativity scene has always been a *theatrum sacrum* – a holy scene, in which artists and believers arranged the figures in particular scenes. History has shown that the nativity scene does not include anything overly romantic, entirely inexpert, and does not include any false enthusiasm, any unworthy refuse. These models from the beginning of the 19th century are displayed in museums as historical testimony. However, they are unworthy of imitation. Loquacious and fictitious elements have not left anything in the nativity scene, and therefore they should not be in it. In the past, nativity scenes addressed only what was essential: giving, festivity, devotion, peace on earth; these were dominant. However, they

¹ Cf. Grčar [1997: 150 f.].

did not exclude showing profane events; for example, a fisherman, who hurries to the lake to catch a fish and bring it to the newborn Redeemer.

Setting up the nativity scene used to be one of the most anticipated and cheerful occasions. Some opted for a Palestinian crèche and others for local ones. Pilgrimages to the Holy Land influenced the designers of nativity scenes to create a Palestinian landscape with a cavern, Middle Eastern-style houses, and costumes known from the Bible and reference works. Some creators of nativity scenes believed that only the Palestinian nativity was the genuine one, as the authentic reflection of the true historical time and place where Christ was born.

The belief that Christ wishes to be reborn once again every year, everywhere for everyone, did not fade. This is because the birth of Jesus is not only a historical event, but much more: it is a repeating reality, not only in the Holy Land but all around the world at any time. Thus the Slovenian people recreated a local nativity scene: a shed was set up in the Slovenian landscape, figures were arranged all the way to the distant mountain slopes, the decision matured in the affirmation: Slovenians, Jesus wants to be born for you and in you. Do not flee to the East, but open your hearts and hands here and now!

Many creators of the manger concentrated their work on nativity figures rather than on the landscape. The size of the figures has always set the scale for everything else: for the landscape itself, the paths, trees, buildings, tools, and so on. Everything had to be made to balance the figures. The creators of the figures followed the rule expressed by Georg Spiegler: *Der Mensch ist das Mass aller Dinge* (Man is the measure for everything) [1967: 8]. The proportions that exist in the natural environment have always been considered in nativity scenes.

In Slovenia three forms of figures have been used: immovable, movable dressed, and mobile. Immovable figures were wooden carvings, plaster casts, sculptures made of clay or other material, or figures coated with pieces of cloth. Figures less than 15 cm tall used to be immovable because they are difficult to dress. Inside households people used figures from 15 to 20 cm tall. Movable, dressed and flexible figures have had preference over immovable ones because it is possible to place them in an appropriate spot and at the same time put them in a sitting, lying, or kneeling position; the legs and the arms could be moved to represent desired gestures. History has shown that clothes depended on the figure's size as well as on whether the figure represented a local or a Palestinian character.

Slovenians preferred to put the nativity scene in the prayer corner or on an old family chest, a chest of drawers, a special small table, or sometimes a wide shelf between the windows [cf. Kuret 1981: 244]. Many set up the nativity scene on a board and later moved it to an appointed place. In this case, the size and the shape of the nativity scene were determined by the base. When creating the nativity scene, usually with the help of the entire family, the landscape was set up first, according to which the proper position of the shed or cave, paths, water, bridge, and individual trees and the rest of the greenery was fixed. Slovenians would set the nativity hill made of moss in the prayer corner, in front of which they placed

the shed. A wooden framework or stumps were used to make a higher hill. However, most of the time there was hay, covered with moss.

The shed or the cave with the Holy Family has been the main or focal point of the nativity scene. To achieve the desired effect, lights were used. A brighter light has always been focused on the shed to attract attention.

A shed shaped like a hay-rack from Gorenjska (Upper Carniola) was an original idea. A higher roof was made to accommodate and illuminate the Holy Family. This high quality Slovenian nativity scene was set up year after year by the engineer Jožko Pogačar (1923–1993) in Kamnik.

The Slovenian open nativity scene is placed in the prayer corner; it can also be situated on tables of various shapes, chests of drawers, or windowsills. In Slovenia it is possible to find nativity scenes in various cabinets. These are known as the closed type. They are reminiscent of a stage in miniature.

A famous means of creating the Christmas event is to fashion miniature houses for a place – not only individual houses, but even a real farm model as done by the Franciscan priest Ludvik Dovč in Nazarje.

The background for the Slovenian crèche in the prayer corner was usually a cross and images of saints, and in some places Bethlehem was added as well. In Slovenia the landscape rises up the hill, which is crowned with the silhouette of the old town; from a green environment to the rocky world that ends in the skyline against which appear the snowy peaks of the Slovenian mountains. Above this is stretched the common background of a beautiful night sky. The parish church of Cerklje in Gorenjska keeps a copy



Fig. 1: Corner crèche: “God’s corner”. Author Mateja Kozmus, Žirovnica, 2007 [All photo by L. Grčar].



Fig. 2: Corner crèche: “God’s Corner”. Author France Gorše, Zamostec, Sodražica.

of the night sky that can be seen from the front of the church on Christmas night. Some Slovenians were true masters in creating these starlit surfaces.

