



Every Advent, Christian homes worldwide come alive with a tradition that connects us to the heart of the Christmas mystery: the Nativity scene. Among the figures that compose it, two seemingly secondary characters often catch our attention: the ox and the donkey. These humble animals, always near the manger where the Baby Jesus lies, are a constant presence in Christian tradition. But what do they mean? What do they teach us today in a world so different from Bethlehem over two thousand years ago?

Historical Origins of the Ox and the Donkey in the Nativity Scene

Interestingly, the canonical Gospels (Matthew and Luke, the only ones narrating Jesus' birth) do not explicitly mention the ox and the donkey at the manger. So, where does this tradition come from? The answer lies in the Old Testament and the rich Christian tradition developed over centuries.

In the book of Isaiah (1:3), we read: *"The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."* This prophetic passage was interpreted by the Church Fathers as a prefiguration of the humility and obedience that would surround Christ's birth. The ox and the donkey symbolize those who, though considered simple or insignificant, recognize their Lord and are present at His coming.

Furthermore, in apocryphal Gospels like the *Protoevangelium of James* and the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, the presence of these animals near the manger is explicitly mentioned, reinforcing their inclusion in depictions of Christ's birth. These narratives are not part of the biblical canon, but they significantly influenced Christian art and tradition, making the ox and the donkey essential figures in the Nativity.

Theological and Spiritual Symbolism of the Ox and the Donkey

The ox and the donkey are not random figures; their presence at the manger carries deep theological and spiritual meaning:

1. **Humility and Service:** The ox, a beast of burden and labor, represents humility and selfless service. In the context of the manger, its proximity to the Baby Jesus reminds us that the Son of God entered humanity in an environment of simplicity, embracing smallness and service from His birth.
2. **Duality of Humanity:** The donkey, a hybrid and sterile animal, has been seen in Christian tradition as a representation of humanity living apart from God, while the ox symbolizes those who acknowledge their dependence on the Creator. Yet both animals share the manger space, showing that Christ came to redeem all humanity, regardless



of their condition.

3. **Recognition by the Humble:** In contrast to the powerful of this world, the animals at the manger are the first to be near the Savior. This emphasizes the Gospel message that the Kingdom of God belongs to the simple and humble of heart.

The Ox and the Donkey in Artistic and Liturgical Tradition

Throughout the centuries, Christian art has immortalized the ox and the donkey in countless paintings, sculptures, and Nativity scenes. Artists like Giotto, in his frescoes at the Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi, or El Greco, in his depictions of the Nativity, include them as silent but eloquent witnesses to the mystery of the Incarnation.

In the 13th century, Saint Francis of Assisi, considered the creator of the first living Nativity scene, explicitly included the ox and the donkey in his reenactment of Christ's birth, solidifying their place in popular Christian tradition.

Although the liturgy does not directly mention these animals, the spirit of their symbolism is reflected in Christmas texts and hymns, highlighting humility and adoration before the mystery of God made man.

Lessons for Today's World

In a world marked by haste, materialism, and spiritual disconnection, the ox and the donkey invite us to pause and reflect. These animals, in their simplicity, teach us profound truths:

1. **Valuing the Essential:** In the manger, greatness happens in smallness. The ox and the donkey remind us that true wealth is not found in material things but in recognizing God's presence in the everyday.
2. **Unity in Diversity:** Their coexistence at the manger symbolizes that despite our differences, we are all called to draw near to Christ. In a divided world, the Nativity offers an image of reconciliation and peace.
3. **The Value of Silence and Contemplation:** Amid the Christmas bustle, the ox and the donkey remain silent, contemplating the Child. This gesture invites us to cultivate moments of inner stillness to encounter God.

The Nativity Scene as a Living Catechesis

Pope Francis, in his apostolic letter *Admirabile Signum* on the meaning and value of the Nativity scene, encourages us to view the manger as a "living catechesis." Each figure,



including the ox and the donkey, helps us delve deeper into the mystery of the Incarnation and transmit the faith across generations.

In the Pope's words: *"The Nativity reminds us that God, as in Bethlehem, is born where life seems hardest, where there is no hope, but also has the power to transform everything."* In this transformation, the ox and the donkey bear witness to how simplicity and humility become the dwelling place of God.

Conclusion

The ox and the donkey, though seemingly secondary, play a central role in the message of Christmas. They teach us to recognize God in the small, to value humility, and to draw near to the Savior with a simple heart. As we prepare our Nativity scenes this year, let us remember that these humble animals not only adorn the manger but inspire us to live with faith, hope, and love.

May we, as we contemplate the Nativity, allow ourselves to be transformed by the eternal message of Christmas and, like the ox and the donkey, find our place beside the Savior, becoming silent yet faithful witnesses of His love.