



THE CHURCH IN MALTA

COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE
Archdiocese of Malta

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PRESENTATION OF THE NATIVITY CRIB TO THE HOLY FATHER

ADDRESS OF THE ARCHBISHOP OF MALTA, MGR CHARLES J. SCICLUNA

Most Holy Father,

We thank you for the gift of this audience, of this encounter between a father and his children.

The crib given by Malta for Christmas 2016 brings with it a swathe of the Mediterranean Sea to Saint Peter's Square. It is topped by a beautiful fir tree, donated by Trentino Alto Adige. North and South, the sea and the mountains meet in the embrace of the Bernini Colonnade.

Whoever admires the artistic oeuvre of Manwel Grech, son of the island and Diocese of Gozo, immediately immerses oneself in the ideal Maltese landscape that physically welcomes the blessed announcement of the angel to the shepherds in Bethlehem: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (Lk 2:10-12).

We find the *luzzu*, a colourful boat of our fishermen. It represents all the boats and ships that crossed our millennial history: invasions and rescues, fishing and piracy, emigration and immigration: shadows and light. The Apostle Paul landed among us because the ship that was carrying him here to Rome was shipwrecked. Luke writes in the Acts of the Apostles: "Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold...They honoured us in many ways; and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed. After three months we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island—it was an Alexandrian ship" (Acts 28:1-2; 10-11). The *luzzu* in Saint Peter's Square becomes for us a celebration of our roots, of the encounter with the Apostle of the Gentiles. But it is also an urgent appeal for a generous commitment of welcome to the people who today cross the Mediterranean in search of our solidarity.

Your Holiness, among the statuettes of this year's Nativity crib we also find the humble figure of the diocesan priest from Malta, Saint George Preca, born in 1880, died in 1962, beatified by Saint John Paul II in 2001 and canonised by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007. Dun Ġorġ, as he is known among us, is recognized as the great benefactor of our people for his untiring apostolate of catechesis, as well as for founding in 1907, the *Societas Doctrinae Christianae*, an association of lay catechists. In 1910, Dun Ġorġ started disseminating the devotion for the Gospel phrase: "Verbum Dei caro factum est". In 1921 he launched the "Procession in honour of Baby Jesus" that is still held today in the streets of our towns and villages on Christmas Eve. Saint George Preca encouraged his catechists to give a small grotto with the Baby Jesus to all the girls and boys attending catechism classes for he wanted to ensure the presence of the Nativity crib in the heart of every family. For Dun Ġorġ, the Nativity crib was the "School of Bethlehem". At this school one learns the virtue of humility, of silence, of obedience, of trust in divine providence, of poverty. Indeed, how we need to attend this School of Bethlehem!

Our wish, Your Holiness, is that the gift of this Nativity crib be a sign of gratitude of all the Maltese for the mission that You fulfill as successor of Peter, a prayer for Your person on your approaching 80th birthday, and a sign of our cordial expression of filial devotion. Bless us all, Holy Father!

✠ **Charles J. Scicluna**

Archbishop of Malta