When the landscape, the background, and the sky were complete, the creators of the nativity scene drew paths and secured the entire scene with a fence. A basic rule was applied to their work: the paths had to be drawn as naturally as possible, so the shepherds could move along them roped up or with crampons. There were never too many paths. In the best of cases there was one that led to Bethlehem and another one joining it from the side along the way. If the path led over a brook, there was usually an old wooden bridge.

The fence, which represents the separation of the holy from the profane, was usually an old uneven paling, which was sometimes broken here and there. The Slovenians knew that these fences should never be intrusive because the nativity scene is set up in order to bring us together; however, big palings and fences have always separated us. The architect Jože Plečnik (1872–1957) commented to Franc Saleški Finžgar (1871–1962): “Between good neighbors there are no fences!”

The happiest moment in the family on Christmas Eve was when the nativity scene was finished and only the figures had to be arranged. The local crèche creators devoted great attention, care, and love to the arrangement of the Holy Family. In the shed or cave there was a crib, a basket, or simply some hay covered with a piece of cloth onto which the Jesus was laid, and beside him was Virgin Mary. She usually kneels in front of the newborn Child, who is the Creator, Savior, and Son. The third person is St. Joseph. The figure that represents him usually shows concern, as a fosterer and guardian. Sometimes he holds a gnarled walking stick in his hand and his lamp is hung in the cave or shed.

Behind the Holy Family, an ox and a donkey usually appeared. If there was not enough space, only their heads were put in the background. This can be seen in several creations by Father Wolfgang Kogler (1913–1993). In front of the shed and in its immediate vicinity there were shepherds of various shapes. The one that brought the lamb to the Child was usually at the front.

Skilled creators sometimes put a good-hearted shepherd on the outer edge, who became the connector between the outer world, represented by the living, and the world that is simple and real. That is the world in which Jesus Christ was born to recreate a new heaven and a new earth, where the new man will live according to the New Testament, singing a new song. This shepherd usually faces those admiring the scene and invites them with his raised arm to come closer, to stop and take time to listen to what the nativity scene has to say.

THE NATIVITY SCENE AND FAITH IN THE FAMILY

The nativity scene represents the Holy Family, the model for every family. The image of the Holy Family is the image of God’s plan for the family on Earth.

One of the most pressing questions of our time, one of the most painful, most current,

most vital questions is the family. But what is the family? Sociologists, moralists, educationalist, politicians, and psychologists could give us very different explanations. [Lubich 1981]

One concept of the family rises above the others: God's conception. What is the family in God's eyes? What is its purpose? What is its meaning? "God created the family at the very beginning. When he became incarnate, he became part of a family. And Jesus started his mission and revealed his glory in celebration of the new family" [Lubich 1981].

It would be sufficient to realize what the family is according to God's idea: God has set his heart upon the family. This reality is so important to him that he put his own character in it, God's life, the life of the Holy Trinity is reflected in the family [Lubich 1989].

Pope John Paul II declared in the apostolic letter on the family:

God, who is Love, conceived the family as an intertwined love relationship, which can be marital, maternal, paternal, filial, fraternal, the love of grandparents towards grandchildren, and vice versa. Only love forms, joins, and creates a family. The family is a mystery of love. [cf. Lubich 1989]

Pope John Paul II wrote in the Exhortation to Families:

The mystery of Christ's incarnation and the mystery of His covenant are closely linked with the communion of two persons. Not only was this true with one family, from Nazareth, but is with every family, as the Second Vatican Council says about God's Son, who "in a way united himself with every person" when He became incarnate. Following the example of Christ, who "came" to this world "to serve" [Mt 20:28] the fundamental task of the Church is to serve the family. Hence the man as well as the family are "a journey of the Church." [PD, 2]

The council says: *In the family, or the domestic Church, parents are, through the witness of their lives, the first heralds of the Gospel for their children. In every child they have to foster their own vocation, but in particular the religious vocation* [C 11].

Where else could they and will they accomplish their mission more easily than in front of the crèche? Niko Kuret says:

Ancient sources tell us that in times past, when the plague was raging in the country, the houses that displayed the nativity were safe from the scourge of God. Whether this is true or not, one thing remains certain: the domestic nativity scene, arranged in the true spirit and respected at the right time, prevents many evil spirits and pernicious sins from entering the family.

Modern life has torn apart many families. The adult children start their own lives. They are not necessarily bad lives, but we must face the fact that different organizations have contributed to the separation of the families. Thousands of them are grateful to the nativity scene for reuniting the torn family during the advent season – and have

stayed united. How? The entire family participated in arranging the nativity scene.
 [Kuret 1941: 30–31]



Fig. 3: Crèche, glasswork.
 Author Anica Jereb, Idrija,
 1997.



Fig. 4: Crèche in corn-husks.
 Author Marija Zlobko,
 Mala Slevica, Velike Lašče,
 2005.

THE FAMILY AND THE NATIVITY IN SLOVENIAN RELIGIOUS TRADITION

As early as 1877, Fran Erjavec (1834–1887), a story writer and natural scientist, published an article in the newspaper *Soča* entitled “Christmas Eve in Kranjska (Carniola).” The style of his story writing was characterized by a romantic-realistic duality, which was notably inclined to realism. In *Kranjska* the entire family stayed at home on Christmas Eve. Men in particular did not worry about work; however, women had many errands to do and could not have managed everything even if they had had four hands.

