



THE CHURCH IN MALTA

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CHRISTMAS MESSAGE BY ARCHBISHOP CHARLES J. SCICLUNA

FROM ST PETER'S SQUARE, VATICAN CITY

On this holy night of Christmas, I am conveying my greetings from Saint Peter's Square, a place which welcomes thousands upon thousands of Catholics who come to listen to the voice of Pope Francis, the successor of Peter.

This year we find the Nativity crib made by the Gozitan artist Manwel Grech which the Republic of Malta, the Maltese Government, presented to Pope Francis as a gift. Next to it we find a beautiful tree from the province of Trento, in Italy. The crib, inspired by the Maltese landscape, is dotted by several figures which surround the grotto occupied by Joseph, Mary and Baby Jesus.

Beneath the balcony adorned with the Maltese cross, we find a man sleeping on a cart, a very familiar figure in our nativity cribs. This sleeping man reminds us that, at Christmas, we too can be distracted and thus forget the true meaning of this event. Upon looking on this sleeping man in the crib, we pray that we open our eyes so that we value the meaning of the Lord who became flesh for us.

Our eyes move on to a figure that we Maltese call 'ix-xabbatur' (the climber) - the young man who climbs the grotto for a better view in his eagerness to find out what is going on. It is natural for us to be curious, for it is an instinct found at the heart of each and every one of us that helps us in our search to find God; an instinct that drives us to recognize his presence on this Christmas night, a baby in a manger. This was the sign that the angel gave the shepherds: "behold, I bring you good news of a great joy ... for to you is born this day ... And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (Lk 2, 10-12).

We also find 'l-għaġeb tal-presepju' – the man full of wonder. We often mention this figure, not only during Christmastime, but throughout the year. But the man full of wonder with his arms wide open, awestruck by the simple scene in the grotto of Bethlehem, understands the profoundness of this mystery: that the Son of God became man. It is a wondrous thing when

one ponders that it was the mercy of God that permitted that he become one of us, the Imanu'el, one with us.

We also meet the 'daqqaqa' - the instrument players, who moved on from admiring the scene with amazement to expressing the joy of this event: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth among whom he is pleased" (v. 14).

The joy of Christmas is contagious. I wish that wherever there is sorrow, sickness, and suffering, we also find the song of consolation, the song of solidarity, the song of the presence for each other, the song of forgiveness where there is division, the song of peace where there is disagreement.

We also observe a delightful group of figures that is typically Maltese because among them we find Saint George Preca, a Maltese diocesan priest, who in the crib, is seen leading the children to look upon the grotto of Bethlehem. It was he who in 1921 started the processions with the statue of Baby Jesus that still grace our streets at this time of the year to this day. Since 1910, Dun Ġorġ spread the devotion for the verse we find in the Gospel of Saint John: "and the Word became flesh - *Verbum Dei caro factum est*" (Jn 1:14). But above all, at this time of the year, Saint George Preca is remembered for the book he penned for his associates called 'L-Iskola ta' Bethlehem' (The School of Bethlehem). In it, Saint George reflected on the many virtues we can find there: patience, humility, poverty, the providence of God, the mercy of God, forgiveness – this power that forgives. All these virtues are rooted in the experience of the Lord who became flesh for us.

I heartily thank the Maltese Government for sponsoring this masterpiece by the Gozitan artist Manwel Grech is in place here at St Peter's Square; for putting Malta's name at the forefront in this square which is the heart of Catholicism, especially in this joyful season. I take the opportunity to remember the Maltese and Gozitans who reside abroad who are a living witness of the great heritage of our islands.

I remember in a special way the residents of the Homes for the Elderly, the sick in hospitals and other residences, including those in their own homes. My thoughts also go to the inmates at the Corradino Correctional Facility. I remember them all most especially while I wish everyone, from my heart, a blessed Christmas.

✠ **Charles J. Scicluna**

Archbishop of Malta