

The Many Faces of Christmas...

I'm one of those people who like to decorate my home for the changing seasons. Christmas is my favorite when I get to display my nativity sets collected over the years. They come from different places in the world and trigger memories of the people who previously owned them or gave them to me.



There's a carved walnut set owned by a relative now in a nursing home. It was bought piece by piece over the years and was the highlight of his annual Christmas decorating. A small silver one-piece nativity with the baby Jesus that can be taken out and held also belonged to him. It has a year-long place on the mantel.

A very good friend brought me back a nativity set from her trip to Ireland. It always graces the secretary desk in my dining room with an angel looking down from the shelf above. Each time I take it out I think about and savor our relationship.



One set by artist Trina Paulus is nearly 50 years old. Made of clay it had its share of nicks and bruises over the years but it's still a favorite. I fondly remember my oldest son when he was a toddler taking the baby Jesus out of Mary's arms and then putting it back into her loving caress.



I found a modern nativity at a recent craft show. It's two blocks of wood with wooden balls for heads and a star hanging above them. It fits well with the wooden angel a relative made for me Christmases ago.



Like most new families, I am sure that Mary and Joseph were often tired. One of my nativity sets depicts a reclining Joseph holding a sleeping Mary who is cradling the infant Jesus in her arms.



I found a brightly colored Guatemalan nativity set at an international fair. Each figure is made of cloth and Mary has a pocket in her dress where the baby Jesus snuggles. There's a multi-colored arch with a golden star on it that stands over the holy family.



The most recent set is from Kenya and made of banana leaves and wire. Each piece is intricately fashioned and stored in a box that doubles as a stable. Though not Burundian, like our parishioners, it reminds me of the riches of African art and culture.



Even my three-year-old grandsons have their own Nativity set with Fischer Price Mary, Joseph, Jesus, shepherds, kings, farm animals, and an angel that sings "Away in a Manger." The characters stay around all year and often ride the school bus, work on the farm, and visit Sesame Street and Daniel Tiger. I think Jesus likes being included in their day-to-day activities.



Each one of these nativity sets shows a different face of God crafted from the available materials and the culture and traditions of the artisans who made them. They remind me of the many faces of God we are blessed to have at St. Leo's. There's the neighborhood Anglos and others coming from different communities. We have African Americans and Africans from Burundi, Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, and Cameroon. Guatemalans and Mexicans from Latin America are part of our parish family. Each brings the unique gifts of their home nations. We come together in prayer and faith celebrating our diversity. It is like Pentecost every Sunday at St. Leo's and we are blessed to experience Emmanuel—God with us—each time we get together.



May you too experience the gift of God who took on our flesh in all of its hues to set his tent among us and enter into the messiness and joys of our lives.

-Angela Anno