Surprisingly, the children were very helpful on this day... Everyone is in the house, everyone throngs around the table. And they are incredibly silent, unlike the other days. There is the elder brother, who is studying in the city, whom the farmhand drove home late the previous night. He brought with him everything necessary for the crèche. [Erjavec 1877]

Then the writer describes with vivid expression how the children went to the woods first thing in the morning to dig in the snow for the moss on the rocks and stumps. Shivering and numb with cold, they finally returned home. Fran Erjavec writes:

They brought a full basket of moss. There was enough of it for five nativity scenes. While the children were in the grove, the farmhand fixed a large board in the corner; on this board an older boy set up the crèche. He created a mountain out of moss, and a path winding up the mountain, sprinkling it with the finest sand. The road leads to Bethlehem, shining yellow, green, and red on the top of the hill in the corner. Below, a step away from the road is the shed, carefully carved from pine bark. Inside there is hay for the Divine Child. At the side there is a donkey and an ox. Next to the baby is the Holy Mother with Saint Joseph. The slopes of the mountain are scattered with trees, sheep, cows, wolves, and shepherds, all carved from wood, brightly painted. In front, a row of small candles is carefully placed; some here and others there. At last, an inscription in the hands of an angel of God is attached on long horsehair, hanging from the ceiling, which says: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased." This announces the joyous news that the King of Heaven is born, the Savior of a sinful generation. [Dolenc 1969]

When the author finishes with the description of the domestic errands, baking, and tidying up, he writes:

Now the mother of the house brings in a vessel with hot coal and incense and hands them both to the father. He takes off his hat and the other men follow and prepare themselves for the procession. First comes the shepherd with the lamp in his hand, followed by the father, who scatters incense on the hot coal, then the children and the servants come. Thus they go from house to house, from store to store, censuring, sprinkling water, and praying. The father seems greater to his children on this evening than the other days, his voice is solemn almost as if he were a priest.

When the procession returns home, all the candles on the nativity scene are lit; everyone hurries to the house to see and praise the masterpiece. The mother kneels, surrounded by the children, behind them are the young women and the men; the devout hearts gloriously sing an old Christmas carol: "Shepherds, Rise to Your Feet and Hurry to See!"

When the domestic holy service is finished, a cold dinner is served and a round straw basket filled with dried fruit, walnuts, and hazelnuts is passed around. After dinner

the neighbors arrive to have a look at the crèche. [Kuret 1989: 323f; Zablatnik 1984: 29]

In 1887 Ivan Zarnik (1845–1912), a Slovenian religious poet and writer in *Vrtec* – a newspaper with illustrations for Slovenian children, published “The Christmas Pictures,” describing the advent season. It states:

As soon as St. Nicholas’ Day was over, the children set their minds on how to make a beautiful nativity scene for Christmas. They would need money to buy all the necessary things for the crèche.

The children counted the money and there was enough to buy colored paper, golden foil, shepherds, and so on. When mother went to town, the children gave her the money they had saved, asking her to buy everything they needed for the nativity scene. Oh, what a joy it was when she returned home from town. She brought everything her children had asked for. They curiously check everything their mother bought. Only ten days remained before Christmas. Everything needed for the nativity scene had to be prepared at once. “Jožek and I are going to collect the green moss, and you, Marijca and Anica, cut out and glue the Three Wise Men, the shepherds, the sheep on stiff paper. Mother will paint the walnuts gold, and father said he would do the rest.”

Christmas Eve approached. Everything was ready for the nativity scene to be displayed . . . Rotija is very dexterous and before long a neat crèche stood in the corner behind the table. The children could not take their eyes off of it. It was so beautiful. Nothing could be compared to this feeling of happiness! Everything glittered because of the golden walnuts arranged around the crèche. After dinner, father said the rosary and mother lit the candles around the crèche in the corner. Oh, how lovely everything was!

“Children,” mother says, “now sing a nice Christmas song, as is fitting in front of the nativity scene!” The children obey her and sing a beautiful carol:

<i>God’s child is born</i>	<i>We hurry to the scene,</i>
<i>In the shed tonight</i>	<i>In this holy Christmas time,</i>
<i>Came from celestial home</i>	<i>And beg Jesus prime</i>
<i>Sing for His Glory bright!</i>	<i>With mercy to subvene.</i>

Thus they spent the evening and soon it was time to go to church for the midnight service. The children attended the midnight mass as well. When they got back home they could hardly express how wonderful the Holy Mass had been at night. [Zarnik 1887: 210–211]

In his first “Christmas picture” Ivan Zarnik describes the time before Christmas and the busy participation of the entire family in displaying the nativity scene. This shows how carefully the family worked together, especially the children, who handed all their savings to their mother to buy everything they needed for the crèche.

