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A House of Bread Rises

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For its annual exhibit of Nativities from around the world, the Marian Library at the University of Dayton turned to an unlikely source to create a new setting for a damaged Nativity scene.

A bakery.

A large, carefully crafted loaf of rye bread is now the background for cheerful Nativity figures made from bread dough by French artist Catherine Baillaud. She created the unusual Nativity figures many years ago, originally placing them with a shelter made from a real loaf of bread, according to the Rev. Johann Roten, S.M., director of research and special projects for the Marian Library.

That's particularly appropriate, he said, because Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem, a word that means "house of bread" in ancient Hebrew, for the birth of Jesus.

But over the years, the library's original "house of bread" had deteriorated. And although it would be particularly appropriate to include in this year's "No Place like Home" exhibit, the delicate bread figures were literally homeless, Roten said.

Phillip and Mary Powers, two of the Marian Library's devoted corps of volunteers for the Nativity collection, thought they could do something about that.

"We started about five or six months before Christmas and went to various stores to try to find a loaf big enough," Phil Powers said. "The bakery at the Kroger Marketplace in Beavercreek said they could do it."

It wasn't just the size, he said. The loaf had to be "as round as you could get," with enough space for a door and three windows. Rye bread was selected, because it would give a nice color both inside and outside.

After it was baked, the couple went to work, painting it with a sealer, cutting the door and windows, oven-drying it, hollowing it out and using the cut-off end of the loaf as a resting spot for Jesus' crib.

Roten liked it and placed a dozen of Baillaud's delicate, colorful figures around and inside it. A baker's assistant has a prominent place, stepping out of the house while carrying two loaves of bread and balancing a basketful of bread on her head. The bread cut-out for the door became a flying carpet for the three wise men.

"It is reminiscent of the meaning of the word 'Bethlehem' as a house of bread, and it reminds us that Christ offered himself as the Bread of Life to those who hunger for justice and peace," he said.

Cheryl Powell, bakery manager of the Kroger Marketplace in Beavercreek, Ohio, said the bakery was up to the challenge.

"We knew it would have to be a particular shape; and since it was such a big loaf of bread, it had to be lighter," Powell said.

The Kroger bakery is accustomed to special orders for special events — birthday cakes, yard-long loaves of bread for giant subs — but this was new.

"We've done special requests before, but we've never done a Nativity," she said.

The "house of bread" is included in the Marian Library's exhibit, along with more than 200 Nativity sets from the library's vast collection, on display now through Jan. 29 in Roesch Library at the University of Dayton. It's free and open to the public. Hours and days vary; for complete information including directions and parking, visit <http://udayton.edu/libraries/manger> or call 937-229-4234.

University of Dayton's Marian Library/International Marian Research Institute holds the largest collection in the world of printed materials and artifacts devoted to Mary, the mother of Jesus. The collection includes nearly 3,000 crèches as well as Marian art from around the world. For more, visit <http://udayton.edu/mary>.