When I was growing up in New Britain, CT, Christmas always had a very special meaning for our family. The Christmas tree and the manger scene personified the Lynch family Christmas.

When I decided to join the Franciscan Order in 1946, I knew very little about St. Francis of Assisi except that Christmas had a special place in his heart. The more I studied his life, the more I began to see the role of the birth of Jesus played in his personal spirituality.

The historical celebration of the Feast of Christmas took place after the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century. At the time of the winter solstice, the pagans celebrated the Mythric festival of the birthday of the invincible sun-god. This occurred on December 25 in the Julian calendar and on January 6 in the Egyptian calendar. When Constantine converted to Christianity, he promoted the Christian religion throughout the Roman Empire. To counter worship of the pagan gods in favor of Jesus Christ, he established a festival emphasizing the incarnation of Jesus by uniting the December celebration of the birthday of the Roman sun-god with the birthday of Jesus Christ.

St. Augustine developed the basic content of the Feast of Christmas during the fifth century. His theology focused on Christmas as a remembrance of the historical event of the mystery of the Incarnation.

St. Francis of Assisi, on the other hand, emphasized the humanity of Christ's birth. In fact, the origin of the Christmas crèche rests with St. Francis. In his book, The Life of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Bonaventure tells us, "In the year 1223, St. Francis, the deacon, was visiting the town of Greccio to celebrate Christmas. Greccio was a small town built on a mountainside overlooking a beautiful valley. It happened in the third year before his death, that in order to excite the inhabitants of Greccio to commemorate the nativity of the Babe of Bethlehem with great devotion, St. Francis determined to celebrate it with all possible solemnity."

After obtaining permission of the sovereign pontiff, St. Francis recreated the manger scene in a cave in the hills above Greccio. He prepared a manger, and brought hay and an ox and donkey. Summoning the people, Francis read the Gospel and preached about the birth in poverty of the Babe of Bethlehem.

St. Francis' spirituality, as well as the spirituality of the Franciscans, is very much reflected in the crèche. The concrete form of the manger, with live people and animals, underscores the humanity of the Christmas story. St. Francis never forgot that the wood of the manger that held the Infant Jesus would one day give way to the wood of the cross.

The crèche also emphasizes the humility of the Incarnation. Francis insisted that God's family consists of both the haves and the have-nots of this world, both the powerful and the weak, both the social insiders and the social outsiders. The Wise Men represented the non-Jewish outsiders; the shepherds represented the Jewish have-nots. Shepherds were thought of as belonging to the inferior, poor, downtrodden class of Jews, who had no legal standing as witnesses in any Jewish court; neither did the Wise Men, as they were foreigners. The message of Christmas makes it clear that in God's eyes there are no outsiders.

Finally, the scene depicted in the crèche captures the stillness and tranquility of Christmas in the tradition of Psalm 46, "Be still and know that I am God." St. Francis of Assisi in particular, and the Franciscans in general, personify this spirituality.

After Francis' death in 1226, the custom of having the crib at Christmas spread widely throughout Europe. Its effect is still evident today.