The description above represents the spirit of the entire family cooperating in the pre-

parations for the Christmas holiday. Once the nativity scene had been displayed and the house had been put in order, it was time for the ritual of the first holy evening. Niko Kuret wrote in *Praznično leto Slovencev* (The Festive Year of the Slovenians):

The celebration of the holy night begins at dusk /.../ The holy night was always a time to spend awake. For this reason it was called vigilia in Latin, this was taken over by the Slovenians as biljo or bilo. /.../ the pre-Christian age people used to wait into the night for the “rejuvenated” sun to rise. [1989: 323]

When the night falls and the evening bell chimes, if there is no priest to bless the Christmas tables and the home, the father surrounded by the members of the family takes over the priestly role. This starts with liturgical censuring and aspersing in the house, around it, and in every outbuilding; the farm’s fields, vineyards, and pastures are censured and aspersed as well, at least from a distance. This original ritual has been well preserved to these days, not only in rural areas but also in towns and cities.

According to Pavle Zablatic (1912–1993), this is a Christianized custom from the pre-Christian era. It is known that the ancient Romans used to cense and asperse their homes. This custom was called lustario, and Greek used the word katharmoi ‘cleansing’. In the folk tradition, fire and water have always been used in purification rituals.

In Slovenia, the father puts the hot coals in an appropriate receptacle or in an old dishpan with some blessed wood from the greenery bundle and the blessed flowers from the Corpus Christi procession, and later real incense is also used. Using the hot coals of holy wood and flowers, a light is lit and brought along in the procession. Many people participate and pray the angelus or the rosary. In many places, one of the children carries the crucifix from the prayer corner in front of the procession, and the other lights the way. The father censes, and the mother usually takes a cup of holy water; with a pine twig she asperses water in the shape of a cross everywhere they go. Sometimes a statue of the baby Jesus was also brought along. [1989: 323–324]

When the procession was finished, the family would return home. The hot coal is discarded in the fireplace or put under the table; the holy water has its proper place.

An obligatory common prayer follows. All three sets or at least the Glorious Mysteries of the rosary are recited. When all is said and done, it is time for dinner at the table or at the table for making the bread by the fireplace; there is a large table in the prayer corner that is meant only for the bread specially baked for Christmas. In Jezersko all three parts of the rosary were recited in the open. [Kuret 1989: 326]

During the rituals there was a light on the table, in the crèche, or in front of it: today, this is a symbol of the Holy Light, which came to the world on this night – in the olden days it was to comfort the deceased, who wish for light.

In the above description of the celebration of Christmas Eve, the author presented a mother saying:

“Children, sing a nice Christmas song, as is fitting in front of the nativity scene!” The children obey her and sing a beautiful carol: God’s child is born. This demonstrates a custom which has always included Christmas carols during the moment of prayer.

Niko Kuret continues:

The family has gathered in the house, where everything smells of smoldering flowers and incense. Everyone has calmed down. The children cannot take their eyes off of the crèche. Someone starts singing and the old Christmas carols, our most beautiful songs, follow one after another. In them there is nothing false because they have been created by simple people out of the deepest experience of the Christmas mystery. . . . That old Christmas song that most likely everyone in Slovenia knows is sung simply and clearly by young and the old:

*Joy to every man,
Saint Joseph is going to town!
Saint Joseph and Mary
Are going to the town of Bethlehem.*

The simple images recreate the Virgin Mary and Joseph’s path to Bethlehem. Old and young experience their struggle to find shelter, how they remain without dinner, and so on.

*They are coming out of town Saint Joseph tells her:
And can see a little shed “We are without dinner!”
In the field in the poor shed Yet Mary comforts him:
She will give birth to Jesus. “We don’t need dinner.”*

The Christmas songs are one of the most beautiful treasures of traditional folk creations all around the world. [Kuret 1989: 329]

On the three holy eves – Christmas, New Year, and Epiphany – the prayers, incense, water, and singing rendered homes into little sanctuaries. The nativity scene carried the people away from gray everyday life, worries, and plans to God’s world of mercy and faith. The crèche, which was set up by the entire family, was the silent liturgy that was offered day and night under the religious roof and united the family in one heart and one soul. These are the models that are typical of the Slovenian tradition. Nowadays it is not necessary to follow them exactly; however, many of them are useful and still exist in families that practice the faith.

In Slovenian religious tradition, there are some elements that represent people’s attitude towards the nativity scene: the family’s preparation for the day when Lord was born and for the display of the crèche; the collective setting up of the crèche; incense, prayer, and singing; and giving presents and welcoming travelers and the poor. To appreciate these activities, the following elements have to be considered.



Fig. 5: Crèche in TV casing. Setting by F. L. A. Grčar, 2004.



Fig. 6: Home nativity by Konrad Triller, Železniki.

THE FAMILY'S PREPARATION FOR CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS

The Church tradition and practices emphasize that the meaning of the advent season focuses on preparation for the celebration of the Christ's birth. Especially important is the spiritual preparation. This is distant and imminent: distant in the entire advent and imminent with the Christmas novena, consisting of reading appropriate literature, especially the gospels, singing advent songs, and making a good advent confession.

