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# Christmas Nativity Scenes of the Diocese of Subotica in the Light of Traditional Piety of Catholic Believers

*The paper questions the attitude of believers towards the nativity scene in the church in the light of the piety of believers, presenting four unusual compositions of the nativity scene in the churches of the Diocese of Subotica, through an ethnological approach and from the perspective of cultural anthropology. Based on an analysis of personal stories of people in charge of setting up the nativity scene in churches, we are striving to find out what the nativity scene means to them personally and what role the nativity scene plays in society in general. That is, whether it is only a part of the church inventory and décor at Christmas time or the Christmas nativity scene in Subotica can be considered as a form of traditional piety of Catholic believers. The paper also uses theological insights in connection with the interpretation of certain aspects of religion, as well as the social practices that were studied.*

**Keywords:** Christmas nativity scene, traditional piety, Subotica

## INTRODUCTION

As a child in the 1980s, I remember how much I was very much looking forward to watching the nativity scene in the Church of St. Michael at the Franciscan monastery in Subotica, known as the Old Church (locally *Stara crkva*). Jostling in the crowd, as children, we watched the staging of the birth of Jesus, the Holy Family in the cave, and a multitude of colourful figurines arranged in a hilly landscape through which the stream murmured. The festive atmosphere in and around the nativity scene seemed somehow mystical and at the same time pleasant. Although many

believe that children are the ones to most look forward to the Christmas nativity scene, it seems that, with its beauty and imaginative staging, it equally attracts adults, both practical believers and those who come to see it out of pure curiosity or tradition.

Historically, the birth of Jesus Christ and Christmas started being celebrated only from the 4th century, first in Rome<sup>1</sup> (Matić 2003:442), but in Christian iconography the depiction of the birth of Jesus appears much earlier. The oldest fresco depicting Virgin Mary with a child in her arms dates between 230 and 240 AD and it is in the catacombs of Priscilla near Rome (Crnčević 2011:3). The oldest sculptural staging of the nativity of Jesus was made in marble in 1289 by Arnolfo di Cambio for the Chapel of Saint Mary of the Crib (Sancta Maria ad Praesepe) in Rome, which consists of a composition of eight life-size statues, five of which have been preserved to this day (ibid.). However, the first live staging of the nativity of Jesus is associated with St. Francis, which took place in 1223 in a cave not far from the Italian town of Greccio<sup>2</sup> (ibid.). Following the example of St. Francis, until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the nativity scene was built in churches, monasteries and oratories, and consisted of compositions of large figures. In the 18th century, primarily in Naples, wealthy families started making small-sized nativity scene at home, which formed complex compositions of figurines dressed in expensive fabrics. Later, this practice spread throughout Europe, and by making Christmas nativity scene, local masters, along with the Holy Family, often faithfully portrayed the real life of the region in which the nativity scene was created (Topp Weber 2013:9). Hence, over time, the tradition of sculptural staging of the birth of Jesus slowly passed into the domain of naïve art and lay piety.

According to Hoško, the traditional piety of the believers “in content and scope includes that expression of the Christian believers’ attitude to God and Jesus Christ which is manifested in extra-liturgical and non-liturgical forms of worship” (1983:195). Most of the traditional piety was created in the Middle Ages, which, according to Biškup, was due to several factors. Firstly, the fact is that the liturgy of that time was more or less tailored to the needs of clerics, canons, monks and a small number of theologically educated believers. In fact, worship, which had previously taken place spontaneously in smaller communities, took on a different form – the language of the liturgy became Latin, understandable only to a small number of learned people, the fear of the Eucharist was overemphasised, the altar was moved to the apse, with the priest as the only factor in worship, his back turned to the people, and there was a fence between him and the people. Secondly, the peoples whose rulers accepted Christianity, were forced to accept the faith of their ruler. At the same time, few missionaries failed to change their way of life and understanding and many of the customs of these peoples were Christianised only superficially

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1 To find out more about the beginnings of Celebrating Christmas, and the reason why it is celebrated on 25<sup>th</sup> December, see MATIĆ, Marko. 2003 “Povijest i poruka Božićnog otajstva”. *Obnovljeni život*. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/1220>, (accessed 29<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

2 Franciscan sources describe in detail what happened in the small town of Greccio near Rieti, which St. Francis visited upon his return from Rome in 1223. Before that, he visited the Holy Land and the caves in Greccio reminded him of the landscape of Bethlehem. Fifteen days before Christmas, Francis asked a local named John to help him make a wish come true. “I would like to restore the memory of that Child who was born in Bethlehem and of his childhood needs and troubles, i.e. how he was laid in a manger with straw in the presence of an ox and a donkey.” On 25<sup>th</sup> December, many brothers from various regions came to Greccio, along with them men and women from the poor houses of the region who brought flowers and torches that illuminated that Holy Night... Before the scene of the birth of Jesus, all those present experienced a new and unspeakable joy that they had never experienced before.” MACUT, Ivan. 2020 “Apostolsko pismo - Admirabile Signum” Svetog oca Franje o značenju i vrijednosti jaslica”, *Služba Božja: liturgijsko – pastoralna revija*. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/245752>, (accessed 1<sup>st</sup> October 2021).

(1983:184). Unlike the incomprehensible liturgy at the time, from which the individual was more or less excluded, “folk religion relies more on visible signs, that is, it puts the believer in a position of physical contact with the supernatural world” (Jukić 1985:19). Outside the institution, the pieties of believers are almost always guided by some tradition established by the community, and they are characterised by spontaneity, imagination, sentimentality, and community of believers (Biškup 1983:186-187).

One of the more contemporary definitions of piety of believers is that of Marijana Belaj, who defines it as “the totality of the various extra-liturgical and non-liturgical beliefs, acts, attitudes and styles that express the attitude towards the sacred, which has a certain historical, cultural and social framework and is constantly permeated by the official religion” (2005:73). Hence, according to this definition, the piety of believers is indivisible from the official religion, because the believers often do not separate it from other forms of piety.

