



My Grandfather's Christmas Gift...

The Christmas Crèche, or nativity scene, has been one of the most sacred and honored traditions in my family. In Italian, the nativity is called a *presepio* which means "crib". My grandfather, Henry Gioia, started the tradition in my family long before I was born. He would create this old world Neapolitan crèche in his home each year. Most people might put up a scene under the Christmas tree or on a special table, but not my grandfather! He filled an entire living room with his depiction of that holy night when Jesus Christ was born. My grandpa was a man of deep faith and I believe that this yearly, living tribute to Jesus Christ was one of his most cherished activities. He collected his nativity figures from all over the world. He made mountains out of crumpled screen and then covered them with plaster, then painted each mountain and covered them with moss and peat for authenticity. Each of the little houses was hand crafted as were many of the small details and finishes. My great grandmother, for example, sewed a tiny saddle with sequins and golden thread for one of the three kings' camels. There were footbridges and pathways, wells and campfires. All of these details were to insure that the viewer would be immersed into the experience of the greatest moment in human history...the incarnation of God here on earth in the person of Jesus Christ.

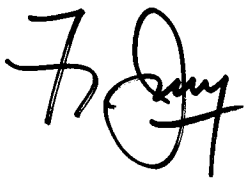
As a small child, my grandpa would tell me stories of how he would put up the scene each year. I wondered why he didn't just leave it up, but he told me that taking it down each year forced him to make it bigger and better each time. It also became apparent to me that this was indeed a labor of love. When my Mother and Father were married they received a beautiful stable that my grandfather had made and figures he had collected over the years from Spain and Italy. My earliest memories of Christmas are of my father and mother tenderly unwrapping each of those beautiful pieces and telling the story of the first Christmas. My brother and I would be so excited to see which piece would be opened next and to hear how each of the figures - every one with its own personality - was part of the whole story. I knew that when I grew older I would want to create my own nativity scene. Then it all began. My grandfather and grandmother, along with my parents and brother, started me on my first nativity pieces. They were unlike any figures I had ever seen! They were the Roman Fontanini collectible crèche nativity figures. Beautiful in every detail and made of an unbreakable resin, I knew that these pieces would become part of something wonderful. I began collecting what has now become literally thousands of figures of varying size, shape and position. In the 1980's I took a job working in a local Catholic Church as a Youth Minister. I thought that the best way to tell the story of Christmas was to engage these High School students in the creating of our own nativity. In 1988, I created my very first scene inside the Church. It was 15 feet long with a few figures, mountains, pathways, and a waterfall. Everyone loved it, so I continued the tradition each year.

After some time, I left my job as a Youth Minister and entered the Seminary to become a Catholic Priest. Even though the studies and the formation were tough, I found the time to set up the scene each year for all those in the seminary to enjoy. While in the seminary, my grandfather passed away. I promised myself, and him, that I would always create a nativity for people to enjoy and learn from. Years later, I still miss him but his Christmas gif - his legacy... lives on. Now that I am a priest, I set up my crèche in the parishes and institutions that I am assigned to. Many of my grandfather's wonderful figures and miniature accessory pieces are part of my collection. I have also acquired many vintage pieces through estate sales and antique stores. I have also found that over the years, people have asked to have one of their own nativity figures included. These donations have also become a treasured part of the entire project. People come from all over to view the crèche and always seem overwhelmed by the thousands of figures and the intricate details.

I thought I might share some of the secrets to a really life-like display. Most of these come from my grandfather, but I'm proud to say that I have made some improvements of my own over the years! First, you have to have a good set up board or workspace to place everything on. I do mine at table height so that everything can be seen well. Around the edges I build little fences from twigs and rocks. Then I fill the entire workspace with various materials that add color, texture, and scent. This gives a very realistic effect to your entire scene. I sprinkle, each year, some soil from the holy land into the scene. Under the crib of the baby Jesus, I place a stone from the cave of the nativity as a link to the true nativity in Bethlehem. The first piece placed in the workspace should be your stable or barn. That is the centerpiece from which the entire display flows. Then from that stable you could have small footpaths. I usually use coffee grinds - either right from the can or dried after use. I also use shredded potpourri on the footpaths to give the display a nice fragrance. My grandfather had to make many of the miniature accessories like stools, pots, and furniture. Thanks to the world of doll houses and miniatures I have been able to get some incredibly detailed accessories for my display. Fontanini now makes wonderful pieces to accent your figures. I have made fountains myself, but now in the stores you can get wonderful table top fountains to add to your nativity. I have many different fountains now all with running water. I always include water from the River Jordan, Lourdes, and Fatima. I like the running water because it brings movement into an otherwise motionless display. There are many dwellings; from caves to shacks to large structures like the Inn and the marketplace. I have an area that I spread sand into to create the desert out of which the three kings and their entourage come forth. There are campfires with flickering lights, tools, brooms, tables, chairs, coils of rope, wheelbarrows, carts and wells; all to add to the lifelike effect. I use thin sheetrock painted midnight blue and bend it around the display on a wooden frame to give the effect of nighttime sky. The large north star above the stable and small little stars around the whole sky complete the effect. Above the sheetrock, and all over the ceiling I hang chicken wire.

Then I stuff the chicken wire with polyester fiberfill to give the effect of billowing clouds. From those clouds I hang numerous Fontanini cherubs. Then after all the caves and houses, wells, campfires, fountains, and miniatures are in place...I put in the many figures of the holy family, three kings and townspeople. My grandfather always said "Don't just put them in...find out where they belong by looking at each piece!" What is their posture? What are they doing? These are important questions as you decide where each piece belongs. Then, the sheep and animals are added. The entire nativity scene is on an electronic timer to go on in the morning and off at night. Included in the display, I have a four foot calligraphy prayer of how St. Francis of Assisi created the very first crèche in Greccio, Italy. Near the prayer is a beautiful statute of St. Francis that was donated by an admirer of the project. Above the whole scene is placed the Gloria Angel donated by a dear friend. I make up prayer cards and have photos of the crèche available for visitors.

So, that is my story - the story of my grandfather's gift to me and to so many. Now well over 25 years later, thousands of people have made trips from all over to see, to remember, and to tell the story of Jesus. I love it when I see a mom or dad holding their child and telling the story of how God so humbly entered the world. The nativity was born as a teaching tool by St. Francis and it continues to tell the world of the wonderful *true* story of Christmas today. My prayer is that in the midst of a crazy, commercial, and stress filled world, people will stop for a moment to admire and remember what truly is the greatest story ever told. I thank God and this wonderful school of Bishop McGann-Mercy Diocesan High School for giving me the opportunity to share my family tradition and I ask God to fill you with joy and hope this Christmas and always!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "G. Cestare". The signature is stylized with a large, looped "G" and a cursive "Cestare".

Rev. Gerald Cestare
Chaplain