



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania

COURTS OF THE INFANT KING

The Christmas scene with figurines of Mary, Joseph, Jesus in a manger, angels, shepherds, barn animals, and kings is a tender devotion of Christians everywhere. St. Francis of Assisi established a simple scene on Christmas Eve, 1223. Since then, the Nativity scene (*Crèche* in French and *Presepio* in Italian) evolved into elaborate displays involving a cave or a simple wooden structure and a host of characters.

Naples, Italy became famous for its complex Christmas scenes. They depict town, city, and country life and include figures of aristocracy, tradesmen, laborers, and shepherd-bagpipers (*zampognaro*). Initially *presepios* were exhibited in monasteries. By the 17th century many aristocratic homes also displayed nativity scenes. It was into this culture that St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787) was born.

Alphonsus, aware of the spiritual poverty of the people in his locale, desired to bring the good news that redemption is plentiful and that the generosity of God knows no bounds. Alphonsus wanted to replace fear with an awareness of God's merciful love. He desired to teach folks how to recognize and celebrate in the ordinary circumstances of life, God's divine providence (*the tender, loving care that God has for each soul*). Personal experience of the love of God, leads to an automatic response of love and service.

Alphonsus developed a spirituality that focused on four themes: the Christmas Crib, the Cross of Calvary, the Blessed Sacrament, and Mary, the Mother of God.

Alphonsus tried to reduce lofty truths of salvation into simple practices that would

appeal to ordinary people. The custom of **Serving in the Court of the Infant King** is one example.

Alphonsian spirituality recognizes that the Incarnation (the Word-made-flesh) reaches beyond Christmas Day. We are called to give birth to Christ continually in every event of our lives. Therefore, prayer before the Christmas nativity scene moves us beyond a tender event of two millennia ago. We desire to incarnate Christ by practicing the messages of Christmas: union with the will of God, simplicity, humility, evangelization, hospitality, inclusion of all people regardless of race, creed, etc.

Alphonsus adored the Infant King in the Christmas manger – a king who was destined to be prophet, priest, and victim; a king who would be crucified, die, and rise from the dead to save his people.

The privileged men and women who surrounded an earthly king were known as members of the royal court. 17th century folk understood the concept well. The Christmas practice of **Drawing the Courts of the Infant King** assigns participants to a particular role in the court of the King of Heaven and suggests a practice that is appropriate to the specific role in the Court.

To observe this custom . . . Prepare cards or slips of paper that name a Nativity figure (Joseph, Mary, Shepherds, etc.). At an appropriate time the family members pick a card that will become their "court," their role of service to the Infant King. As they place their figurine into the family Nativity scene (1) they explain how they will fill their role (their

function) or (2) they announce what was pre-written on their court card.

Some families write new practices yearly to reflect current family or world needs.

The following “courts” appear in *Heritage Prayer*, a prayer book of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, PA. Feel free to use them or adapt them to your specific circumstances.

- Father, you chose **BETHLEHEM** as the place where your Son would come to dwell among us. Jesus, like those who were led to Bethlehem, the House of Bread, lead me to a deeper love of your presence in the Eucharist.
- Father, may my heart, like the **STABLE**, be open to receive you in each way that you choose to come into my heart. Jesus, touch me with the grace of devotion to your service, and especially to the poor.
- Father, you chose **MARY** for the mother of your Son and you willed that her motherhood be virginal, entirely dependent on you rather than on others. Jesus, give me the gift of faith so that I may learn to rely on the power of your Spirit in my life rather than on my own efforts.
- Father, you chose **JOSEPH** to enter into the mystery of the birth of your Son. Jesus, deepen my trust in your word, and teach me to depend on your providence in all the circumstances of my life.
- Father, may I, like the **CRIB**, offer my being as a place for your Son Jesus to dwell. Jesus, dwell in my heart, and make my life filled with tender love for You and all those you send into my life.
- Father, Mary laid Jesus on the **STRAW** as his first resting place. Jesus, let my charity be the straw that strengthens me and provides support for others.
- Father, the warm breath of the **ANIMALS** sheltered your Son during the first hours of his life as a human being. Jesus, give me understanding in my relationships with others so that I may know how to respond to all who need me.
- Father, may I, like the **ANGELS**, bring the good news of your coming to all those I meet this day. Jesus, give me singleness of vision and gentleness of spirit to proclaim your good news to all people.
- Father, when the **SHEPHERDS** heard the song of the angels they went to seek Jesus. Jesus, give me a listening heart, always ready to hear the prompting of the spirit and always willing to respond with love.
- Father, the **STAR** revealed your love to those who sought you. Jesus, grant me the vision to see and draw forth the goodness you have placed in others.
- Father, you called **WISE MEN** who studied the heavens from the east to come into the presence of your Son. Jesus, strengthen my efforts to be present to you in prayer.

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