There are different types of piety of believers and among others, in the Croatian ethnic area, it consists of holidays and memorials organised by the believers, solemn processions, pilgrimages, days of vows in feasts dedicated to patron saints, miraculous power of granting wishes, devotion of the Holy Rosary and veneration of Mary, etc. (Mardešić 2007:746). For this reason, the piety of believers can be defined as “... a complex reality consisting of different religious expressions and pious behaviours, in different cultural environments, originating from the historical situation and it is the result of different spiritual and material needs of vital importance for a period, region, a people or any individual person” (Šimić 1994:50). In this sense, the Christmas nativity scene, popularised by the Franciscans following the example of St. Francis of Assisi as a part of promoting devotion to Christ and the mysteries of his life, is an example of how the religious practices of believers can be adapted to the “needs” of people from different parts of the world by taking on the features of a particular region.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

In this paper, I will focus on four compositions of the nativity scene arranged in the churches of the Diocese of Subotica, more specifically that in the Church of St. Michael at the Franciscan monastery in Subotica (the oldest and the largest church in the city), and three compositions of the nativity scene by the sculptor Alojzija Ulman<sup>3</sup> from Vinkovci, which are located in the Cathedral of St. Theresa of Avila, in the Church of the Resurrection of Jesus and in the parish church in Bajmok. I will refer to the historical moment of the creation of individual nativity scene composition and the symbolism of their individual elements – primarily human and animal figures in the light of the Judeo-Christian tradition in general. Moreover, since the Christmas nativity scene is one of the most widespread traditional pieties of the Catholic believers in the world, I will question the attitude of believers to the nativity scene in churches of Subotica, or whether in this environment the nativity scene can be considered a piety of believers.

As the study of piety of lay believers needs to be approached from the point of view of “everyday life” and “from the point of view of society and the individual and their attitude towards God and the holy” (Rihtman Augustin 1991:11), I collected the material for this work based on my

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3 Alojzija Ulman, sculptor, born in 1926 in Vinkovci, died in Split in 1994. She began her artistic work in 1947. She was mostly engaged in sacral art, and her oeuvre can be divided into several groups by topic: nativity scenes, stations of the cross, ensembles of saints, individual statues, and decoration of church spaces (DEVIDE, Marija. 2003. *Alojzija Ulman*, Vinkovci: Croatian Woman Vinkovci.)

own experience, since for years at Christmas I visited most of the nativity scene compositions mentioned in this text and personally witnessed their different presentations. In addition, one year I personally participated in the installation of the construction for the largest nativity scene in the city – that in the Franciscan monastery. By observing the behaviour of believers in churches before the nativity scene, I gained insight into their practices, actions and behaviour. Moreover, at Christmas time in 2021, for the purposes of this paper, I conducted field research, where I talked with narrators on the topic of the nativity scene, primarily with people who I knew were personally involved in arranging of the nativity scene in churches, but also with the parishioners. The narrators were: Rev. Bela Stantić<sup>4</sup>, a retired parish priest in the Church of the Resurrection of Jesus in Subotica, narrator No.1. – a sacristan and a person who was in charge of setting up the nativity scene in the church for more than twenty years, narrator No. 2 – a lady who came from Dalmatia, who was entrusted with arranging the nativity scene in the Church of the Resurrection of Jesus in 2020 and 2021, narrator No. 3 – a parishioner of the parish church in Bajmok, a middle-aged lawyer, narrator No. 4 – a friar who on several occasions, starting from 1965, served in the Franciscan monastery in Subotica, and narrator No. 5 – a pensioner, a member of the Third Order of St. Francis in the Church of St. Michael at the Franciscan monastery in Subotica, who also participated decades ago in the installation of the nativity scene. Although the narrators were happy to discuss the topic of the nativity scene, I thought it was better not to mention the names of the narrators since “the topic of religion is a particularly sensitive issue” (Šantek 2005:133). The only exception was the name of Rev. Stantić, who was a public figure.

Researching within my own group, in this case within the group of Catholic believers in Subotica, I found myself in the position of an ethnologist in ethnology of the familiar who is simultaneously in the position of a participant – insider (researcher) and the position of a participant witness (narrator). Some anthropologists think that such a position is highly challenging, believing that this is how objectivity in the approach is lost (Kirsten Hastrup according to Naumović 1998:2). Namely, when an ethnologist investigates within their own group, they are at risk of double insider syndrome, when they can take on the role of the group’s advocate at any time, and thus move away and become biased in relation to the field of research (ibid.). This challenging position can be justified by the fact that an ethnologist in ethnology of the familiar will organise knowledge differently than an individual from the social group they are researching (Čapo Žmegač et. al 2006:33). In fact, I think that in this case the position of insider helped me. Namely, most of the narrators knew me from before, and although I had previously explained to them that I was planning to use their stories for scientific work, they talked about the topic of the nativity scene gladly and without reservations. Conversations with narrators were spontaneous, and, recalling the past, they told personal experiences about arranging the nativity scene in churches, their attitude to nativity scene and the perception of today’s role of the nativity scene in churches.

I also received valuable material for this work from an ethnographic study on the nativity scene in the Diocese of Subotica written by Géza Cékus<sup>5</sup> in 2013, which was created on the basis of a questionnaire intended for churches and houses of prayer (111 of them). Prof. Cekuša’s ethnographic description mainly deals with factual data: the time of the nativity scene, its posi-

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4 Rev. Bela Stantić was a pastor in the Church of the Resurrection of Jesus in Subotica from 1974 until his retirement in 2019.

5 Géza Cékus, a retired professor of biology at the Hungarian Faculty of Teacher Education in Subotica and an amateur ethnographer.

tion inside or outside the church, the dimensions of the composition, the type of figurines and materials from which it was made, who were the builders, and it contains photographs of most of the nativity scenes in the Diocese, without ethnological analyses of the relationship between individuals and the community towards the nativity scene.

I also collected material based on the literature available to me on the topic of the nativity scene and piety of believers, which I mostly accessed online, since the local library in Subotica has an extremely small fund of professional ethnological literature. In addition, for the purposes of this paper, I used articles about the nativity scene published in the local press.

The reason why I decided to write about the nativity scene in churches is the fact that in Subotica there is no longer the tradition of setting up or arranging nativity scenes at home, as is the case in Croatia (Brlek 2004, Hrovatin 2009). One of the narrators who grew up in Dalmatia and came to Subotica in the 1980s confirmed that:

*When I came here, I found it strange that no one here sets up the nativity scene in the house. I made a few nativity scenes for the family.*

However, in Bački Bunjevci there is a custom of making Christmas bread (*božićnjak*)<sup>6</sup> – which could be considered a local version of the Christmas nativity scene because the bread is decorated with figurines of the Holy Family and animals that are normally found in the nativity scene, which is locally also referred to as *bethlehem*,<sup>7</sup> and during Christmas time it is placed next to the Christmas tree. In 2017, Marija Vukov's Christmas bread from Subotica was presented at the "100 Nativity Scenes" International Exhibition at the Vatican upon the initiative of the Zagreb City Museum employees. It was specific because that was the first time that dough nativity scene was presented in this exhibition (Petrekanić Sič HR:2021).

