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Priest's Collection Began Small and Kept Growing

By Janice Shumake
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It began with a small piece of cloth, a pall with a Nativity scene embroidered on it.

The pall, a piece of cloth used to cover a Communion chalice, was a gift from his mother to Father Basil Congro of St. Mary's Catholic Church, S.C. Highway 165 in Meggett. He was 21, and it was the early '70s.

The gift seeded a collection of Nativities now numbering 55.

The actual collecting began in 1983, when Congro entered the Navy and was sent to Catania, Sicily.

"I just started picking them up."

He's been collecting ever since, through 10 years of active duty in the Navy and 13 or 14 years since in the Navy Reserves.

His Navy service began in Sicily "and just kept going west until I finished up in the Orient and Persian Gulf and places like that. ... When you're in the military, you can really collect."

He made his first purchase, a Lladro set, when he was ordained, paying \$ 5 or \$ 10 a month until it was paid for.

Figures in the various sets range from about an inch to about a foot tall.

They come from St. Mark's Square in Venice; Virginia City, Nev.; Hawaii; Edisto; Sicily; Rome; Africa; Israel; Spain; Guadalajara; San Diego; Portugal; Austria; Naples; the U.S.; Germany; Costa Rica; Russia.

They're made of hand-blown glass, clay, porcelain, crystal, wood, cloth, straw, even coconut shell.

Most are the traditional Caucasian representations, but there are American Indian (Virginia City) and black cloth and clay from African Nativities. His favorite, a baby Jesus in a manger from Sicily, has a distinctly Italian look in its features.

Some are unique. The set from San Diego is made of thimbles, while a Nativity purchased at St. Peter's Basilica includes pigeons.

Congro's collection ranges from famous names such as Lladro from Spain and Fontanini from Italy to unknown artisans and crafters.

Most are just three pieces - Mary, Joseph and Jesus - because that was easy for a Navy guy to pack and transport. Some include the stable, and the Fontanini set has 17 pieces.

Though some were gifts, Congro bought most himself.

He enjoys the challenge of finding Nativities in places you wouldn't expect to find them, such as the Santa Monica pier.

"I was there with friends having dinner, and it was there. ... I mean, how many people are going to find one on the Santa Monica pier?"

They also come from places you might expect to find a Nativity - St. Marks; Oberammergau, Bavaria, which is known for its Passion play; and St. Peter's Basilica.

Usually, he just stumbled across them.

His favorite piece was found while walking around Sicily waiting for the final fireworks display for the Feast of St. Agatha, patron saint of Catania, Italy. There it was in a window.

He said, "Excuse me, guys," to his buddies and disappeared to make the purchase. The Babe's manger was fashioned by a Navy friend.

Congro, who also is pastor at Saints Frederick and Stephen Roman Catholic Church on Edisto Island, became so well known among his Navy pals for disappearing and returning with Nativities that they began to tug him to keep him moving.

"If we passed a Christmas shop, they'd pull my arms."

He saw a sign for Oberammergau on the highway while driving from Germany to Holland and stopped off to see the town. A Nativity awaited him in a shop window.

"Actually, I don't intend to buy them, but if I spot one and it's interesting, I buy it."

In Virginia City, he walked out of the famous Bucket of Blood saloon and crossed the street to a store and there was the American Indian Nativity.

As the collection has grown, Congro has become more selective in his purchases.

He doesn't always display the whole collection, nor is it on public view.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO; Two Colored Staff Photos by Shumake:One of a Fontanini Nativity scene and One of Father Congo's favorite Nativity piece and Three B&W Staff Photos by Shumake:One of Father Congo and Father Davino,One of a cloth nativity from Africa and One of a thimble Nativity found on Santa Monica pier

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