

## **Christmas Grotto As An Art For Experiencing Divine Humility**

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### **Abstract**

The installation of a Christmas grotto must begin with a process of meaningful reflection. Without it, such construction may become a hollow and repetitive act. The witness of Scripture must be re-reflected upon so that foundational norms are retrieved, thus ensuring the significance and value of the art continue to offer spiritual benefit to the faithful, and that the art itself maintains its place, is preserved, and passed down. This reflective qualitative study attempts to rearticulate essential Catholic principles that should be present in devotional art surrounding the Christmas Liturgy, so that the artistic expression may be properly and fruitfully carried out. This literature review is grounded in sources considered reliable within Catholic circles. Each source certainly holds varying degrees of influence. We hope this reflection aids readers in reassessing sufficient considerations in realizing devotional Christmas artwork. The key principle to uphold: the Catholic Church uses human art as an auxiliary means to proclaim the Good News in a more beneficial manner for humanity, without obscuring the core message. Therefore, as a means, the Christmas grotto/stall is necessary.

**Keywords:** Devotion; Kenosis; Popular Piety

### **Abstrak**

Pemasangan gua Natal harus dimulai dengan proses refleksi yang bermakna. Tanpa itu, konstruksi semacam itu dapat menjadi tindakan yang hampa dan berulang-ulang. Kesaksian Kitab Suci harus direfleksikan kembali agar norma-norma dasar dapat ditemukan kembali,

sehingga memastikan bahwa signifikansi dan nilai dari seni tersebut dapat terus memberikan manfaat rohani bagi umat beriman, dan bahwa seni itu sendiri dapat dipertahankan, dilestarikan, dan diwariskan. Penelitian kualitatif reflektif ini mencoba untuk mengartikulasikan kembali prinsip-prinsip Katolik yang penting yang harus ada dalam seni devosional di sekitar Liturgi Natal, sehingga ekspresi artistik dapat dilakukan dengan benar dan bermanfaat. Kajian literatur ini didasarkan pada sumber-sumber yang dianggap dapat diandalkan di kalangan umat Katolik. Setiap sumber tentu saja memiliki tingkat pengaruh yang berbeda-beda. Kami berharap refleksi ini dapat membantu para pembaca untuk menilai kembali pertimbangan-pertimbangan yang memadai dalam mewujudkan karya seni Natal yang penuh renungan. Prinsip utama yang harus dipegang teguh: Gereja Katolik menggunakan karya seni manusia sebagai sarana bantu untukewartakan Kabar Gembira dengan cara yang lebih bermanfaat bagi umat manusia, tanpa mengaburkan pesan utamanya. Oleh karena itu, sebagai sarana, gua/kios Natal diperlukan.

**Kata Kunci:** Devosi; Kenosis; Popular Piety

## 1. Introduction

December arrives, and Catholics enter the new liturgical year, beginning with the celebration of the First Sunday of Advent. During Advent, liturgical art is dominated by the color purple, greenery without flowers, and the Advent wreath (GIRM 345–347). These elements aim to conceptualize a specific faith experience.<sup>1</sup> They are meant to remind Catholics to undergo inner conversion through prayer, penance, and confession in preparation for the liturgical celebration of the Lord's Incarnation (cf. Luke 21:25–28, 34–36). However, knowing that the parousia is near should not lead them into one of two extremes: either treating life lightly or indifferently, or worrying excessively about everything.<sup>2,3</sup> From the First Sunday of Advent onward, the Christmas celebration committee becomes busy preparing a series of events, personal celebrations of the Sacrament of Penance, liturgical ministers, and — without fail — the Christmas grotto or stall. This last element, if not continually given meaning, risks becoming merely part of secular popular culture. Art within Catholic liturgy assists people in contemplating God's works of salvation as presented through images or other tangible objects.