Currently, the oldest nativity scene in the city is that at the Franciscan monastery in the Church of St. Michael in Subotica, for which in 1953<sup>8</sup> (Figure 1) the scenery was made by Fr. Ivan Krznar, famous for making nativity scenes throughout Croatia and beyond. The nativity scene is of imposing dimensions: 9 meters wide, 4.3 meters deep and 5-6 meters high. According to the memory of the narrator no. 4 – a friar, who remembers the time of the creation of this nativity scene because he spent time in the church as a child. Fr. Krznar painted the scenery, while the model of the landscape was made by the friar Jeremiah assisted by several local masters. The scenery that Fr. Krznar painted for the nativity scene in Subotica is very similar to that in the composition of the nativity scene in the Franciscan church at Kaptol in Zagreb, dominated by

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6 Christmas bread – bread kneaded by women of the Bunjevci Croats in the north of Bačka on Christmas Eve, which is decorated with figurines of the Holy Family and other figurines, depending on the imagination and skill of the woman who makes the bread (more about this in: POLJAKOVIĆ, Bojana, ed. 2014. *Božićnjak*, Zbornik radova "Tradicijska baština i etnokulturalni identitet podunavskih Hrvata Bunjevacā", FF Press, Zagreb)

7 Christmas nativity scenes in Subotica and its surroundings are also referred to as *bethlehem* (figurative depiction of the birth of Jesus)

8 Ivan Krznar was born on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1919 in Domašinci, Croatia, which at the time was in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. In the autumn of 1931, he enrolled the Franciscan Collegium in Varaždin, which he completed in 1941. He first put on the Franciscan habit in 1937, and after studying at the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Zagreb, he was ordained as priest on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1946. Father Krznar loved nature and was a passionate mountaineer. He stood out as a nativity scene builder. He made a whole series of nativity scenes throughout Croatia, and in Subotica, as well as in the Church of St. Anthony in Belgrade. He died on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1997 in Čakovec.

the realistically depicted ambience of the Middle East – the city of Bethlehem in the night. In the right-hand side of the scenery there are paintings of a stone house with a flat roof that are still being built in the Middle East today, in the centre there is the star of Bethlehem<sup>9</sup>, while to the left there is a hilly landscape with a path leading to the cave where the Holy Family is located. The second, lower part of the composition is a hilly landscape through which a stream flows. In one hill, in the centre of the composition, there is a cave. Originally, the model of the nativity scene was made of cardboard, jute and plaster, on which a multitude of figurines were placed in different poses. The panel of the model was placed on a wooden structure and, after the composition of the nativity scene had been arranged on the ground, it was lifted and put on a wooden stand. The model, together with the rectangular wooden stand, was extremely heavy and around twenty people were needed to lift it and put it on the wooden stand. In 2009, upon the initiative of the then Franciscan Custos, Fr. Ivan Bošnjak, the old structure was replaced with a new one made from metal pipes. The latter structure is far lighter and simpler to assemble. Moreover, the damaged worn-out landscape model has been replaced by a new one, made of more modern, lighter materials. In the past, these large nativity scenes were adorned with dozens of figurines and hence Cékus stated in the book that in 2012 there were 76 of them (2013:24). The scenery painted by Fr. Krznar is still in good condition and every year it is set up again behind the new, renovated nativity scene model. A large number of plaster figures was eventually damaged, and they were replaced with new ones, while some were restored in the City Museum in Subotica. Nowadays, although they are more modest compared with the composition from about ten years ago, these nativity scenes still attract crowds of people during the Christmas holidays.

The second nativity scene was made by Alojzija Ulman in 1958 for the Cathedral of St. Theresa of Avila (Figure 2). This nativity scene is quite unusual, namely according to the idea of the author “the sculptures are placed in the sanctuary, between the altar and the people, in a free space, without staging, and the whole scene mediates and connects the altar and the Eucharist with the people” (Devide 2003:16). The nativity scene consists of seven large sculptures: Mary, kneeling with her back to the observers, in front of her there is a child on a bed of straw. St. Joseph is standing and facing the visitors. He is inviting the people to look at the scene with his right hand. A shepherd is kneeling in front of him, and to his right there is a boy approaching them with a lantern in his hand and a tiny sheep. One of the Three Kings is kneeling beside the shepherds— *a faithful Egyptian* (Isaiah 19:18-25; 56:7 “And the Lord shall be known to the Egyptians...”), and on the left-hand side two kings are approaching - a European and *an Indian* trustworthy (ibid.). If we compare the previously described idea of the sculptor Ulman with the photographs of the later compositions of the nativity scene, we will notice that the figures in the later compositions are arranged differently, and do not follow the idea of the author. This is understandable, as more than sixty years have passed since the basic set-up. Over the last ten years, Mary is most often placed to the left of the cradle with Jesus, and visitors can see her from the profile, while St. Joseph is placed to the right. The figures of the Three Kings and the shepherds are arranged symmetrically to the right and left in relation to the central figures of Bethlehem.

The third nativity scene is in the Church of the Resurrection of Jesus, which was first set up in 1979. All the statues of this nativity scene except those of the Holy Family wear Bunjevac folk costumes, which makes the nativity scene special and in a more intimate way connects it with

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9 The Star of Bethlehem—is mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 2:1-13). The star was followed by the Magi looking for the King of the Jews. It is not clear whether this is an astronomical phenomenon or some extraordinary celestial phenomenon (Ratzinger 2012:112)



Figure 1. The nativity scene in the Church of St. Michael at the Franciscan monastery in Subotica – own photograph taken in 2021



Figure 2. The nativity scene at the Cathedral of St. Theresa of Avila in Subotica – a photograph taken in 2019, provided by Nada Sudarević from Subotica

the local people, because, as Fr. Stantić said *Jesus could have been born among us*. Namely, this church is located in a part of the city that until the 1990s was mainly inhabited by the Bunjevci Croats. The author meticulously approached the creation of the statues wearing the traditional costume of the Bunjevci, and through two women's statues she faithfully presented two variants of women's traditional dress, one is festive wear, consisting of an *otunčica* (top blouse), a wide skirt with underskirts and an apron made of the same type of fabric, and headwear – a headscarf tied at two ends (it is tied in such a way that two or four folds are formed on both sides, and a harder paper was inserted inside the headscarf – locally referred to as *forma* that fixed the position of the headscarf on the head).<sup>10</sup> The second variant of women's traditional dress was worn by girls and young women. This outfit consists of a silk skirt with underskirts, and an apron of the same colour as the skirt and the vest (*mider*) with metal buckles, a shirt, and *igrač* – a silk fabric 15 cm wide and around 3 metres long, tied around the waist in such a way that there is a bow in front. The young woman's hair is combed into a bun. The clothes of the male figures in the composition are also carefully selected, so on the figure of a younger man who is carrying a Yule log (in Croatian *badnjak*), items of festive wear can be seen – a silk vest and trousers tucked into deep leather boots. An elderly man wearing straw on his back is dressed in work clothes comprising of a leather vest (in Croatian *pršnjak*) and wide-leg trousers (in Croatian *gaće*) sewn from homemade linen, and the figure of the shepherd is presented in a wide floor-length cloak made of sheepskin (locally referred to as *opaklija*) and a hat (locally referred to as *šubara*) made of sheep's fur (Sekulić 1991)<sup>11</sup>. The presentation of figures in traditional clothes is not a new idea, namely, the first nativity scene whose figures were presented in the Croatian traditional clothing was made by the academically trained sculptor Vojta Braniš<sup>12</sup> in the period from 1915 to 1916 under the name “Croatian Christmas”, and it is set up in the church of St. Blaise in Zagreb (Matijević 2017). *The Bunjevac nativity scene* is not the only nativity scene where the figures are in the traditional costume. Namely, the sculptor Ulman made a series of such nativity scenes (the nativity scene in the cathedral in Hvar, as well as in churches in Delnice, Derventa, Babina Greda, Otok, and the nativity scene at the Croatian Chaplaincy in Essen), and as the author herself said that the idea behind it was “that children fall in love with the newborn baby Jesus” (Devide 2003:19).

