



## Traditional Nativity Scene

Saint Francis of Assisi is credited with creating the first nativity scene, as a way to make the Christmas season a time of peace and goodwill.

Saint Francis of Assisi, a twelfth-century churchman, is best known as the founder of the Franciscan Order of Friars. He is also credited with creating the very first nativity scene, as a way to convey the ideas of Christmas to an illiterate congregation.

### The First Manger Scene

In 1224, Saint Francis had the idea of creating a “living” recreation of the birth of Jesus, as a way to bring the Christmas spirit to the local villagers. It is believed that local shepherds, guarding their flocks outside the small Italian town of Greccio, inspired him. Saint Francis had real people dressed in biblical robes, and real animals positioned outside a cave on the outskirts of Greccio. In the manger was a life sized wax figure of the infant Jesus.

On Christmas Eve, families travelled far and wide to witness the spectacle. Saint Francis urged the people to rejoice in the season of Christ’s birth and put hatred from their hearts. Over time the presepio, as it was called in Italy, grew in popularity. Other towns began featuring them and soon people had individual nativity scenes in their own homes. Wealthy families hired famous sculptors to make their nativity scenes. One of the most famous nativity scenes in Italy is displayed at in the Basilica of Saint Cosmos & Damian in Rome. Originally built in Naples during the 17th Century, it measures an impressive 45 by 20 feet and features hundreds of wooden figurines.

Not surprisingly, the use of a Christmas nativity scene quickly spread throughout Western Europe. In France it was referred to as a Christmas Crèche, while in German speaking areas it was called a Kribbe. Despite the growing popularity of Christmas trees throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries, the nativity scene remained the central focus of Christmas celebrations in Catholic areas. As Catholicism grew world wide, so did the use of the Nativity scene. In Spanish speaking areas it is called a nacimiento and is a prominent part of Christmas traditions in Mexico and other parts of Latin America.