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<sup>1</sup> Didier Méhu, "The Colours of the Ritual: Description and Inscription of Church Dedication in Liturgical Manuscripts (10th-11th centuries)." *Sign and Design. Script as Image in Cross-Cultural Perspective (300-1600 CE)*, ed. Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak et Jeffrey Hamburger, Washington, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2016. (2016).

<sup>2</sup> James H Evans, *Playing: Christian explorations of daily living* (Fortress Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Dennis McConaughy, *Parousia: the biblical record and other religious views of the religious world of Christ's Second Coming* (Friesen Press, 2013); Denis McManus, "Heidegger, Wittgenstein and St Paul on the Last Judgement: On the Roots and Significance of the Theoretical Attitude." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 1 (2013): 143-164.

It is an invaluable treasure.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Church even utilizes contemporary media as new means to express gratitude, praise, sorrow, and joy.<sup>5</sup> Several forms of signs and symbols used clearly convey messages and possess specific meanings.<sup>6</sup> These symbols carry a mystical quality and convey a sense of the sacred, influencing human embodiment. Through symbols, inner energy is activated, as one is drawn into deeper reflection than usual.<sup>7</sup> Only when these symbols are understood do they gain meaning and impact the individual. Therefore, religious art and symbols are designed to assist and inspire individuals toward spiritual reflection.<sup>8</sup> The Catholic Church is one of the religious institutions that uses many symbols and artistic expressions in worship and liturgy. Its liturgy centers on the Mass or Eucharistic celebration. Religious art includes vestments, vessels, decorations, images (GIRM 318, 325–351). All of these impact the spiritual lives of the faithful.

This article seeks to reaffirm the importance of art in liturgy and its meaning for the faith journey of Catholics. Specifically, we reflect on the construction of the Christmas grotto/stall, which is almost always present in every Christmas celebration. It has found its way not only into church spaces but also into public areas such as malls, schools, hospitals, workplaces, and city halls. Why does this structure continue to exist? Why did Pope Francis express his full support for this lowercase “tradition” in *Admirabile Signum* (AS, 2019)? Though meaningful and significant, why does the Catholic Church still find it necessary to issue guidelines for its construction? What is the significance of the grotto/stall, and what meaning is it intended to convey to those who witness it? How should it be presented so that its artistic expression and creativity do not counteract the solemnity of the Church’s liturgical celebration and the proclamation of the Gospel?

This research is both relevant and important because, phenomenologically, the use of art in Catholic liturgy has never ceased. Artistic expressions continue to evolve, and in some instances, we encounter public affirmations stating that “images/art speak louder than words.”<sup>9</sup> For a long time, Catholics have expressed their faith and meditated or contemplated the events of human salvation wrought by God through beautiful man-made aids. In fact, not a few people have joined the Catholic Church because they were drawn or moved by the Church’s artistic expressions. For the proclamation of the Good News — which always possesses contemporary relevance and awakens spiritual awareness — art in the liturgy is indispensable. If readers wish

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<sup>4</sup> A Rouet, *Liturgy and the Arts* (Liturgical Press, 1997); A Garcia-Rivera and T. J. Scirghi, *Living Beauty: The Art of Liturgy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> L. N. Okoro, “The Fundamental Principles of Catholic Liturgical Music Composition: The Second Vatican Council Perspectives” in *The Prodigious Musicologist: Celebrating Professor Agatha Ijeoma Onwuekwe* (Ugonabo, 2023), 397-415.

<sup>6</sup> E. D. Crowley, *Liturgical art for a media culture* (Liturgical Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> J. M. A. Eke, “Language and symbolic arts: Religious adornments, arts and menaing in the Catholic Church liturgy.” *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics* 10, no. 4 (2020): 390-403.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Sînziana Cuciuc Romanescu and Ozlem Kaya. “Liturgical Textile Representations in Byzantine Art.” *Revista Romana de Studii Eurasiatice* 17, no. 1/2 (2021): 33-46.