The author made the fourth nativity scene composition for the Diocese of Subotica in 1980, and it is set up in the parish church in Bajmok. The composition of this nativity scene, also known as *the Peacemaking Nativity Scene*, was made by the sculptor Ulman, inspired by the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The wolf will live with the lamb, the lynx with the goat, the calf will graze, and the child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. An infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child

10 More about women's traditional wear: Prčić, Aleksandra. 2017. “Veliko ruvo – osvrt na simboličku dimenziju bunjevačke ženske svečane tradicijske odjeće”, *Etnološka istraživanja* 22: 73-91 (Hrčak: <https://hrcak.srce.hr/198099>)

11 More on that in SEKULIĆ, Ante. 1991. *Bački Hrvati - Narodni život i običaji*. Zagreb: JAZU

12 Vojta Braniš, sculptor and art teacher (born on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1893 in Brzenec, the Czech Republic – died on 29<sup>th</sup> November 1983 in Zagreb). He studied sculpture at the Department of the Higher School of Arts and Crafts in Zagreb, and after that he perfected woodcarving in Prague and Vienna. He was first a teacher at the Higher School of Arts and Crafts, and later a teacher and the director of the public Crafts School in Zagreb. His small sculptural opus was created between 1916 and 1938. (Leksikografski zavod “Miroslav Krleža”, Hrvatski bibliografski leksikon <https://hbl.lzmk.hr/clanak.aspx?id=2708>. (accessed 27<sup>th</sup> September 2021))



put its hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain. The Earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord." (The Bible, Isaiah 11:6-9). In 1987, *the Peacemaking Nativity Scene* received the Grand Prix award in Rome at the exhibition of nativity scenes in the Church of St. Maria del Popolo (Devide 2003:22).

According to Fr. Stantić, because of the fact that the sculptor Ulman dealt with the theme of the nativity scene from multiple aspects – from the theological, sociological, ethnological and emotional aspect (ibid.), the then Diocesan Bishop of Subotica, Matija Zvekanović trusted her immensely. Consequently, we can still enjoy her works today. In addition, the nativity scene of the sculptor Ulman is distinguished by vivid figures. The conversation with narrator No. 2 confirmed that her statues are truly perceived as alive. Because of her distinctive sense of beauty, the narrator No. 2 was entrusted with the set-up of nativity scenes in the Church of the Resurrection of Jesus in Subotica in 2020. The first thing she said was: *These are such beautiful statues; they look as if they were alive*. At the time, she did not yet know that these were unique art pieces, not mass-produced statues from church supply stores. Fr. Stantić, who had the honour of meeting the sculptor Ulman, said that the vitality of the statues is actually the reflection of the cheerful personality of the sculptor, which she successfully transferred into them. As Maria Devide wrote in her book dedicated to the sculptor Ulman: "she knew how to breathe life into her statues" (2003:16).

## SYMBOLISM OF THE COMPOSITION AND FIGURES OF THE NATIVITY SCENE AS A PART OF LAY PIETY

In simplest terms, the nativity scene, which is locally referred to as *bethlehem* is a figurative depiction of the birth of Jesus. The Croatian ethnologist, professor emeritus Vitomir Belaj defined the nativity scene as a group of figurines by which once a year during the Christmas period, the believers evoke the place of Jesus' birth by arranging them in space, usually in a plastic panoramic form (1995:3). The nativity scenes can also be perceived as a part of church inventory that can be bought, given as a present, replaced when damaged, etc. For example, priests said that when they received new nativity scenes, they gave the old ones to other parishes, or parts of the set-up ended up in storage. Hence, after the parish of the Resurrection of Jesus received the nativity scene by the sculptor Alojzija Ulman, Fr. Bela Stantić donated the existing parts of the old nativity scene that was in the parish when he arrived as a young priest, to the parish church in Mala Bosna. Similarly, when the nativity scene by Alojzija Ulman reached the cathedral, the Bishop Matija Zvekanović donated the old nativity scene to the church in Đurđin (Cékus 2003:48).

The nativity scene can be made in countless ways, and the place where you can see the nativity scenes from all over the world is the exhibition titled *100 Nativity Scenes*, which is held every year in the Basilica of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome. Marija Nimčević had the honour to exhibit the nativity scene made in the traditional technique of shaping straw. Marija Nimčević, born in Subotica<sup>13</sup>, won a special award of the expert panel in the competition of 170 nativity scenes from about forty countries. The expert panel was particularly impressed that the author from such a fragile material made "a gentle work of subtle brilliance that emanates life that is born, turning it into a movement that ultimately translates into the fiery rays from heaven..."<sup>14</sup>.

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13 Find out more about that in: Krmpotić, Lazar Ivan, 2004. *Umjetnost u tehnici slame*, Matica Hrvatska, Zagreb.

14 Source: [laudato.hr/Novosti/Kultura/Mariji-Nimcevic-nagrada-za-jaslice-izradene-pd-sla.aspx](http://laudato.hr/Novosti/Kultura/Mariji-Nimcevic-nagrada-za-jaslice-izradene-pd-sla.aspx)

Namely, straw as a stiff material that is perceived as a byproduct, in the hands of skilled artisans can become a beautiful ornament, shiny as gold.

The figurines in the composition staging the birth of Jesus can also be seen in the context of their symbolism. By listing figurines in the nativity scene of the Diocese of Subotica, Cékus made the basic division into human and animal figures. Among human figures, alongside the Holy Family he listed: shepherds, the Three Wise Men (Magi) from the east, children, moving lumberjacks, moving sheep shearers, camel men, servants, a water-bearing girl and women (2013:26).