The Advent Wreath. The Symbol

In *The Book of Blessings* of the *Rimski obrednik* (Roman Ritual), which was ordered to be revised by the Second Vatican Council and approved by Pope John Paul II, it is written:

The use of the Advent Wreath is a traditional practice that has found its place in the church as well as in the home. Customarily the Advent Wreath is constructed of a circle of evergreen branches into which are inserted four candles. To make its symbolic language more understandable, it should be simple with no extra decorations. The wreath may be replaced with some other appropriate symbol. [Rimski obrednik 1989: 26]

If there is no tradition of blessing advent wreaths in church, the family should bless their wreath at home after the meal, as prescribed in the Ritual.

All family members are present at the blessing, and the prayer is said by an adult; for example, the father or mother. There should be a cross and a receptacle of holy water next to the wreath or the symbol. The prayer begins with a suitable hymn or psalm; for example, Psalm 146. Then the father or mother, or an adult child, reads a passage from the Bible; for example, Is 35:3–6. A silence should follow so that the Word of God can be contemplated. There can be also an appropriate hymn or Psalm 148 can be recited, from which one person reads two lines and the next person reads the following two lines. The invocation used in the ceremony may be taken from those suggested in the Ritual, which can be altered or interchanged with others. The intentions however, should include the entire parish, the universal Church, and the needs of all people in the world, not only the needs of the family. At the end, the prayer of blessing is said by the mother or father:

*God, our Father, we praise Thee and pray.
We thank Thee for all the graces
Our family receives day by day.
Full of trust we ask Thee
To bless this advent wreath (this advent symbol).
Let it unite us with each other and with Thee,
So that we might prepare for the coming
Of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Then the entire family makes the sign of the cross and sprinkles the wreath or the symbol with holy water. The Our Father follows. The domestic liturgy is completed with an appropriate advent song or with a decade of the rosary [Rimski obrednik 1989: 27].

Preparations for Christmas time are carried out most appropriately if special care is given to displaying the crèche. After finding moss and other suitable material for the crèche landscape, the family then makes a decision on what kind of crèche to create this year and where the emphasis should be placed. Then, after examining the existing crèche material, the family members agree on what else could be done or bought.

Displaying and Blessing of the Crèche

The displaying of crèche is the most profound experience during Christmas time. The family, having had a proper advent preparation, begins setting up the nativity scene with

joy and delight. Each member of the family participates according to his abilities and is glad for what the others have made.

The new Roman Ritual, the Book of Blessings, provides for the blessings of the crèche:

The genuine nativity scene is displayed to truly express the Christmas mystery and help really experience Christmas. Children especially understand its language. However, the nativity scene also draws adults into contemplation and deep silence or vocal prayer. It is proper to ask God's special blessing that He might be close to everyone that stops by the nativity scene to praise Christ.

The blessing of the nativity scene may take place in church during the mass, at the end of the Christmas Mass, or at midnight mass.

The family crèche is blessed on the fourth Sunday of Advent individually or at the parish mass.

The family blesses its nativity scene after the meal, as provided. [Rimski obrednik 1989: 31]

The most appropriate time is Christmas Eve. The blessing is a part of Christmas celebration in the family. The family gathers around the nativity scene. A child lights the Christmas tree or a candle close to the nativity scene. The rest of the family sings a hymn or listens to suitable music. [Rimski obrednik 1989: 27]

The person that conducts the blessing addresses those present in the following or in a similar way:

Brothers and sisters, we are gathered at the nativity scene that we have prepared with great care. The images of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph narrate to us God's love and love in the Holy Family. The shepherds invite us with all their simplicity to accept the newborn child and to worship Him with sincerity. The sheep, greenery, and flowers are part of nature, which has accepted the Redeemer and paid Him reverence in its own way.

When we stop, pray, and sing at the nativity scene and explain the Christmas mystery to children, we must not forget that God became a man for us that we might become like God. [Pastoralna priloga 1984: 1]

Then a passage is read from the Bible, Heb 1:1–4. If possible, the passage can be discussed; otherwise, a Christmas song can be sung or listened to. Then follow the invocations. They are composed from the sample of invocations for all needs at the mass, yet those that are foreseen in the Ritual can also be used. Then the family recites the Our Father. The prayer is read by the father or mother, and the others stand and listen:

Father in Heaven, You created us.

Through Your goodness and kindness we became family.

*Tonight we rejoice and are particularly glad to be together.
We ask You to be with us and to bless this nativity.
May it remind us of the birth of Your Son Jesus Christ,
Who is God-with-us and Savior of all,
That together with Him we might praise and thank You
Now and forever. Amen.*

After the prayer, one of the parents asperses the crèche with holy water, and then censes it. Later the house is censed and blessed.

