

THE GROTTTO

The history of the grotto of the Nativity is the most interesting of those histories connected with Christmas and especially so because it inspired the Christmas Crib. The account of the birth of Our Lord tells us that the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph left the town and came to the cave or stable on the eastern hill, which served as a refuge to the shepherds and their flocks in rainy weather. Very ancient tradition avers that an ass and an ox were found in the stable at the birth of Christ. This tradition indorses the saying of Isaias: "The ox knoweth his own and the ass His Master's crib."

St. Helena converted this grotto of the Nativity into a chapel and adorned it with the most costly marble and other ornaments. The first basilica of truly regal style is due to the devotion of her son Constantine. Both grotto and basilica have undergone numerous restorations and modifications made necessary in the course of centuries by the ravages of wars and invasions. In 1873 this grotto was plundered by the Greeks. The few relics left are at Rome.

Yearly from the eve of Christmas until the day of the Epiphany a crib representing the birth-place of Christ is shown in all the Catholic churches in order to remind us of the Incarnation. The old Franciscan church of Ara Cœli possesses perhaps, one of the largest and most beautiful cribs in the world. In this crib the famous Santo Bambino di Ara Cœli is exposed. It is a figure carved out of wood representing the newborn Saviour. It is said to have come from the Holy Land and in course of time has been bedecked with numerous jewels of great value.

The disciples of Jesus were afraid when a great tempest arose in the sea because their Master was asleep. Within the tabernacle He seems to sleep, but His heart watcheth. In every tempest of trial or temptation, let us seek Him there, and call Him to our aid.