

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Franciscan Friars to Celebrate 800 Year Anniversary of St. Francis' First Crèche

DOWNTOWN TAMPA – To honor the 800th Anniversary of the first crèche assembled by St. Francis of Assisi, the Franciscan Friars of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Downtown Tampa will distribute 800 Nativity ornaments to the public as an invitation to join the historic parish's celebrations of Christmas.

Nativity scenes, or crèches, are ubiquitous for Christians celebrating Christmas, but many may not know the tradition began with St. Francis of Assisi in 1223 in a small town located roughly 60 miles north of Rome, in central Italy, called Greccio. The town, built on a mountainside overlooking a valley and vineyards, had only a small Franciscan hermitage, one that St. Francis believed to be too small to hold the congregation for the celebration of the Nativity of the Lord. St. Francis, presented with the challenge of being able to minister to the congregation effectively, requested permission from Pope Honorius III to set up a representation of the birth of Jesus in a nearby cave, the first Christmas crèche.

“The crèche is a uniquely Franciscan tradition,” says Fr. Mike Jones, OFM, pastor of Sacred Heart Church. “It was a new, vivid way to celebrate the Nativity and Christmas. So vivid that we continue the tradition all these years later.”

Religious dramas were frowned upon at the time, so Francis knew that his request may be denied, even though his intention was reverent. St. Francis did receive permission from the Pope, so he found a niche in the rock near the town square and set up the altar. St. Bonaventure, from his biography *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, states, “then he [St. Francis] prepared a manger, and brought hay, and an ox and an ass to the place appointed. The brethren were summoned, the people ran together, the forest resounded with their voices, and that venerable night was made glorious by many and brilliant lights and sonorous psalms of praise.” It is unclear whether a live baby or an inanimate representation of Christ was used in this first Nativity scene, but accounts are clear that live cows and donkeys were at the cave, along with live actors representing Mary and Joseph.

The following Christmas, the people of Greccio and the surrounding area reconstructed the place of Jesus' birth in other caves and stables, and the Nativity tradition began to grow and spread, a Franciscan tradition now celebrated by all Christians at Christmas.

“The crèche is a universal symbol of Christmas,” says Fr. Zack Elliott, OFM, a parochial vicar of Sacred Heart for more than a decade. “People the world over instantly recognize the symbolism and message, and we're excited to continue sharing the message this Christmas, alongside this remarkable anniversary.”

The friars will distribute the ornaments, along with a brief history of St. Francis' first crèche, at the following times and locations leading up to Christmas:

- The Blessing of the Crèche | Friday, December 1 | 5:30 p.m. | The Franciscan Center, 3010 N Perry Avenue, Tampa FL 33603
- Metropolitan Ministries Holiday Tent | Friday, December 15 | 8:30 to 11:30 a.m. | 2609 N Rome Ave, Tampa, FL 33607

Sacred Heart will host eight Masses for the celebration on the Nativity of the Lord, on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, December 24-25, 2023:

— Christmas Eve —

Sunday, December 24, 2023

4 p.m. | Children's Christmas Program at 3:15 p.m.

6 p.m.

8 p.m.

11 p.m. | Mass During the Night | Choral Program at 10:30 p.m.

— Christmas Day —

Monday, December 25, 2023

7:30 a.m.

9 a.m.

10:30 a.m.

Noon

Sacred Heart Historical Society Christmas Tour | Tuesday, December 26 | 3 p.m. | Free Admission

To view the full Advent and Christmas Season schedule for Sacred Heart, visit shfla.org/christmas.

Erected in 1905, Sacred Heart is the first Catholic Church in Tampa, and along Florida's west coast, with our parish history stretching back to Tampa's early pioneer days.

Dedicated to the Greater Glory of God, Sacred Heart and the Franciscan Friars proudly serve the neighborhoods of Downtown, VM Ybor, Davis Islands, Hyde Park, Tampa Heights, Robles Park, and Seminole Heights with a mission to cultivate a vibrant community of faith by creating meaningful connections with both God and each other.

For more, visit shfla.org.