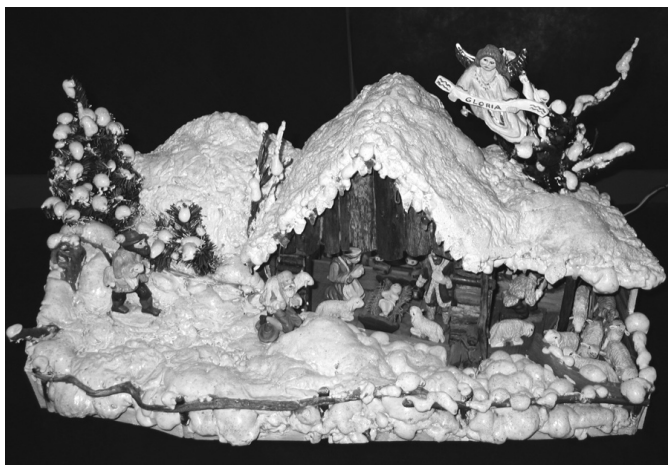


Fig. 7: Home crèche in the snow by Cene Razingar, Pod Golico, Jesenice, 2004.



Fig. 8: Cabinet crèche by Romeo Volk, Ilirska Bistrica, 2004.

Incense, Prayer, and Singing

By setting up and blessing the nativity scene, the family displays a domestic altar. The home has thus become a small church and sanctuary that has been aspersed, censed, and

consecrated with hymns and prayers. When the family carries out this ritual, it becomes even more deeply conscious of its call to supernatural virtues. The ritual of censuring and aspersing the house and collective prayer are described under the “Family and Nativity in Slovenian Religious Tradition.”

Giving Gifts and Receiving Travelers and the Poor

Christmas Eve and Christmas time express the deepest sign of the gift that man has received. This sign is therefore shared in the whole family. It urges a person to give gifts to others; the parents should give to their children, and the other way round.

Jesus Christ came in humility and poverty. Doing so, He addresses man to welcome and kindly offer help to travelers and to the poor, to the homeless and to refugees. In this way he realizes and lives Christ's words: *For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, . . . whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of Mine, you did for Me* [Mt 25: 35–40].

Preparing and displaying the nativity is in fact a sign of dynamic faith and continuity, participation and the eternal presence of the supernatural, divine, and sacred in the family.

FAMILY AND NATIVITY UNDER NEW CONDITIONS

Modern life has fully shaken the foundation of the former Slovenian family in the past few decades. Adults as well as young people have discovered various reasons for diverting to their own paths and withdrawing themselves from the benevolent influence of the family. People that are conscious of the importance of a healthy family are seeking all possible means to reconcile and deepen the relationships in the broken family. How can we reach this goal? The past has shown us an effective remedy that can heal the family: the nativity scene. How? It is important that the entire family participate in setting up the crèche. Elizabeta Hribar says that the nativity will connect the family and bring warmth through the common endeavor:

The nativity scene is very important. It brings out in children the desire for the most beautiful, the warmest and inexpressible, everything that the birth of Christ offers us. An older woman gave out a loud cry when she approached the crib in the Franciscan church in Ljubljana. [P. c.]

In her old age, the nativity scene recalled a bright memory of youth and spoke to her heart. The sculptor Viktor Konjedic (born 1942) said in his reflection on the family and the nativity:

The Holy Family must be an ideal for every family. It must be a community to which

a rule is applied: "Look, how they love each other!" Only this assures happiness. When looking at the nativity scene, one has to become familiar with the Holy Family: the Child, the Virgin Mary, and St. Joseph. The Christmas preparations in our family go together with the nativity scene. It is important to be together and to listen to the music and singing together. In winter it is cold outside, but in the crèche a new life is born, which brings redemption and hope.

At the end he makes a point: *We originate in the Holy Family. There is no other way. The New Testament starts with Christmas!* [P. c.]

We always have to bear in mind that every age has a different approach to the nativity scene: an adult experiences Christmas with a bunch of greenery and flowers and a statue of the newborn Child laid on moss or in a crib of pine bark, in hanging macramé, with a candle as a symbol standing next to the scene. A young person looks for a different shape, impossible for the others, but which suits the level of his needs. It can be a symbolic crib next to the city dump. The children love to lay down the moss, circle the lake and stream with stones, prepare a pile of wood, and make a cave or shed.

The nuns Darinka (born 1924) and Pavla Bajec (born 1921), members of the School Sisters of St. Francis of Christ the King, believe that the nativity scene plays one of the most important roles in a religious family, and hence the child can deeply experience the great truth and the fact God wanted to be born on Earth as a little baby with a special purpose: to die and redeem humanity.

In history, man was addressed only by the one that loved him and respected him and knew how to prove it. However, no one proved it like Jesus Christ did with His birth, death, and resurrection. Therefore the nativity scene is the best educational help in the family.

The sculptor Alojzija Ulman (1926–1994) from Vinkovci, who enriched Slovenia with many exquisite church nativity scenes, stated:

A warm family fireplace, with deep emotional experiences of festivities in the company of parents, brother, and sisters in Vinkovci, was crucial for my artistic predispositions, particularly when the crèche is concerned.

I thought that I would be a teacher all my life, as my mother was. However, I lost my job as a schoolteacher early under communism because I was against materialism.