<sup>9</sup> Eunji Lee, Jung-Ah Lee, Jang Ho Moon, and Yongjun Sung. “Pictures speak louder than words: Motivations for using Instagram.” *Cyberpsychology, behavior, and social networking* 18, no. 9 (2015): 552-556. Seyyed Mahdi Erfani, “Pictures Speak Louder than Words in ESP, Too!” *English Language Teaching* 5, no. 8 (2012): 164-169.

to understand how much opportunity the Church has in proclaiming the Good News of God's salvation through artistic installations, then they need to reconsider this review.

This study seeks to contribute to the vitality of art in the Catholic liturgy. It may provoke artists to continue creating works that express Scripture and faith in new artistic languages for today's era, helping believers to more deeply understand and grow in their faith. It can also encourage policymakers involved in the creation/construction and use of liturgical art within the Church. For the Catholic faithful in general, this research presents an opportunity for renewed understanding of this issue, enabling them to participate in Catholic liturgy more consciously, actively, fully, and meaningfully through the aid of liturgical art. We hope that policymakers, artists, and the faithful will always dare to reflect/ meditate/ communicate their faith and Church teachings before creating or building certain installations for liturgy so that the spiritual benefits may increase.<sup>10</sup>

The articles *Liturgy and the Arts* and *Living Beauty: The Art of Liturgy* have explored the capacity of art within Catholic liturgy.<sup>11,12</sup> In their studies, images and artistic objects within liturgy invite people to contemplate God's salvific works. Okoro describes liturgical art as an invaluable treasure.<sup>13</sup> In *Liturgical Art for a Media Culture*, Crowley highly appreciates the Church's courage in using modern media to spread its message.<sup>14</sup> In his study *Language and Symbolic Arts*, Eke reiterates the importance of understanding the symbols expressed through liturgical art so that such presentations remain meaningful and impactful.<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis, in *Admirabile Signum*, affirms his support for the installation of the Christmas grotto/stall and wishes this artistic tradition to be continued (AS 1).<sup>16</sup> Suryanugraha, in the book *Liturgical Decorations*, offers both critique and suggestions regarding the expression of art in liturgical celebrations.<sup>17</sup> These writings, articles, and apostolic letters speak to the meaning and importance of art in the liturgy. In this review, we merely attempt to compile and reorganize the previously available information into a simple compilation regarding the meaning and importance of constructing a Christmas grotto/stall.

This qualitative study is conducted through literature review, enriched by reflections from direct observation and involvement in equipping and accompanying artists who design and build Christmas grottos/stalls. Primary sources include the Apostolic Letter *Admirabile Signum* by Pope Francis (2019), the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* issued by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (December 17, 2001), and the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (1969). Secondary sources include C. H.

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<sup>10</sup> Deborah Thebault, "Who ever said that the Nativity Scene was religious?," *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 6, no. 2 (2017): 399-405. doi: 10.1093/ojlr/rwx023.

<sup>11</sup> Rouet, *Liturgy and the Arts*

<sup>12</sup> Garcia-Rivera and T. J. Scirghi, *Living Beauty: The Art of Liturgy*

<sup>13</sup> Okoro, "The Fundamental Principles of Catholic Liturgical Music Composition," 397-415.

<sup>14</sup> Crowley, *Liturgical art for a media culture*

<sup>15</sup> Paus Fransiskus, *Admirabile Signum* (Jakarta: Dokpen KWI, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Eke, "Language and symbolic arts: Religious adornments, arts and menainga in the Catholic Church liturgy," 390-403

<sup>17</sup> C. H. Suryanugraha, *Indah Bersahaja Seni Flora dan Dekorasi Liturgis*. Yogyakarta: Penerbit Kanisius, 2019.

Suryanugraha's book *Simple Beauty: Floral Art and Liturgical Decorations*. This exposition limits itself to systematically presenting the meaning of the Christmas grotto/stall and the general guidelines for its construction. As the main source, *Admirabile Signum* will be read and interpreted in conversation with the other sourcebooks. The reading process involves reflection on the texts and analysis of their formulations until a potentially fruitful point of understanding is reached.