The centre of all the nativity scenes is the little child Jesus Christ as God incarnated. Pope Francis, speaking of the nativity scene from the theological point of view, said that in the nativity scene God is depicted in the form of a small child in order to be “welcomed in our arms” (Macut 2019:473). Symbolically, the newborn represents a new beginning, the renewal of life, and a child placed in a manger could symbolise a new beginning at the end of the old year. Nowadays in the nativity scene, with the baby, there are almost always his mother Mary and his father Joseph. But if we go back to the earliest depictions of the birth of Jesus on the frescoes of the Roman catacombs, we will notice that Joseph was not always a part of the central composition of the nativity scene alongside Jesus and Mary. He appeared much later, at first very rarely, which initially, according to the opinion of theologians, was to remove any doubt about Christ’s god-like humanity (Crnčević 2010:3). For a period of time, St. Joseph was placed separated from the mother and child, outside the cave or barn, but gradually he got his place next to them. St. Joseph symbolises the father-protector and is most often depicted with a stick or lantern in his hand (Pope Francis according to Macut 2020:472).

In the nativity scene in the Cathedral of Therese of Avila in Subotica, as previously mentioned, the sculptor Ulman set up the Holy Family, especially Mary and Joseph in a completely unusual way. Namely, since the entire composition of the nativity scene is located in the centre of the church in front of the altar, she made the statue of the Virgin Mary in a kneeling position and positioned her with her back to the people. Mary is focused on the child, and St. Joseph is in a standing position next to the child and is proudly with his left hand, calling people closer to the child–God.

The contemporary interpretation of the role of the father-protector is present in the nativity scene of recent date called *Let Mum Rest*<sup>15</sup>, which Pope Francis received as a gift in 2019. In the previously mentioned nativity scene, St. Joseph is shown with the child on his lap, while the mother is sleeping in the background. Thus, the father in the modern world takes over a part of the care of a small child, which in traditional society mainly belonged to the mother.

In addition to the Holy Family, in the nativity scene there are most often shepherds, who according to the Bible, having received the news from the Angels, were the first to become witnesses of the birth of Jesus<sup>16</sup> (Ratzinger 2012:83-84). Some authors see in shepherds a reminder of David whom God took from the pasture of Bethlehem from the flock and made king, and the child in the manger is that descendant whom God promised David that he would be born of his body and would establish his throne forever (Matić 2003:450). Others see in the shepherds the small, the poor, the sinners, the ordinary world. Hence, the shepherd is viewed as the leader of

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15 Source: [bitno.net/vijesti/vatikan/evo-jasllica-koje-su-odusevile-papu-franju-pustimo-mamu-da-se-od-mori](http://bitno.net/vijesti/vatikan/evo-jasllica-koje-su-odusevile-papu-franju-pustimo-mamu-da-se-od-mori) (accessed 18<sup>th</sup> February 2022)

16 “Let us go to, then, to Bethlehem, to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us” (Luke 2:15).

the flock and a symbol of leadership, but he can symbolise the characters of any time, status and life circumstances (Šaško 2011:11). Figures of shepherds in the nativity scene can be diverse. There are those in an attitude of admiration, those who sleep (represent the old world insensitive to mystery), who kneel, bring gifts (usually lamb or bread), play the bagpipes, the flute, etc. The kneeling shepherd is a part of the composition of the nativity scene of Alojzija Ulman in the Cathedral of St. Therese of Avila in Subotica, which can be ethnologically, culturally and anthropologically seen as a symbol of the humility of priests – shepherds of the church before God.

Alongside shepherds, the Three Kings, the Magi or Three Wise Men can often be seen in the nativity scene. These figures are most often placed in the nativity scene on 6th January, the Catholic feast of Epiphany. The Magi bring gifts: gold to honour Jesus the king, frankincense to honour divinity, and myrrh honouring his sacred humanity who will experience death and burial (Macut 2019:473). The Magi from the East are representatives of all who seek God throughout history, and artists portray them as representatives of the black, yellow and white races in youthful, masculine and old age, to emphasise the universal significance of Jesus' birth for people of all races and ages (K. Stock 1986:18 according to Matić 2003:456). The Three Wise Men are a part of the picturesque composition of the nativity scene in the Franciscan monastery in Subotica, and they formed an integral part of the older compositions, as evidenced by the figurines kept by the friar – narrator no. 4 in the chapel of St. Nicholas in Bikovo near Subotica. In the present nativity scene in the church of the Franciscan monastery, the Three Wise Men are represented in the form of three people of different skin colours who arrive on an elephant, a camel and a horse.

Since the beginning of the 18th century, nativity scenes started being made at home, it has become popular to add to the Holy Family the figures of the inhabitants of the region where they were created in real life situations. Thus, it was possible to see in them the figures of farmers, craftsmen, beggars and the poor, etc. According to the interpretation of the Church, these figures were intended to “remind us how God became man for the sake of those who feel the greatest need for his love and seek his closeness” (Macut 2019:472). This tradition was accepted by believers and has continued to live on to this day. In addition, the nativity scenes of the sculptor Ulman in the Church of the Resurrection of Jesus in Subotica show figures of a family from the farmstead<sup>17</sup> in traditional clothing, approaching the stable in which the Holy Family is located. This nativity scene composition, full of symbolism, is valuable from an ethnological point of view because the characters that make up the composition of the nativity scene speak about the Christmas traditions of the Bunjevci Croats in Bačka. There is an elderly woman - a *mâjka* dressed in festive women's traditional clothes, who carries a bowl of cooked beans in her hands – a part of the traditional table of the Bunjevci Croats in Bačka on Christmas Eve. Then there is an elderly man who carries straw on his back, which he will spread on the floor of the room, symbolising the straw in the nativity scene in which Jesus is laid. This is followed by figures that narrator No. 2 (set up this composition of the nativity scenes in 2020 and 2021) interpreted as a young family: a younger man carrying a Yule log (*badnjak*), and a young woman kneeling before the Holy Family holding Christmas bread (*božićnjak*) in her hands. There is also a child - a

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17 Salaš - Ethnologist Ante Sekulić closely associates the everyday life of the Croats of Bačka with farmsteads. These are agricultural estates outside the village, distant from each other, which are most often built on the edges of the property (1991: 209). The word “salaš” has a broader meaning and denotes the totality of buildings on the property: residential buildings, stables, sheds, pigsties, chicken coops, corn cribs, dungyards, wells, bread oven) (ibid. 207). Sekulić, Ante. “Bački Hrvati – Narodni život i običaji”. 1991. Matica hrvatska. Zagreb.

little girl who is looking at the Holy Family with a small lantern in her hand. In the composition there is also a shepherd dressed in sheepskin (*opaklija*), and as could be seen in the pastures of northern Bačka in the middle of the 20th century with a lamb in his hand and a flock of sheep.

Animals are not mentioned in the gospels of Luke (2:1-7) and Matthew (1:18-25), which speak of the birth of Jesus, but they have also found their place in the nativity scene. Most often there is an ox, a donkey, then sheep, but also other animals, such as a horse, an elephant and a camel on which Three Wise Men arrive, or those that the person making the nativity scene finds important and considers belonging in the nativity scene. S. Weber presented a nativity scene from Guyana – Africa from 1980 (2013:87) in which, among others, there was a crocodile, or a nativity scene from Australia containing kangaroos, koalas (2013:56).

