The Message of Christmas

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A three-foot-tall metallic foil church façade from Poland reflects gold, silver, ruby and emerald light, and hides a tiny Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus at its center. A few feet away, dwarfing the tiny figures, tall marionettes from Slovakia are suspended by strings, literally bring the Christmas story to life.

The two Nativity scenes, also called crèches, along with scores of others, are on public view this Christmas season at the University of Dayton's Marian Library and in other locations in the Dayton area. Selections from the library's collection of about 1,500 Nativity scenes, one of the largest in the U.S, are on loan to the Dayton Art Institute, Bergamo Center in Beavercreek, Ohio, the UD campus and several local parishes.

The library's collection reaches more people each year, said the Rev. Johann Roten, S.M., director of the International Marian Research Institute. The loaned displays allow the community to enjoy the artistry and diversity of the crèches and at the same time, remind people that these scenes are more than art pieces, he said.

"We like to make sure what we have in our holdings are useful," Roten said. "The Nativity scenes from so many countries help to announce the message of Christmas."

Paper is the theme of the Marian Library's gallery display this year, which includes 106 antique crèches on loan from Pennsylvania collector Bill Baker. Baker's collection includes three-dimensional pop-up scenes, some dating from 1880. The Marian Library display is open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday starting Nov. 26 on the seventh floor of Roesch Library. It will run for a full year.

Thirty crèches will showcase secondary figures in Nativity scenes including townspeople, animals, wise men and other visitors at the Dayton Art Institute from Wednesday, Nov. 21, through Jan. 6 in a collection titled, "Who Else Was at the Nativity?"

"We want to show who else was at the manger," Roten said. "Most cultures have very distinctive ways in which an important event is greeted, and those are expressed in ways that are unique to that culture."

Crèches at the art institute will showcase visitors to the Nativity from a number of different cultures and regions. Different animals, townspeople and protectors can be seen, reflecting the values and practices of each culture.

One crèche from Iceland includes 13 Yulemen, mystical, mischievous people known for causing trouble who come one by one and who are expelled by the light of Christmas, according to Sister M. Jean Frisk, S.S.M, director of special projects for the library.

Instead of shepherds, angels and wise men Jesus, Mary and Joseph are joined by crocodiles and polar bears. Political conflict is expressed in a scene from the Chiapas region of southern Mexico, where revolutionaries in black and red carrying guns and backpacks gather to be with the similarly dressed Holy Family.

The Bergamo Center in Beavercreek, Ohio, a Catholic, Marianist retreat and conference center, will display 30 crèches in a collection titled "Christmas Around the World," a global village theme. The display is open from noon to 4 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday at 4400 Shakertown Road.

The library's crèche collection also will be displayed in more than 30 locations across the UD campus in academic and administrative offices including the schools of law and engineering, and the president's and provost's offices.

"Once you start looking at them, it's amazing how many from different countries there are," said Tim Stonecash, assistant dean of the School of Law. "When I grew up, I had my little Nativity scene as a child ... and I had that vision in my mind. When you go over to the library, you think, 'Wow, look at the possibilities. Look at what kids in Russia or Ireland must have grown up looking at.'

"I think it helps people here feel good about the Christmas season and the special meaning it has for the faculty, staff and
students and those visiting the law school," Stonecash said.

The library's crèches also are on view at parishes in the Dayton area and other Ohio cities.