We hope this article provides updated knowledge for liturgical art policymakers and artists to continue grounding their artistic expressions in Catholic faith and teaching. Thus, art will continue to enrich Catholic faith development. Liturgical art is not a casual matter. Anyone who wishes to engage in it must first allow themselves to deeply understand the kind of benefit it provides for the vitality of the Church's faith — not merely personal pleasure.

## 2. Method

This qualitative research was conducted through a literature review.<sup>18</sup> The primary sources of faith testimony come from the Gospel texts of Luke 2:7 and Matthew 2:11. The primary source of ecclesial reflection is the Apostolic Letter *Admirabile Signum* (AS) by Pope Francis, published in 2019.

In the results section, narrative analysis is used to reinterpret the Gospel texts Luke 2:7, Matthew 2:11, and *Admirabile Signum*. These interpretations may differ from the original intentions of the respective authors. Therefore, we have made every effort to interpret these narratives carefully.

The interpretative results of all three texts are presented sequentially according to the paragraph numbers listed in the *Admirabile Signum* document. The interpretation of the narratives in these three texts is framed by the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM), the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, and *Simple Beauty: Floral Art and Liturgical Decorations*.

In this way, we aim to obtain a renewed understanding and propose a contextualized approach to the construction of the Christmas grotto/stall that remains within the boundaries of liturgical guidelines.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1. Findings

The Apostolic Letter *Admirabile Signum* (AS) consists of 10 paragraphs. Paragraph 1 refers to the Christmas grotto/stall as a “wondrous sign” that continually evokes in Christian believers a sense of *tremendum et fascinosum*. These two experiences flow from faith in the Incarnation, which conveys the message of “simplicity and joy” (AS 1, par. 1).

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<sup>18</sup> J. Hartley, *Academic Writing and Publishing*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.

Furthermore, AS affirms the tradition of families preparing for the Lord Jesus' birth in the days leading up to Christmas — at home, in workplaces, hospitals, schools, prisons, and public spaces. It refers to this as “popular piety,” and encourages that in places where the practice already exists, it should be preserved, and in places where it does not, it should be initiated (AS 1, par. 2).

In the parish contexts I have served (Banyumanik, Tanah Mas, Sambiroto, Cawas, Bedono, Pringgolayan), the construction of Christmas grottos/stalls has sometimes failed to evoke a sense of *tremendum et fascinosum*, or the simplicity and joy intended. The grotto/stall installations have not succeeded in stirring viewers with a sense of awe for God's radical solidarity — a solidarity that defies human logic. The sense of guilt that should arise from realizing we allow God to “fall” into conditions no one else would endure has not been evoked.

Instead, the grottos/stalls are made ever more beautiful, increasingly “Instagrammable”: with twinkling lights, fountains, fish ponds — even romanticized instead of stirring sorrow. People line up to take smiling selfies in front of the grotto. The intended simplicity is perhaps better expressed as *poverty* or the *lack of human security*, which should radiate from such an installation. Amid this utter lack, joy can still be found in the birth — but it is a joy faced with threat, not comfort.

In paragraph 2, AS identifies the details of “manger” and “no room in the inn” from Luke 2:7 as the scriptural source of the “birth” of the grotto/stall tradition (AS 2, par. 1). The manger — a feeding trough for livestock — connects with Jesus Christ as the “bread that came down from heaven” (John 6:41). This symbolism was significant for the Church Fathers because the one laid in a manger would become food for humankind (AS 2, par. 2).

Another source of the grotto/stall tradition is the event in which Francis of Assisi sought to rekindle the memory of “the Baby born in Bethlehem ... lying in a manger ... on straw” (AS 2, par. 3). His realization of this desire was “a manger filled with straw” (without a human baby figure on it), accompanied by a live ox and donkey, and surrounded by many people. Thus, the feeding trough was the central focus. Not a new, clean, or beautiful one — but cracked, broken, and worn.