Professor Ulman, who studied at the École des Beaux-Arts art academy in Paris and became a sculptor that specialized in creating the nativity scenes, says:

Also here Kinderstube – my childhood – played its role. I made my first crèche as a child together with my father. My understanding of the nativity was influenced by my mother's biblical stories and especially by her motivation for conscious liturgical participation at mass. The advent season was full of anticipation in our large family (6 children)! My brother and I looked for moss, lichen, and red berries in the forest. Together with my father, we painted the entire scene in oil on canvas. Daddy mixed the colors for little model figures, even camels, which we still have today. My brother

(a future dentist) made the town of Bethlehem out of plaster. We sowed wheat in a narrow groove along the edges. I taught my little sisters how to knit the stars for the Christmas tree. The crèche was displayed in the place of honor in the room. We made the shed following the model of our grandfather, who was a barrel maker, and it was lit by mother's brother, who was an engineer. We admired this nativity scene at our grandmother's.

Alojzija Ulman states that the crèche should involve the entire family in making the festive atmosphere. It opens the hearts of the little, the young, the adults, and the elderly. The nativity scene awakens creativity and presents an opportunity to express oneself more with the heart and soul than with style.

The nativity scene in Šentvid pri Stični used to be displayed by the sexton Janez Bijec (1931–2006), born in Velika Goba, in the parish of Dole pri Litiji. His nativity scenes have probably been the largest in Slovenia in the last few years. He particularly placed emphasis on the cave, where he placed the Holy Family. He said that for people Christmas is the greatest joy in the year, when the family becomes the focal point and a reflection of the family of Bethlehem and Nazareth.

The above statements on the family and the nativity scene were given by people who have done the most for the Slovenian nativity scene in the years after the Second World War. They all became enthusiastic about it in their childhood when in the heart of the family they sensed and discovered its benevolent power to create, announce, and reconcile. It is our duty to continue our mission of the nativity in every family and community. In this way we can help the Slovenian nation in the spiritual renewal of families and complete this task in a united Europe and in the world.

From what has been said, it can be deduced that the nativity brings people together, and reunites the family now as it did in the past. It affects everybody from children to grandparents if the family lives together. The nativity scene connects; the family is truly together as its members join in prayer, singing, joy, and giving gifts.

In addition to the old models of the Advent and Christmas celebration, which are being increasingly revived, new models of fidelity are arising in new living conditions in small apartments in the city. During the advent season, the family listens to appropriate passages from the Bible and hymns on CDs. The family members want to better understand each other and to accept their differences. Instead of moss, a green cloth or velvet is used. A plastic pine branch replaces the Christmas tree. The nativity scene is no longer found in the prayer corner; instead it is next to or on the television set, or on a book shelf of new stylish furniture. A few grains of incense do not melt on the hot coals anymore, but on a hot electric stove plate. After the prayer and singing, the family can watch Christmas programs on television or videotapes. This inner wealth and peace of the family can be transmitted to the next-door neighbors and with tolerance and kindness on the staircase, in the elevator, in the office, at school, and everywhere else.



Fig. 9: Crèche, wood.
Author prof. Vinko Ribnikar, Tržič, 2004.



Fig. 10: Crèche, Idrija lace. Author Marija Kastelec, Žiri, 2005.

THE MEANING OF DISPLAYING THE NATIVITY SCENE

To better understand the importance of displaying the nativity scene, we are offered this explanation: the faith, gospel, and catechesis are fulfilled and presented in the family's preparation of the nativity scene. Conversations with today's most eminent creators have revealed the value of Elizabeta Hribar's words: *When an artist wants to interpret the Christmas mystery, he must live it!* (p.c.). The deepest respect and gratitude goes to the people that, in the difficult conditions of the years after the Second World War, continued the tradition of the nativity and handed it down to new generations.

The nativity scene having involved the entire family – from the father, wife, and mother to the youngest son or daughter – has restored the meaning of the family and the power to preserve God's plan for the family and keep it in harmonious unity. The rich celebration of

the three holy eves – before Christmas, New Year, and Epiphany – with praying the rosary, censuring, aspersion, and singing old Christmas carols, has restored peace, happiness, deep pleasure, and joy in families.

Our great artists and creators have revealed how the nativity scene awakened the desire for the most beautiful, warmest, deepest, and most blissful feelings already in their youngest years. At the same time, the nativity scene has stimulated creativity and represented an artistic expression led more by the heart, senses, and spirituality than by style.

Our pastoral work for families and within families will be especially rewarded when we discover the importance of displaying the nativity scene and when we inspire enthusiasm in families, so that everyone from the father to the youngest child participates in its conception and creation.

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SLOVENSKE JASLICE IN NJIHOV VERSKO-OZNAVJEVALNI POMEN

(Akademiku, profesorju dr. Niku Kuretu v zahvalo)

Avtor ugotavlja, kako so se jasllice, ki so jih postavljali po cerkvah in samostanih, po domovih bogatih in revnih družin, vpete v etnološko, zgodovinsko, kulturno in predvsem v versko izročilo slovenskega naroda. Iz vere, ki jo je slovenska družina sprejela, se v njej poglobljala in iz nje živela, sta se družina in posameznik odločila za postavljanje jasllic in za ohranjanje te šege.

Slovenske jasllice so odsev domače zgodovine in evropskega dogajanja. Tokovi, ki so se pojavljali v sosednjih deželah, so vplivali na postavljanje jasllic tudi pri nas.