Among the animals in the nativity scenes in the Diocese of Subotica, in addition to the ox, donkey and sheep, Cékus listed goats, elephant, giraffe, deer, roe, bear, wolf, lion, panther, dog, duck, geese, turkeys, *exotic Chinese birds* and a cat (26:2013). As Cékus later explained in the conversation, “exotic” Chinese birds – i.e. porcelain ducks, became a part of the nativity scene in the Church of the Resurrection of Jesus one year, when the nuns who decorated the nativity scene, in an attempt to more faithfully evoke the ambience of the farmstead, added to them several porcelain figurines of ducks made in China, which were quite different from the rest of the composition.

Although cats are not a part of the usual Christmas story, it is quite possible that a cat could have been found in a cave or barn. There is even a Christian tradition according to which the cat warmed the Child Jesus, and in gratitude Mary touched her head, which is why striped cats still carry the letter M on their foreheads<sup>18</sup> today. But let's return to the symbolism of animals placed in the nativity scene.

Ox and donkey are, according to the established iconography, animals that are most often found next to the Child laid in the manger. The presence of ox and donkey, as well as other animals in the nativity scene, should be considered within a wider conceptual framework in which animals had symbolic meaning (Crnčević 2010:13). In fact, Crnčević explains the reason why the ox and the donkey are introduced into Jesus' company in a much older text – that is, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, which read: “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's feeding trough – but Israel does not know, my people do not understand” (Isaiah 1:3). With these words, the prophet admonishes the chosen people for neglecting the Word of God and unfaithfulness to the Covenant and God. In this context, the donkey is the symbol of resistance and untamedness, and the ox is the symbol of kindness, calmness and obedience. “These two opposite characters in Old Testament symbolism, together at the manger, represent the disappearance of the opposition between the chosen people and other peoples, and the emergence of a new chosen people— a Church that grew out of Judaism and Gentile peoples” (ibid.).

The sheep is the animal that is the most often mentioned in the Bible. It symbolises meekness, kindness, innocence, and readiness for reconciliation (Crnčević 2011:14). In biblical times, God was honoured by sacrificing sheep and it also expressed gratitude. Jesus is called *the Lamb of God*, and the sheep is the most common symbol of Jesus Christ through the sacrifice that both

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18 A Christmas tale: How the tabby cat got its “M” (by the Rose Gates for the Sun Chronicle, 26<sup>th</sup> December 2008, [thesunchronicle.com/pet\\_day/a-christmas-tale-how-the-tabby-cat-got-its-m/article\\_8fe2ee41-1bfe-58cb-b566-7623a696d8b9.html](http://thesunchronicle.com/pet_day/a-christmas-tale-how-the-tabby-cat-got-its-m/article_8fe2ee41-1bfe-58cb-b566-7623a696d8b9.html))

innocents endure. Jesus, equally without guilt, was sacrificed on the cross for all the people, which is why the sheep is also in the nativity scene<sup>19</sup>. At least one sheep can be found in all the nativity scenes in the Diocese of Subotica.

*The Peacemaking Nativity Scene* in Bajmok in the Diocese of Subotica includes the largest number of different animal characters in the nativity scene. At the centre of the composition, there is the Holy Family set in an open space, surrounded by animals: a bear, a lion, a viper and a wolf, among others, which faithfully show the words of the prophet Isaiah. It seems, however, that this unusual nativity scene, although indisputably artistically valuable and visually beautiful, is not fully accepted by the parishioners. For example, the narrator No. 3 from Bajmok recalls with nostalgia the previous nativity scene composition, which she says *resembled that in the church at the Franciscan monastery in Subotica*, which she considers the most beautiful in the city. She finds the existing composition interesting, but as a *believer, she always watches the Child Jesus laid in the centre of the church*. Namely, next to the Peacemaking Nativity Scene positioned in front of the altar, a cradle with the Child Jesus is placed – a life-size doll, which forms a separate composition.

Concerning the place of birth of Jesus, the Gospel of Luke says that Joseph and Mary *were* in Bethlehem when the time came for Mary to give birth (Lk 2:6), and that Mary laid the child in a manger after giving birth<sup>20</sup>, because there was no room for them in the inn (*katalyma*) (Tomić 1972:447). Since the manger from which the animals take food is in the stable, it would be logical to conclude that Jesus was born in a stable. However, in the vicinity of Bethlehem caves have been used as stables since ancient times (Ratzinger 2012:79).

Symbolically, “the cave is an archetypal place that symbolises the bowels of the Earth and God’s descent into the reality of the world” (Crnčić 2010:6). The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew tells us that Mary enters a cave where the light of day has never reached “and then everything is illuminated as if noon had shone” (*ibid.*). Šaško believes that the cave, as the place of Jesus’ birth, can be linked with the most widespread cult in the Mediterranean basin at the time – *Mithraism*. Namely, the rites for the Persian deity Mithra, a symbol of the sun and light, were held in caves, and provided a good basis for the Christian mytheme (2010:9).

According to Celestin Tomić, the ambiguity about the place of Jesus’ birth stems from the misinterpretation of the word *katalyma*, which was often translated as *an inn*, while according to him the true meaning of this word would be *the hall* (1972:446). So *katalyma* would actually denote a living room, a larger room in the house. Tradition and archaeology indicate that in the past, houses in Bethlehem, as well as today, houses of poor Arabs were leaning against a cave where caverns were hollowed out that were used for barn and storage. Thus, it can be assumed that Joseph and Mary settled in the house of a relative or acquaintance, and that when the time came, Mary retreated into the silence of the cavern behind the house and gave birth to a child there and laid him in a manger that was already there (*ibid.* 448).

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19 Ideas from the book “ZooObilje u slikama” by Vojmir Žic, Glas koncila – a Catholic weekly, 27<sup>th</sup> December 2022, [glas-koncila.hr/simbolika-bilja-i-zivotinja-uz-dan-Isusova-rodjenja-kada-stvorenje-slavi.bozic/](http://glas-koncila.hr/simbolika-bilja-i-zivotinja-uz-dan-Isusova-rodjenja-kada-stvorenje-slavi.bozic/), (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> November 2023)

20 “Was placed in a manger” - the Latin term *praesepium* or *praesapium* (manger) originally denotes a place that is enclosed by intertwined wicker from which the cattle ate. The Croatian word *jasle* denotes feeding since it is derived from the verb *to eat*. The city of *Bethlehem* - the place where Jesus was born literally means *House of Bread*.