Why are mangers in Christmas installations always clean, tidy, perfect? Don't we receive the Lord's Child in clay vessels that are chipped, cracked, dirty, and even threatening to the Child? Isn't it true that not only mangers and plates are used for feeding — but also garbage bins?<sup>19</sup>

Why not try creating an installation of a garbage bin filled with rotting leftovers, swarmed by flies, cockroaches, and rats — and place the baby Jesus there? Might we, by witnessing and experiencing this, feel disgust toward our own lifestyles — and thus even more deeply sense the magnitude of God's solidarity?

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<sup>19</sup> Amalia Widyasanti, Rajendra Aryal, “Berapa banyak makanan yang terbuang sia-sia?” *Antara*. <https://www.antaraneews.com/berita/4669805/berapa-banyak-makanan-yang-terbuang-sia-sia>

Wouldn't such an installation more authentically communicate poverty (the brokenness of humanity) and how beautiful it is to believe in a God who humbles Himself so completely for us (AS 3, par. 1)? It would reveal a God whose love is self-emptying, without resistance (AS 3, par. 2). Thus, it revives history within us while remaining faithful to the Gospel, and encourages our involvement in the salvation history of today (AS 3, par. 3). It invites us to feel and touch poverty and to follow Jesus on the path of humility, poverty, and self-denial toward the glory of the Cross (AS 3, par. 4).

Pope Francis encourages us to make mangers/feeding troughs that reflect today's historical conditions — ones that *really relate* to our own brokenness. These include:

1. Distant starlight and darkness (AS 4, par. 1).
2. Ruins of buildings, nature, humanity, and disappointment manifested in crying or anarchic actions (AS 4, par. 2).
3. Mountains, rivers, sheep, shepherds, angels (AS 5).
4. Symbolic figures like beggars, those unfamiliar with worldly wealth, and the poor (AS 6, par. 1).
5. Other figures unrelated to the Gospel narratives (AS 6, par. 3).
6. Mary and Joseph (AS 7, par. 1–2).
7. The figure of the child Jesus placed only at Christmas (AS 8, par. 1).
8. The three Magi placed at Epiphany (AS 9, par. 1).

In paragraph 10, AS concludes with two key affirmations:

1. The Christmas grotto/stall may be the same or different each year, but the image of the Lord Jesus' birth must always speak anew (AS 10, par. 1).
2. The grotto/stall is “a precious and meaningful process for passing on the faith” (AS 10, par. 2).

If we agree that the Christmas grotto/stall plays an important role in passing on the faith, then its construction must be rooted in profound meaning from the very beginning. In Pringgolayan, the teenagers have already started making figurines of animals, plants, angels, and people out of clay since January. This experimental effort will reportedly continue with the crafting of other objects in the months to come. They are preparing all of this during their weekly Saturday morning gatherings in the “Youth Group for Play and Faith.”

Committees assigned the task of building the Christmas grotto should not simply hire others to assemble a templated installation. They need to be invited into contemplation — about a grotto/stall that is historically relevant to the present. Those who assign the task to the committee should not merely issue orders but accompany and equip them with the spirituality that ought to be embodied

### 3.2. The Church and Signs

The Catholic Church recognizes two kinds of signs: Those referred to as “sacramental” because they originate from or are willed by Jesus Christ and manifest the mystery of salvation being celebrated (*GIRM* 1), and those that are non-sacramental (popular devotions that help the faithful grow in faith). Among the seven sacraments, the Eucharist occupies the highest place. It is the center of the entire Christian life. In it, the climax of God's saving work for humanity and the summit of human glorification of God occurs (*GIRM* 16). Therefore, all other acts of worship, devotions, and daily work in Catholic life “derive from and lead to” the Eucharist.

