

# The Neapolitan version of the Nativity message

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Fascinated by the spectacularly detailed set-up of the traditional Neapolitan crib, 25 years ago a Maltese priest started collecting authentic hand-made figures during his travels.

After collecting over 140 18th-century pieces, Fr Edgar Vella decided four years ago to bring them to life by setting up the presepio in Malta to give people the opportunity to enjoy the dramatic scenery that is so popular in Italy.

Unlike the traditional crib that is set in a cave, the Neapolitan nativity scene takes place in the ruins of a Roman pagan temple to symbolise the end of paganism with the arrival of Christ, Fr Vella explained.

The scene is not set in the night time, under the guiding biblical star, but takes place during the day, the idea being to spread the message that Christ is the light of the world.

Fr Vella explained enthusiastically that the scene is divided into episodes: the nativity scene or mister, the Annunciation set in a rustic background and the tavern scene that shows inn-keepers

of the tavern in Bethlehem who refused shelter to Joseph and Mary. This scene, that shows people drinking oblivious to Christ's birth, highlights the alienation of people who do not know Christ, Fr Vella said.

Another, smaller, scene, the bridge setting, shows the passage from darkness to light that symbolises the enlightenment that comes with knowing Christ.

The fountain scene transmits the message that Christ is the water of life.

It took three days to set up the crib. On the first day, the large base and scenery were built by a carpenter. The following day, the Maltese-made structure - put together with wood, gesso (a chalk-mix) and cork - was laboriously set up. Finally, the figurines were carefully put in place and positioned with props that include wine glasses, food plates and musical instruments.

Fr Vella explained how the complex figures' heads are made of painted terracotta with glass eyes while their arms and legs are made of carved wood.

The limbs are mounted onto a mannequin-type body made of hemp and tow that allows the figures to be positioned differently. They are then dressed in little fabric costumes according to their character.

All figures and props in the crib are authentic 18th century pieces which Fr Vella collected over the years from all over the world, including America, France, Germany, England, Canada and Uruguay.

For the first two years, the crib was mounted at Rabat's Wignacourt Museum. Last year, his Neapolitan treasure was mounted at Castille and, this year, the impressive crib can be viewed at the Ministry of Infrastructure, Transport and Communications in Valletta where it is open to the public from today.

"The detail of the crib unleashes the imagination in both young and old," Fr Vella said, inviting the public to view it.

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## Comments

Andrew Said (4 days, 13 hours ago)

The report describes the "mannequin-type body made of hemp and tow"

I know what hemp is but I'd love to know what tow is. Maybe someone could be kind enough to enlighten me.

Thank you and a Happy Christmas to one and all.

Chris Ebejer (5 days, 7 hours ago)

A world of thanks to our friend Fr Edgar who with his passion, brought the only authentic Neapolitan crib in the islands.

For those who never saw a masterpiece of this kind it is high time to visit this artistic crib.

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