



DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE
OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

Christmas 2021

To the People of God of the Diocese of Rockville Centre:

On December 1, 2019, Our Holy Father Pope Francis issued *Admirabile Signum*, an Apostolic Letter *On the Meaning and Importance of the Nativity Scene*. It is a beautiful reflection that I draw on every Christmas season and one which I urge you to read and pray.¹

In it, the Holy Father reminds us that the simple act of arranging our Nativity set links us to the past, opens questions for the present, and orients the future. It is an act that has an existential impact.

Pope Francis says: “Setting up the Christmas creche in our homes helps us to relive the history of what took place in Bethlehem. Naturally, the Gospels remain our source for understanding and reflecting on the event. At the same time, its portrayal in the creche helps us to imagine the scene. It touches our hearts and makes us enter into salvation history as contemporaries of an event that is living and real in a broad gamut of historical and cultural contexts.”

The beautiful scene of parents and grandparents setting up creches together with children and grandchildren is a powerful multi-dimensional experience of catechesis – the teaching and passing on of our Catholic faith and our belief in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ to the next generation.

Parents and grandparents have that wisdom of teaching children and grandchildren how to assemble and situate the creche, but at the same time, they also have the catechetical and relational sensitivity to let children and grandchildren make choices about where the shepherds, the sheep, the three kings are to be placed.

Children are encouraged to place the Holy Family – Mary, Joseph and the Prince of Peace – with their own hands into the center of the creche. How often children then enjoy, sometimes on their own and sometimes with brothers and sisters and family members, moving and interacting with the figurines. How often their biblical imaginations and souls are set on fire with God’s love as they play with their family Nativity sets.

The Holy Father continues: “I would like now to reflect on the various elements of the nativity scene in order to appreciate their deeper meaning. First, there is the background of a starry sky wrapped in the darkness and silence of night. We represent this not only out of fidelity to the Gospel accounts, but also for its symbolic value. We can think of all those times in our lives when we have experienced the darkness of night. Yet even then, God does not abandon us, but is there to answer our crucial questions about the

¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20191201_admirabile-signum.html

meaning of life. Who am I? Where do I come from? Why was I born at this time in history? Why do I love? Why do I suffer? Why will I die? It was to answer these questions that God became man. His closeness brings light where there is darkness and shows the way to those dwelling in the shadow of suffering (cf. Luke 1:79).”

We can drift through life dodging and repressing these critical existential questions of life. We can live blindly and superficially.

Our Catholic belief in the unity of the Nativity and the Crucifixion, the Creche and the Cross, Bethlehem and Golgotha keeps our lives centered and focused on the things that really count in our short time on earth – the Last Things (Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell) and a belief in the Eternal Joy of Heaven, our true home.

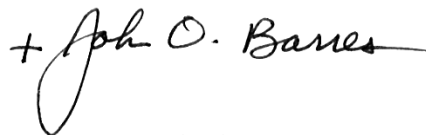
The Holy Father continues to press the existential questions: “The presence of the poor and the lowly in the nativity scene remind us that God became man for the sake of those who feel most in need of his love and who ask him to draw near to them. Jesus, ‘gentle and humble in heart’ (Matthew 11:29), was born in poverty and led a simple life in order to teach us to recognize what is essential and to act accordingly. The nativity scene clearly teaches that we cannot let ourselves be fooled by wealth and fleeting promises of happiness. We see Herod’s palace in the background, closed and deaf to the tidings of joy. By being born in a manger, God himself launches the only true revolution that can give hope and dignity to the disinherited and the outcast: the revolution of love, the revolution of tenderness. From the manger, Jesus proclaims, in a meek yet powerful way, the need for sharing with the poor as the path to a more human and fraternal world in which no one is excluded or marginalized.”

May our prayer, silent contemplation and creative family catechesis of the Nativity scene help us to be instruments of a Gospel revolution of humility, charity, mercy, tenderness, and solidarity with the sick, the poor and the suffering.

May our commitment to “holiness and mission” bless our contemplative Synodal listening and our Eucharistic Revival and Evangelization.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to you and your families!

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ John O. Barres". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'J'.

Most Reverend John O. Barres
Bishop of Rockville Centre