AS 1 refers to the Christmas grotto/stall as a “wondrous sign,” but it is not sacramental. Hence, it does not hold a higher value than the Eucharist, but rather exists to help prepare the faithful — who view, meditate on, or contemplate it — to participate in the Eucharist more consciously, actively, fully, and perfectly (*GIRM* 5, 13). As a non-sacramental sign, it appears to present two possibilities:

1. If the Christmas grotto/stall is deemed unhelpful or unbeneficial to the faith of the people, it may be abandoned. The criteria for its lack of benefit can be identified, simply, by denying the list of values it is supposed to convey as mentioned in point two below.
2. If it is seen to help the faithful in celebrating the Eucharist (i.e., beneficial for the development of their faith), then it should be preserved.

If it is to be preserved or constructed, several qualifications must be met (AS 1, par. 1): **(a)** It must be in harmony with the concerns of the local faithful, just as the Lord's incarnation entered into the historical situation of Jewish society nearly 2,000 years ago.<sup>20</sup> To a certain extent, if this installation is placed within the church building, the issue of inculturation must be considered. **(b)** The installation should radiate/share/teach the values of simplicity and joy. **(c)** AS states that such installations can be built anywhere, but does not comment on their placement inside church buildings. In this, AS aligns with the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* no. 109, which writes: “Living nativity scenes and the setting up of the nativity scene in the homes of the faithful provide a good opportunity for family prayer.” This Directory does not mention the construction of grottos/stalls inside churches. It is only in the book *Simple Beauty: Floral Art and Liturgical Decorations*, which may serve as a guide for the Catholic Church in Indonesia, that the following recommendation appears: “Do not disturb the dignity and honor of the altar. Let the altar speak to the faithful in its own authenticity.

The creativity of the Christmas grotto or stall should ideally be placed outside the sanctuary, even outside the church building, or in a designated room so that anyone may view

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<sup>20</sup> Emanuel Pranawa Dhatu Martasudjita, “Inkulturasikan Dan Tata Perayaan Ekaristi 2020 Gambaran Berinkulturasikan dalam Konteks Indonesia.” *Studia Philosophica et Theologica* 22, no. 2 (2022): 159-180. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35312/spet.v22i2.441>.



and pray before it at any time, as far as possible.”<sup>21</sup> Even though two Vatican documents do not specifically regulate the installation of Christmas grottos/stalls inside the church building, a liturgical scholar in Indonesia dares to suggest such a possibility, provided that the installation is located outside the sanctuary, or — more precisely (Suryanugraha uses the word *bahkan*, meaning “preferably”) — outside the church building or in a designated space. Although it is considered a popular devotion (the piety of the people), the Christmas grotto/stall should be preserved in places where it already exists and introduced in places where it does not (AS 1, par. 2).

Nonetheless, AS also invites Catholics to return to Gospel testimony regarding this tradition. Two Gospels record the birth of the Lord. **Luke 2:7** mentions two details: “manger” and “no room in the inn.” Luke does not mention a grotto or stall. Therefore, it is appropriate that AS 2, par. 1 states: “Luke 2:7 is the written source for the origin of the nativity scene (grotto/stall).” According to our interpretation, this statement is legitimized as follows: a manger must be located in a specific place. In other words, a manger cannot be situated in a non-specific or undefined space. Logically, the most plausible setting for a manger would be a cave or stall. It is illogical to imagine a manger in a house, palace, or prison during Jesus’ time. As a feeding trough for livestock, the manger would have been placed where animals gather. This focus on the manger is also preserved by Francis of Assisi (AS 2, par. 3). His emphasis on the manger even led him to omit a doll or representation of the baby Jesus. The manger passed down by Francis is an *empty* one — because it is the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of God that is present on it.<sup>22</sup>

This self-emptying becomes God’s way of awakening human involvement.<sup>23</sup> Through the “emptiness” of the manger, anyone contemplating it can discover what they can offer or contribute to a world and humanity suffering from emptiness (AS 3).<sup>24</sup> Matthew 2:11, the second Gospel that testifies to Jesus’ birth, states: “They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother.”