Today, the depiction of the place of Jesus' birth in the Christmas nativity scene depends on the imagination, that is, the vision of the builders of its makers, so the Holy Family is sometimes placed in a cave, and sometimes in a stable. For example, in the Church of the Resurrection of Jesus in Subotica, the narrator No. 1 arranged the nativity scene by placing the Holy Family in a barn, while the narrator No. 2 placed the Holy Family in a cave. There are also cases when the nativity scene is located outside the recognisable ambience, which is the case in the Cathedral of St. Therese of Avila where the Holy Family is located in the centre of the church in the open space between the altar and the believers.

Irrespective of whether it is placed in a cave or in a stable, the nativity scene is always a symbol of hope for a new beginning. In this context, the contemporary *Covid Nativity Scene* created in the parish of St. Stephen I, the Pope on Hvar, placed the Child Jesus in Dubrava hospital in Zagreb, rather than in a stable or a cave, hoping for the healing of people – light after darkness (Majdandžić-Gladić 2020)<sup>21</sup>.

## THE NATIVITY SCENES IN SUBOTICA IN LIGHT OF THE PIETY OF LAY BELIEVERS

Concluding his book on the nativity scene in the Diocese of Subotica, Cékus stated that some of the respondents believe that the nativity scene has only an aesthetic function, but there were also those for whom the nativity scene had the function of evangelisation, and was the place of address to the saints and Jesus Christ (2013:37).

From the stories of the Franciscan Friars of the Third Order at the Franciscan monastery, I learned that the Christmas nativity scene in the church was smaller in size and placed at the altar. The existing nativity scene of imposing dimensions was made *during the period when nativity scene making was rapidly developing in Croatia* (Fra Bonaventura Duda, notice 5/1997<sup>22</sup>), i.e. after World War II when the communist government restricted citizens' religious freedom. Such a large nativity scene, can be understood as a reaction of the Church and the believers to the pressures and the need to somehow publicly show love for the faith. The nativity scene at the Franciscan monastery has become a part of the tradition in Subotica and at Christmas time it attracts many people, not only Catholics and believers, but also other visitors.

The community of believers who are brought together in the Church of The Resurrection of Jesus in Subotica and who consist mostly of the Bunjevci Croats, is particularly fond of the nativity scene with figures in their traditional costume, which also speaks about the Christmas customs of the local people. These Christmas nativity scenes are perceived as "ours" and they bring together the people of this parish.

The narrators, most often participants in the making of the nativity scene, talked about what the nativity scene meant to them personally. Namely, to arrange the nativity scene did not mean only to arrange the figurines on some type of pedestal or a part of the church intended especially for this purpose. For example, it was especially difficult to set up the nativity scene in the Fran-

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21 Majdandžić-Gladić, Snježana, article: "Isusovo mjesto u današnjim jaslicama", *Vjera i djela – Portal katoličkih teologa*, <https://www.vjeraiadjela.com>, (accessed 29<sup>th</sup> September 2021)

22 The speech by Fr. Bonaventura Duda at Fr.Krznar's funeral, which was provided by the Province of Saints Cyril and Methodius

ciscan monastery and it was physically demanding, which they perceived as *a special honour and spiritual renewal*<sup>23</sup> (narrator No. 5). The same narrator said that in the past they *used to meet in church weeks before and agree on how to set up the nativity scene*, and they looked for moss and other elements for decorating it. He concluded that...*today you need to persuade people to come and help with the set up of the nativity scene, and in the past those you forgot to invite to participate in this task used to be offended.*

The narrator No. 1 was a sacristan. For years he decorated the nativity scenes in the Church of the Resurrection of Jesus and he felt particularly honoured. He said that during the first few years after the nativity scene was brought to the church, it occupied a large space next to the altar, and it was an extremely demanding task to decorate it. Since the statues represented a farmstead family, the nativity scene in the church clearly strived to evoke the ambience of the farmstead, for which it was necessary to bring straw, corn and other props. In addition, the transport of the statues, which were almost life-size, required strength and special attention since they are delicate clay statues. Fr. Stantić took care of the nativity scene statues since 1979, when they were brought to the church until his retirement in 2019. He was afraid that the figures would be damaged and he said: "Every year I brought them from the first floor to the ground floor of the church, stored them in chests and returned them to the same place where they were safest from damage." Since over time it was increasingly difficult to come up with props for a large nativity scene set-up, and simultaneously the job of storing and cleaning them became too difficult, they became more modest, smaller in size and were allocated a space in another part of the church. Narrator No. 2 committed to set up a nativity scene in the Church of the Resurrection of Jesus in 2020. Her vision of the nativity scene was completely different from the previous set-ups. Namely, she ignored the fact that the figures wear traditional costume and that for this reason they need to be put in the ambience of the farmstead. She focused on the fact that the figures are almost life-size and emphasised the unity of believers, believing that the figures need to be separated and placed in a wider space, i.e. placed so that they form several separate units, each of which tells a part of the Christmas Story. The believers who visit the nativity scene were thus able to feel that they were a part of the composition of the Christmas nativity scene, as they were given the opportunity to be among the people gathered in front of the cave and greet Jesus. The narrator felt that setting up the nativity scene was a source of great pleasure for her, and she considered it a blessing. She agreed with the parish priest to set it up again in the future in the larger space that it previously occupied and enrich the entire composition.

It is interesting how narrators No. 1 and No. 2, guided by the same thought *that Jesus could have been born among us*, interpreted *us* completely differently. Namely, the figures represent a family of the Bunjevci Croats in traditional clothes, and the person arranging the nativity scene, originally from the farmstead near Subotica, tried to put the nativity scene in the ambience of the farmstead. For her *us* meant the Bunjevci Croats living on the farmstead, while the narrator No. 2, born in Dalmatia, although guided by the same thought, interpreted *us* as believers – parishioners. Hence, she placed the figurines in a neutral landscape, and focused primarily on the Holy Family. In this case, *us* actually stands for all the believers who have come to worship the Child Jesus.

The narrators, who are currently elderly people, talked about the special attitude towards the nativity scene and the enormous effort they invested in setting it up, but also great happiness and

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23 By spiritual renewal the narrator implies strengthening in faith.

fulfilment that they experienced as a result of arranging the nativity scene. For them, the nativity scene and their work around the nativity scene setting were something sacred. In addition, they said that today it is difficult to find young people who will spend some of their time helping to arrange the nativity scene and decorate the church. This can be seen in the light of the secularisation of society and a loss of interest in institutional forms of piety in modern times (Vidović 2021:740), and in Subotica this also applies to non-institutional forms, which I can confirm from my own experience. Nevertheless, this is also because the number of Catholics in Subotica has seen a drastic drop since the 1990s. Namely, although the results of the 2022 census on the religious affiliation of the residents in Serbia have not yet been published, the fact is that for the first time in the history of Subotica, Serbs make up the majority in the city, while the number of Hungarians, Croats and the Bunjevci (who most often declare themselves Catholic) compared with the census in 2011 has seen a significant decrease. The number of Croats in the city decreased from 14151 to 10431, the number of the Bunjevci dropped from 13553 to 9060, while the number of Hungarians plunged from 50469 to 37 200<sup>24</sup> people.

