



# The Church of St. John the Evangelist, Kitchener

# ON EAGLE'S WINGS

December 18, 2022

Available online at [StJohn316.com/OEW](http://StJohn316.com/OEW)

## St John The Evangelist Parish Library

*The Rev. Paul Kett & The Ven. Ken Cardwell*

This Library has been started with books drawn from a lifetime of collecting books which have been helpful and sometimes challenging in our personal Journeys in Faith. We hope that this library may grow in time by other contributors, and that you will be helped with your journey.



Books are in general categories which are not rigid.

“Take a book home, and return it when you have finished it! No need to sign it out, it’s all on the honour system!”

## Three Maltese Christmas Legends

Sheryl Loeffler

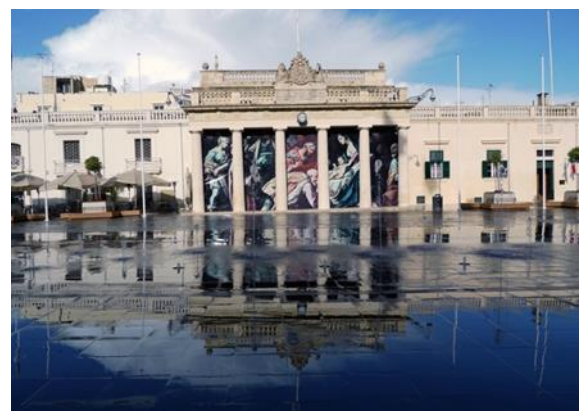
My late husband and I lived in Malta from April 2005 to May 2006, returning once or twice a year nearly every year thereafter until the pandemic struck. I wrote the three poems below—all three based on Maltese Christmas legends—in celebration of our first Maltese Christmas.

### WHY WE PUT TINSEL ON THE TREE

For the first line of “Why We Put Tinsel on the Tree,” I went to the phone book (in 2005, there were still phone books). *Abela* was one of the first Maltese names in the phone book; *Zarb* was one of the last. In other words, the woman of the poem could be any woman from A to Z, a kind of Maltese Everywoman.

The poem tells the story of a woman cleaning her house in preparation for the coming Christ Child. The spiders, however, are angry that she’s swept their webs away, so they spin them in revenge in her Christmas tree. When the Christ Child comes, he honours the

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The next issue of On Eagle's Wings will be available on January 29th, 2023.

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work of both the woman and the spiders, turning the webs into something beautiful.

In this legend, the Christ Child comes to the house as the Prince of Peace, the Christ in whose kingdom a wolf lies down with a lamb and a housewife learns to live with the spiders under her stairs.

### Why We Put Tinsel on the Tree

Mrs. Abela or Mrs. Zarb—  
 one or the other—trained a broom  
 on a corner and beat it blameless.  
 No cobwebbed hearth for the coming Christ!  
 The spiders scowled beneath the stairs.  
 But while she slept, the spiders danced  
 among the boughs, spun subtle silk  
 in the Christmas tree. The Christ Child came,  
 small and still in the secret night.  
*Spiders, spiders, what shall we do?*  
*Your webs will grieve the woman greatly.*  
 So he touched them, turning them to light.

## HOW THE ROBIN GOT ITS RED BREAST

Before the Three Kings, before the Shepherds, there were animals—an ox and an ass—who bore first witness to the birth of Jesus. Art remembers them. They're in every painting, every crèche. Poetry remembers them, too. Sometimes seriously.

*O magnam mysterium*, for example, is a lovely Latin text whose first verse in translation reads: *O great mystery / and wondrous sacrament, / that animals should see / the newborn Lord / lying in a manger.*

In legend and story, animals aren't just present at Jesus's birth. In legend and story, one of the miracles of that miraculous night is that God allows them to understand it. It's one of the reasons C. S. Lewis gives animals speech in his *Chronicles of Narnia*. The animals knew Jesus first. The robin of this legend, this poem, is one of them.

I like to imagine that every robin after the robin of this legend—every robin we'll see in our cold, late spring—bears not only that robin's first red breast but also its memory and miraculous understanding of the birth.



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### How the Robin Got Its Red Breast

A sacrament—that speechless beasts  
 should be the first to wonder at  
 the birth. But in the bitter night,  
 when Mary bade the ox to fan  
 the fading flame with its warm breath,  
 its dim eyes closed in sleep. The ass  
 slept, too. The robin fixed its eye,  
 bead-bright, on the expiring embers,  
 blew to no effect—too sight—  
 then leaned its breast against the coals  
 and sang them into light. The waning  
 fire leapt up. Its blood-orange breast  
 a testament to burning passion,  
 small-but-fearless steadfastness.

## WHY THERE'S A BLACKSMITH IN THE CRIB

There's a crib in every Maltese home at Christmas. We think of cribs as beds for babies. But *crib* has an older meaning. The Anglo-Saxon (Old English) word *crib* was replaced by a synonym, by *manger* in Middle English, the word we still use to describe the bed in which Jesus was placed for want of a real bed. The Maltese use *crib* in its older sense of *manger* or as a representation of the Nativity. In North America, we often use the French word *crèche*.

The Maltese tradition of making cribs at Christmas comes from Italy, more specifically, from Naples.

Cribs in the Neapolitan tradition are about real estate. Their makers construct vast, craggy landscapes and great architectural spaces. The largest Maltese crib I've seen stretched from wall to wall of a room. The landscapes and architectural spaces are inhabited by elaborately modeled terracotta figures called *pasturi*. In the largest cribs, whole villages are created. The villagers wear traditional 18<sup>th</sup>-century dress. Mary and Joseph are dressed as we've always seen them.

There are farmers and animals, market vendors and their wares, housewives and children, people eating and drinking, priests, musicians, beggars, shepherds and their sheep—always shepherds and sheep—and according to the legend, a blacksmith. All of them oblivious to everything but the every day.



But in a remote corner of the crib, in a cave or a shed or a ruin, a quiet miracle has taken place. The Holy Family, surrounded by angels, animals, shepherds, and kings, stand unnoticed by everyone in the village.

In the poem, I've made reference to a Poor Tommaso. That's simply a name I've given to the beggar. Poor Tom was a generic 16<sup>th</sup>-century English term for a poor, mentally ill person who raved, wandered, and begged. I've translated Tom into Italian Tommaso.

Why is there a blacksmith in the crib? According to the legend, a shepherd tells him the story of the birth. The story fast-forwards to the Crucifixion. Thirty-three years later, the blacksmith refuses to give nails he's forged to a Roman executioner.

### **Why There's a Blacksmith in the Crib**

See the terracotta townsfolk,  
    pious Neapolitans—  
naked Poor Tommaso in the foreground,  
the one we have to look through  
    to marvel at the rich, brocaded kings,  
or the blacksmith,  
    his hammer raised time without end  
    over the anvil,  
the one who heard a story from a shepherd  
and believed his wonder,  
the one who forged great spikes  
and wouldn't give them decades later  
    to a Roman executioner  
    making his grisly way  
    to the Place of a Skull.

DEEP PEACE  
OF THE PRINCE OF PEACE  
TO US ALL.