Interpreting Matthew through the lens of AS 4–9 reveals a movement from the manger to a house — yet still no mention of a grotto or stall. AS 4 imagines the baby Jesus, vulnerable and unprotected by human-built structures, surrounded by a starry sky, darkness, and silence (AS 4, par. 1), as well as by ruins and the disappointment of those around Him (AS 4, par. 2). The contemplation of elements like mountains, rivers, sheep, shepherds, and angels evokes an

<sup>21</sup> Suryanugraha, *Indah Bersahaja Seni Flora dan Dekorasi Liturgis*, 49-50, 147.

<sup>22</sup> David Brown, *Divine Humanity: Kenosis Explored and Defended* (Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd, 2010); Stephen Pardue, “Kenosis and its discontents: Towards and Agustinian account of divine humility.” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 3 (2012): 271-288; David T. Williams, “Kenosis and the nature of the Persons in the Trinity.” *Bulletin for Christian Scholarship = Koers Bulletin vir Christelike Wetenskap* 69, no. 4 (2004): 623-640..

<sup>23</sup> Agustinus Daryanto, “Keberpihakan Terhadap Orang Miskin Sebagai Tindakan Kenosis.” *Studia Philosophica et Theologica* 22, no. 1 (2022): 19-40. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35312/spet.v22i1.418>.

<sup>24</sup> Ferenc Veress, “Following the Star: Nativity Scenes and Sacred Drama from the Middle Ages to the Baroque.” *Urania: Interdisziplinäre Folyóirat: Színház, Mozgóképek, Média* 1, no. 1 (2021): 58-77; Cynthia HO, “Away in a Manger: The Nativity of St. Francis at Sacro Monte di Orta.” *Medieval Perspectives* 23 (2008).

awareness that the manger in which Jesus lay was likely not located within a man-made building, as Bethlehem is not situated near mountains or rivers (AS 5). Sheep and shepherds likely did not sleep in stables but in caves or other natural shelters. Given the prophecy of the Messiah's coming — which Herod, known for his cruelty even toward his own family, had already heard — it is possible that Mary and Joseph avoided giving birth in the open within the village, where they could be easily discovered (AS 7, par. 1–2).

It is plausible that, finding no room in the inn, the Holy Family chose to give birth in a location far from those who could threaten their lives, but still accessible to humble observers. When the census-driven crowds began to thin, and space became available at an inn, the family may have finally entered a house, as recorded in Matthew 2:11. Even then, the Gospels remain silent about a stall or grotto.

### 3.3. *Admirabile Signum* and the Film *Mary*

For readers who have watched or have not yet watched the film *Mary* on Netflix, you need to note that one of the exhortations in *Admirabile Signum* is vividly illustrated in D. J. Caruso's film.<sup>25</sup> Although the film has received its fair share of critique, it still offers valuable insights. Joseph Pronechen advises viewers to see the film as a "reconstruction effort," which naturally entails the possibility of inaccuracies.<sup>26</sup> He also hopes the film will inspire viewers to delve deeper into a more authentic understanding of the figure of the Virgin Mary.<sup>27</sup> However, the focus here is not on Mary's story in the film, but rather on the stable where the manger holding the baby Jesus is placed. In the film, the baby Jesus is born and laid in a manger located amidst ruins. Apparently, it is *ruin* that attracts the creative love of God. This imagery of ruin is also echoed by Pope Francis in *Admirabile Signum* (AS 4, par. 2).

Why portray ruins of a house/building and not an intact structure? This is the reflection offered by the Gospel of Luke and continuously voiced by the Church throughout the ages. The baby Jesus is laid in a manger found amidst the wreckage because Luke 2:7 mentions there was no room in the inn (inns?). But reflection should not stop there. We must ask: "Why was there no room at the inn?" The common answer is: "All the rooms were full," due to high occupancy resulting from the census decree. However, another — albeit problematic — interpretation might be proposed.