## PIOUS PRACTICES OF LAY BELIEVERS WITH THE NATIVITY SCENE: PRAYER, CANDLES, COINS

Ten years ago, an article appeared in the weekly “Hrvatska riječ”<sup>25</sup> in which the then Custos of the Franciscan monastery in Subotica, Fr. Ivan Bošnjak, criticises the custom of throwing coins directly in the nativity scene, which he saw for the first time when he came to Subotica. By throwing coins, people damaged the figurines, and one had to be restored to the City Museum<sup>26</sup>. Tossing a coin at the nativity scene in the church of the Franciscan monastery was prevented by placing the nativity scene a few meters deeper in the side altar, and a fence was placed between the nativity scene and the people. So now it is more difficult to throw money in the nativity scene, and there are alms boxes for those who want to contribute money. Nevertheless, this custom, which is somewhat reminiscent of throwing coins into a wishing well, can also be seen at the nativity scene within the Subotica Christmas Market - Winterfest. Why do people throw money in nativity scenes? The narrator No. 4, who was a friar, believes that coins were thrown in the nativity scene in the Franciscan Church by children for fun, but I remember well that adults did it, as well, and the correct answer to these questions would require additional field research.

When visiting the nativity scene, the believers express respect for sacred things by praying, throwing money into the alms boxes and lighting a candle<sup>27</sup>. It is assumed that these are acts

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24 There is still no data on the number of inhabitants by religious affiliation. The information I have provided relates to nationality, source – <https://www.021.rs>

25 Hrvatska riječ – the only weekly in the Croatian language in Serbia

26 “Hrvatska riječ” from 11<sup>th</sup> January 2013 “Many visit Bethlehem”, internet source: [hrvatskarijec.rs/vijest/A9318/Mnogi-posjecuju-Betlehem/](http://hrvatskarijec.rs/vijest/A9318/Mnogi-posjecuju-Betlehem/), (accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2021).

27 According to Christian, forms of worship of the sacred are divided into older—linked with pieties in a particular place and other, younger, generalised pieties that are not linked with the place. The same author listed the types of prayers that he divides into prayers for the fulfilment of the annual cycle, instrumental prayers, prayers for help with which a piety in return is not immediately requested, but in the event that the prayer has been answered, certain actions of piety are implied, and those prayers that imply some pieties or vows. (Christian, William A. “Folk Religion, The Encyclopaedia of Religion V., ed. Mircea Eliade, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1987, (370-374) according to Čapo Jasna, 1991. “Sveti likovi, svete vodice i zavjeti, O hodočašćima hrvatskog življa u mađarskoj Baranji”, *Etnološka tribina*, 14:17-50.



that can be associated both with the veneration of the saint and with the vow, which is defined as “a conditional obligation specifying what reciprocal actions in the event of a positive outcome of the prayer will be performed by the person who prays” (Christian 1989 according to Čapo 1991:22). The vow dates back to pre-Christian times (Hrovatin 2020), and the commitments made by the vow can be wide-ranging, hence, leaving money in an alms box and lighting candles could be understood in this context, i.e. as a thank you for answering a prayer or asking the saints for help. However, Reverend Bela Stantić confirms from personal experience that *among the Bunjevci Croats, vows are most often made to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Anthony*, and in the case of the nativity scene, he thought these vows included worship of Jesus and the saints or a gift to the church, and the narrator No.1 has the same opinion and is very well acquainted with the habits of the local believers.

Irrespective of the fact that interest in faith in society is weakening and that the number of Catholics in the city of Subotica is declining, at Christmas the nativity scene still manages to attract a multitude of people. While some come out of curiosity, respect for tradition or simply to admire the beauty of the nativity scene, believers – both individuals and communities, see the nativity scene as a place of prayer, a sacred place that evokes the birth of Jesus, and in this context the nativity scene can be considered a piety of believers.

## CONCLUSION

Eight centuries have passed since the first staging of the nativity scene in a cave in Greccio. Over this period of time, the nativity scene has changed its appearance by adapting to the needs of people and the environment in which it was created, but its message has always remained unchanged. From the theological perspective, Pope Francis says in his apostolic letter on the meaning and value of the nativity scene that “it does not matter in what form the nativity scene is arranged, the only thing that matters is that it speaks to our life— the nativity scene is a part of a beautiful and demanding process of transmission of faith.”<sup>28</sup>

Over the last eight centuries, the production of nativity scenes has spread in almost all the parts of the world, and except in churches, nativity scenes are also arranged in the homes of believers. The tradition of making nativity scenes at home among the Bunjevci Croats in Subotica is not long, but there is a tradition of making Christmas bread (locally referred to as *kruh božićnjak*) on which figurines from the nativity scene are placed. Hence, Christmas bread could also be considered a form of nativity scene. As elsewhere in the world, nativity scenes are set up in all Catholic churches in Subotica at Christmas time, and for the purposes of this work I singled out four compositions of the nativity scene in the Diocese of Subotica, which I found the most interesting. These are the nativity scenes from the Franciscan monastery, and three compositions of the nativity scene made for the Diocese of Subotica by the sculptor Alojzija Ulman. Upon presenting the nativity scene compositions, I reflected on the time of their creation, the symbolism of the figurines and how the nativity scene is positioned in churches.

The professor emeritus Vitom Belaj defined the nativity scene as “a group of figurines with which, once a year at Christmas time, the believers evoke the place of Jesus’ birth by arranging them

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28 Macut, Ivan. 2020. “Apostolsko pismo Admirabile signum Svetoga Oca Franje o značenju i vrijednosti jaslica”. *Služba Božja: liturgijsko pastoralna revija* 60/4: 468-474, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/245752> (accessed 1<sup>st</sup> October 2021).

in space” (1995:3). Nevertheless, at Christmas time around the world, the nativity scene brings together believers and for them it means much more than a group of figurines that evoke the place of Jesus’ birth. Believers perceive the nativity scene as a holy place, and it can be considered a form of piety of believers. In order to question the role of the nativity scenes in the Diocese of Subotica, I conducted field research in several churches in Subotica and Bajmok. Sharing their own experiences in setting up nativity scenes, all the narrators said that it was a great honour and a special form of prayer and worship of Christ for them. Moreover, although the number of believers in Subotica has declined, the nativity scene still brings together a multitude of people, both children and adults, and their vows at the nativity scene can be associated with the veneration of saints and Jesus Christ, which can lead to the conclusion that the nativity scene in the Diocese of Subotica, irrespective of many challenges of modern times, are a place of prayer and worship of Christ, and can be considered a piety of believers.

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