

“GAZING IN WONDER AND AWE”: THE MAGNIFICENT CATHEDRAL CRÈCHE

Last Saturday, we gathered to disassemble our outdoor crèche, for me a **bittersweet** day. Alas, Christmas will return again in 2023! Cathedral archivist **Celeste Raspanti** has meticulously organized the documents detailing how **Msgr. George Ryan** drafted plans for an outdoor manger scene in 1947, noting: “There are some people who will not go inside to see” [the manger]. He wrote to **Sidney Woollett**, designer of the statues of the Sacred Heart and Saint Patrick, requesting that he design the Holy Family and “one or two sheep.” In 1948, Woollett’s models were executed by DaPrato Studios in Boston, MA. The outdoor crib was installed in **1949** by members of the Men’s Association. They’ve “shepherded” its care ever since! On that first day, the *Pioneer Press* reported, “They started at 7:30 a.m. and finished at 10:30 p.m.” The work is daunting. Thankfully, it does not take as long today, thanks to engineering advances detailed below!

Correspondence between the men reveal a level of attention to **detail** needed with such a massive project. It was fascinating to spend time recently in the archives. For example, Ryan desired the **camel driver** to have brown, not black skin. He requested the **heights** of the first figures he ordered “so that we can make any alterations that may be necessary in our stable-setting to accommodate them. I am sure they will be as attractive as the figures we received last year and which got such a favorable comment from the many who saw them.” Woollett responded that the shepherd was 51” tall, and the kneeling king 44”. St. Joseph was even **taller** at 62 1/2”. For context, the cost of the infant Jesus in 1949 was \$46; the Blessed Virgin \$195; the sheep cost \$104 each and a king clocked in at \$195. For comparative purposes, in today’s dollars the Magi would cost **\$2,500 each**. Good luck finding a life-size figure even for that price today!

In 1983, long-time parishioner **Jack Grundtner** stepped up to bring to fruition **Msgr. Hayden’s** request for a new crèche, yet one **similar** enough to show continuity, lest parishioners become upset! Jack delivered, with an express goal of making it **easier to assemble!** What used to take two 8-hour days to assemble with hammers, nails, bolts and bailing wire, has been reduced to just a couple of hours. Why? Well, Jack had a **theater** set background and utilized those principles to **streamline** our crèche assembly. He recommended the use of a theater hardware called “casket locks,” so the adjoining pieces could draw close and the locks close with an Allen wrench. Retired master carpenter **Everett Racine** (†2009) executed the design to create a truly impressive crèche worthy of its prominent place overlooking John Ireland Blvd. Jack has selflessly overseen the assembly process for going on forty years! We owe Jack a tremendous debt of **gratitude**, both for his ingenuity and commitment.

It is a point of pride that our outdoor crèche has been around for nearly **75 years**. Then again, I came across a story in the Catholic News Agency that put “Cathedral pride” into perspective. The **oldest known** existing Nativity figurines are located in the underground Chapel of the Nativity at **St. Mary Major**, one of Rome’s four major basilicas. Believe it or not, the figurines were commissioned in **1292 A.D.** by Pope Nicholas IV. Gregorian University art historian Sante Guido is convinced that **five** of the marble statues in the Nativity scene today are **original** to the 13th century. The scene was commissioned because the basilica possesses a precious relic of pieces of **Christ’s crib**, housed beneath the altar. Sent from Bethlehem by St. Sophronius, patriarch of Jerusalem, to Pope Theodore I in the 7th century, the reliquary is in the form of a manger.

I encourage you to read [*Admirabile Signum*](#), the wonderful 2019 Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis on the meaning and **importance** of the Nativity scene. He cites the history as related in the *Franciscan Sources*: Fifteen days before Christmas, Francis asked a local man named John to help him realize his desire “to bring to life the memory of that babe born in Bethlehem, to see as much as possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, and how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he was laid upon a bed of hay”. The crèche remains an **ever-fresh** symbol, appealing equally to people of **all ages**. It facilitates the doctrine of the **incarnation** to become more **accessible**. Saint Francis of Assisi understood human nature well, and our need to **visualize** that which we believe. To him is credited the **inspiration** behind the first Nativity scene in **Greccio** in 1223 A.D., birthplace of the crèche.

As previously noted, we have begun a process of restoring our figures, one by one. My predecessor, Fr. Johnson

did something similar with the **indoor figures** which are even a few years older! Some of the outdoor figures are in better shape than others; the restoration estimates are not based solely on the size, but also its **condition**. They are both massive and heavy. Yet, nearly life-size figures are difficult to obtain today. Rather than purchase a new set, we are initiating a process to **restore** the originals. This will take time and **require funding**. I endeavor to share the **financial estimate** for each individual piece, hoping that some of you will prayerfully consider donating towards a piece, or even “adopt” an animal or King!

- I will be attending the **March for Life** in Washington D.C. with the Archdiocesan pilgrimage group, made up both of young people and seminarians. As a result, I will be **absent** next weekend. However, **Archbishop Hebda** will preside at the 12:00 Noon Mass here, dedicated to Respect Life. Our Saint Cecilia Children’s Choir will sing. The local MCCL Rally at the State Capitol begins at 2:00 p.m.
- The Cathedral welcomes **Fr. Timothy Cloutier**, who has graciously offered his sacramental assistance this week. He recently retired as pastor of Maternity of Mary and Holy Childhood parishes.
- Parishioners who live in MN Senate District 64 or House District 64A, take note. I urge you to **contact** your **local** state house and senate representatives using the **postcards** found on the tables by the piers. Specifically, it is an opportunity to express your voice about the proposed “Protect Reproductive Options Act” being put forward in both houses. This bill is extremely troubling.
- The calls for Pope Benedict XVI’s inclusion as “Doctor of the Church” have begun. His rich corpus of **theological** works certainly merits this honor. Considering that all 37 men and women who hold the title are first **canonized** as saints, it raises an interesting question for me. **Could** or should the designation of Doctor of the Church be considered on its own merits, separately from canonization? In principle, need they be joined?
- Mark your calendar. On Sunday, **January 29** at the 10:00 a.m. Mass celebrated by Archbishop Hebda, we will also welcome Maronite **Archbishop Samir Nassar** of Damascus to speak. A reception follows in Hayden Hall. Archbishop Nassar was unable to attend last year when we blessed the beautiful new **icon** of the Baptism of Paul. We will observe the patronal Feast of St. Paul at all Sunday Masses.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector