

# Barbies and the Baby Jesus: A History of the Nativity Set

By [Mark Hart](#) | November 30, 2010

We have four Nativity sets in my house: not out of overindulgence but out of sheer necessity. One set is for my two year old, who is still learning how to treat things gently and that the horns of an ox are not to be used as a weapon.

One set is for my five year old, who likes to take a more “interactive” approach to the Nativity, including putting Disney princesses and Barbies into the Biblical narrative. Last year when I asked why the baby Jesus was in Barbie’s convertible, she responded, “Barbie is baby-sitting, Daddy... the trip to Bethlehem left Mary and Joseph very tired.”



The third set is for my 8 year old. The most dramatic of the bunch, she feels the need to re-tell the Nativity story from each character’s unique perspective – often times adding accents to their voices. I’m not sure why the angels have an English accent in her brain, but the “Gloria” sounds classy so I’m okay with it. Lastly, there is one very nice ceramic Nativity high atop a bookshelf that my wife and I gaze upon and patrol diligently due to its fragility. A closer examination will reveal the angel has only one hand and the lamb only three legs, due to the “incidents” of 2007 and 2009, respectively (which again explains why it now sits up so high).

Each set represents something special and important. As a father, *I want my children to put themselves into the story*. It is essential that they see the birth of Christ as meaningful and fundamentally important in their own lives. And as sons and daughters of God, you and I need to remember the same thing.

You may have a Nativity set beneath your Christmas tree or on a table inside your house. You almost certainly have one on display somewhere around your local Church.

Many people don’t realize that St. Francis of Assisi is credited with being the first person to “create a nativity scene,” using live people and animals to bring the birth of Jesus “to life” in 1223. The coolest part of St. Francis’ “living Nativity,” however, was not the idea to do it. Now, don’t get me wrong, that *was* a creative thought, but it wasn’t his most impressive insight.

What was most impressive is the fact that St. Francis used *living people* rather than paintings or statues in his “nativity scene.” While statues, figurines, and pictures are useful and effective, using humans and animals adds a different and important dimension to the purpose of the nativity scene (or *crèche*, as it is known to many).

The living nativity was (and is) a great reminder to us as Christians that the Christmas mystery – the mystery of the Incarnation – invites us to active prayer. God emptying Himself and taking on flesh is beautiful: not only because of the humility and gentleness of the baby in the manger but because of His



invitation to interact with Him physically and intimately. The Nativity scene is a celebration of God's love for His children, His willingness to stop at nothing to ensure our salvation. It's a scene that we must prayerfully engage in, not just passively "admire."



I suppose finding modern day actors to bring the Nativity to life in every parish and home would be difficult (and quite messy with the animals in your living room). Additionally, meditating upon a scene that took place over 2000 years ago is easier said than done these days. We live in a world of overstimulation, with countless images constantly vying for our attention. Statues, paintings, and other works of Christian art help us visualize and focus our minds in prayer. It's not like we worship the wood or paint, obviously; these forms and elements are just used as a tool to help us enter more deeply into prayer. This is yet another reason it is so great to be Catholic, as our Church's rich history of artwork both illuminates our senses in the present and helps us appreciate our past.

As you look at the Nativity scene, whether in your home or in your parish, spend time contemplating each of the "characters" or "figures" that you see within it.

Focus on what each must have been wondering or thinking about Jesus. Putting yourself in their shoes (well, sandals) is the first step into a richer prayer life.

- Consider what the **Blessed Virgin Mary** must have been thinking.
- Reflect on how humbled and awe-filled **St. Joseph** must have felt.
- Ponder how important this moment was in history, that God would send a host of **angels** to proclaim the event (like a proud Father would).
- Stop to reflect on what a bold statement it made inviting the **shepherds**, who were often thought of as the least popular and least desirable people in the community.
- Contemplate how far the **wise men** had traveled and what a significant statement they made – not only with their gifts but in their worship of the Christ.

Do you allow yourself to be a living, interactive participant in Jesus' story? Do you see yourself as part of the unfolding drama of salvation history?

If not, then you're probably not looking closely enough at the gospels. Don't stop with the Nativity, get back to **Matthew 1-2**, and encounter the source of St. Francis' inspiration. Never forget that Lord didn't come to be admired but worshipped. Fall on your knees this night, as they did so many centuries ago and worship the God who loved you enough to be born into the world's filth and sin, to save you from it.

St. Francis, pray for us!