Čas v katerem živimo, je prepored jasličarstva, saj se v svetu pogloblja spoznanje njihovega prvotnega bistva: posredovati človeku ne samo spoznanje, temveč doživetje Božje ljubezni, ki se je izničila zato, da bi bila človeku vrnjena čast Božjega otroštva.

Skrivnost Božjega učlovečenja je vsakomur razumljiva, ljuba in privlačna, ker veje iz nje govorica učlovečene, v jaslicah rojene Ljubezni, ta pa je razumljiva vsakomur, vedno in povsod. Zato so jasllice eno od najuspešnejših sredstev za pastorcijo posameznikov, družin, občestev, dežel in narodov. V tem je verjetno eden od razlogov, zakaj jasličarstvo doživlja svoj novi razcvet, zakaj se mu posvečajo preprosti ljudje kakor tudi iskani kiparji in umetniki.

Človek, kljub padcem, išče Resnico ter jo hoče videti in doživeti. Jasličarstvo odkriva v človeku njegovo prvotno usmerjenost in sinovski odnos do Boga - Odrješnika.

Nobeno obdobje cerkvenega leta ni tako globoko stopilo v zavest slovenskih družin kakor adventni in božični čas, zato ugotavljam:

1) *Jasllice so prvenstveno izraz vere.*

2) *Pomagajo ohranjati in poglobljati vero in življenje po veri.*

3) *So domača oblika verskega dogajanja, ki je vsem dostopna, vsi se čutijo nagovorjeni, vsi lahko najdejo v jaslicah svoje mesto in se poistovetijo z jasličnimi osebami.*

4) *So ponavzočenje božičnega dogodka, ustvarjal jih je tako preprost, ljudski kot tudi priznani umetnik, delavec, kmet, hišna pomočnica, učiteljica, mati, vzgojiteljica, otrok, pa tudi odrasli fantje in dekleta.*

5) *Mnoge jasllice se niso ohranile, ker so bile krhke, uničljive, nepriznane, toda zato nič manj pomembne za duhovno življenje in kulturo ljudi.*

6) *Domače jasllice so kljub vpetosti v evropski prostor odsev avtohtonega religioznega doživljanja slovenskega človeka in kristjana, ki je sprejemal vero kot inkarnirano razodevanje Boga ter si na svoj način to učlovečenje tudi ponazarjal.*

7) V tem smislu so bile jaslice posebna oblika *Bibliae pauperum*. Bile so stvarnost, ki je bila dostopna vsem v domači cerkvi in v družini. Ob njih je doživljal vero v Božje učlovečenje, ki jo je sam dopolnjeval s svojo vizijo in doživljanjem tega učlovečenja - inkarnacije ter povezave z Bogom, po vnašanju vsakdanjih elementov življenja v jaslice in po življenju, ki se ga je učil iz zgloda učlovečenega Božjega Sina.

8) Ta izkustveni in doživljajski element, ki je v jaslicah vedno navzoč, je bistven za njihove upodobitve v cerkvah in domovih.

9) Ta spoznanja so pomembna tudi za dopolnjevanje kulturne in religiozne dediščine, za novo ovrednotenje postavljanja jaslic, za novo odkrivanje njihovega verskega sporočila, ki tudi danes - kot nekoč - človeka, otroka in odraslega, bolj ali manj vernega, nagovarja in spodbuja, da se Bogu, ki se je v Kristusu približal človeku ter postal eden izmed nas, tudi sam približa in postaja deležen njegovega Božjega življenja. Jaslice želijo v ljudeh prebuditi zavest, da jih Bog ljubi, saj se je zanje učlovečil, da bi jih odrešil in zveličal.

Jaslice so bile od vsega začetka vključene v cerkveno, liturgično in versko dogajanje. Družina je prenesla jaslice domov iz župnijske ali samostanske cerkve, da bi lažje podoživljala, praznovala in obhajala božične praznike. V družini - domači Cerkvi - se človeku, ki se ves preda pripravi in postavljanju jaslic, odkriva pogled na živo in neživo naravo pod vidikom dobrote stvarstva, saj se je v njem in zanj Bog učlovečil, se v njem izničil, da bi se v njem povečal do končne "nove zemlje in novega neba". Kristus nikogar ne sili, temveč le vabi, da bi sprejeli načrt Očetove ljubezni: "Osrediniti v Kristusu kot glavi vse, kar je v nebesih in kar je na zemlji" (Ef 1,10).

Kljub grozotam, o katerih vemo iz medijev, kljub razpadu družin, pa vendar ves svet teži k edinosti in miru. Človeštvo postaja družina, ki si prizadeva uresničiti edinost na vseh področjih človeškega življenja in dejavnosti, tisto najglobljo edinost, ki temelji na spoštovanju in vrednosti vsake posamezne osebe, na ljubezni in svetosti, pravičnosti in bratstvu... Prav zaradi tega se je Jezus Kristus učlovečil! Kaj bi nas moglo lažje in globlje voditi k tem spoznanjem kot jaslice!

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