Wasn't the birth of the King of Israel already known by Herod and others in Israel? Didn't the signs accompanying the birth appear prominently in the sky, visible to everyone? Coupled with the fear many Israelites had of Herod — who was known to eliminate any potential rivals, even within his own family — it is possible that innkeepers chose to reject travelers who

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<sup>25</sup> Joseph Pronechen, "What Netflix's 'Mary' Gets Right — and What It Gets Wrong," *National Catholic Register*, December 5, 2024, <https://www.ncregister.com/features/netflix-mary-review>.

<sup>26</sup> Pronechen, "What Netflix's 'Mary' Gets Right — and What It Gets Wrong"

<sup>27</sup> Timothy Michael Hayes, *Mary* (United States - United Kingdom: Aloe Entertainment - Luna Film Productions - Ludascripts - Peachtree Media Partners, 2024).

appeared to be about to give birth, to avoid trouble with the authorities. If this reflection is acceptable, then it deepens the portrayal of *the collapse of humanity*. Humanity not only seeks to secure its own power by oppressing others, but also refuses to provide shelter for an innocent child (Sardono et al., 2023; Sutami et al., 2024). It becomes a depiction of the ever-deepening destruction of human dignity. The manger, a crucial element in reflections on the Lord's birth or God's *kenosis*, seems increasingly unlikely to be located within a house or building. If, in today's representations, the manger is forced into a house or stable, this may not be entirely "wrong" — but it risks diminishing the reality of God's self-emptying (*kenosis*) (Stepanus, 2024; Firmanto et al., 2023). In installations depicting the birth of the baby Jesus, it is essential to maintain a presentation of *radical absence* — but within that absence, *the most minimal presence*. It must evoke a situation of total lack — and yet, there is something (Firmanto, 2021; 2023; Adon & Firmanto, 2022).

#### 4. Conclusion

The Christmas grotto/stall is a continuation of the reality of the manger, as found in the witness of the Gospel of Luke (2:7). The grotto or stall itself is not explicitly mentioned in the text. Therefore, the more the focus shifts toward the construction of the grotto/stall while leaving behind the reality of the manger, the more we risk a theological misdirection.

The manger — as a feeding trough for livestock — has a more consistent symbolic continuity with the image of the Church as the flock of God. Just as animals receive food placed in the manger by their shepherd, so too do Catholics receive the nourishment of the Body and Blood of the Lord on the altar, the "new manger."

As Pope Francis affirms, we agree with the value of the tradition of building and preserving the installation of the Christmas grotto/stall. However, perhaps what is truly essential is not the grotto or stall itself, but rather the specific details presented in Luke — the *manger* and *no room in the inn*. These elements of discomfort, lack of human security, limited simplicity, and joy among the humble and gentle creatures must be continually excavated and re-presented to the faithful so that they might receive ever greater spiritual benefit.

The presentation must also accommodate and reflect today's urgent realities and concerns — realities still marked by poverty, cultural and religious diversity, and spiritual hunger. The grotto/stall and manger must be historicized by displaying present-day tragic or painful situations — settings that may repel people, but also cause them to wonder: why is God *there*?

These installations should not be made simply to provide an Instagram-worthy background, but to serve as a critique of human corruption and an urgent call to conversion — not abandonment, but *cleansing*, *reordering*, and active participation in building a renewed world.

We do not yet know whether any church building will allow a broken, dirty, foul-smelling trash bin — full of rotting leftovers — to be used as the manger in which the baby Jesus is laid,

displayed for days during the Christmas season, especially within a worship space. But if such an action is forbidden, that prohibition could stem from many reasons: ranging from mere distaste or concern that it is not something fit to be “viral,” to deeper spiritual discomfort at the idea of seeing the Lord’s Child portrayed in such unworthy conditions.

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