



## Why 'Loreto'...?

By Revel Barker

We are celebrating the memory of 'Our Lady of Loreto', a description mostly unheard of beyond the borders of this village. The two churches in the centre of Ghajnsielem are dedicated to this unlikely appellation. So... *why Loreto?*

The name depends on legend, on folklore... With a complete lack of written history it can be no more than that. There are no church records that justify it, but there is a story. And it goes back through many centuries.

The folkloric version is that the house in which the Holy Family had lived – and, consequently, in which Jesus grew up – was miraculously flown to a safe haven by four angels, just before the final expulsion of the Crusaders from the Holy Land, to prevent its falling into the hands of the conquering Turkish infidels.

In 336AD the Roman empress Helena had identified the building in Nazareth as the place in which Holy Mary had been born, brought up and been told by the archangel Gabriel that she would conceive and bear a son; the same house where she lived during the childhood of Jesus, and to which she returned following the Crucifixion and subsequent Ascension.

Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine the Great (ruled 306-337AD), was herself a remarkable woman who devoted her later life to the study of Judeo-Christian Bible history. On her visits to Palestine she identified the site of the nativity of Jesus in Bethlehem, the place of His tomb in Jerusalem, and the actual 'True Cross' used for the Crucifixion. On an excursion into Egypt she found the Burning Bush of Moses, in Sinai. She ordered, and her son paid for, the building of churches or chapels on many of the sites.

And it was in order to save this religiously historic home from unbelievers that the angels flew the stone building, first to Fiume in Croatia (in 1291 where a sudden appearance of the Virgin attested to its genuine history and sanctity) and thence, three years later, across the Adriatic Sea to the hill of Loreto (in Latin, *lauretum*, named either for laurel trees or possibly the owner of the land). The house became a popular pilgrimage site from the start. People from Ghajnsielem have made the trip.

Vatican researchers established much later that the house had been moved, not by 'angels' but by a wealthy family of Italian ship-owners called Angelos, and therefore that

the carriage by angels was 'not a matter of faith'.

But that didn't spoil the story – nor did it deter the popular artistry showing the house (and the Virgin with it) being flown across the skies. And today the 'Virgin of Loreto' is the patron saint (although most of them are unaware of it) of aircrews and airline passengers.

And of Ghajnsielem... Because a farmer had a dream, or a vision, or an apparition of the Virgin one night, at the fountain from which the village takes its name.

We know this because he told the other villagers about his experience. And they – few in number but devout, as he was – raised money to build a statue in the Virgin's honour.

It was chiselled in stone and placed in 'an elegant niche' close to the spot by the fountain where the apparition had occurred.

In those days, the village was too small, too under-populated, to merit a church of its own. It was part of the parish of Nadur (as was Qala). Church attendance involved a long uphill trek from Ghajnsielem. So the villagers gathered in front of the niche at sunset every day to recite their Rosary. It was certainly easier than

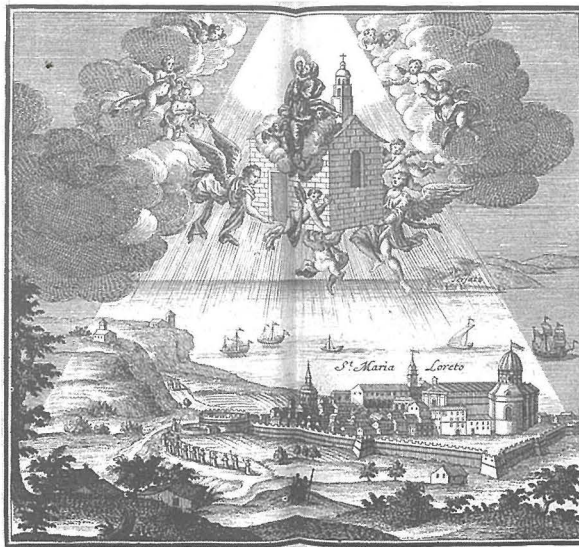
slogging up to their church in Nadur.

And, before long, the archpriest in Nadur would agree to bring his entire clergy and the rest of his congregation down to Ghajnsielem for a full mass and sermon once a year to commemorate the apparition.

Unlike, say, the miracle of Ta'Pinu where a 45-year-old spinster – a shepherdess – heard only a voice commanding her to recite three Hail Marys, and was subjected to a virtual inquisition to substantiate her story, the shepherd Anġlu Grech's recounting of a full-on vision appears to have been accepted from the start.

The villagers believed him. The Church in Nadur acknowledged it. If there was the smallest doubt or inquiry it is not recorded in the archives of the parish. The Archpriest didn't even bother to make a formal contemporaneous note of that momentous event (although obviously he must have known about it).

But many years later – in 1856, a couple of generations after a church dedicated to 'Our Lady of Loreto' had been built in Ghajnsielem – Fr Anton Cauchi, first





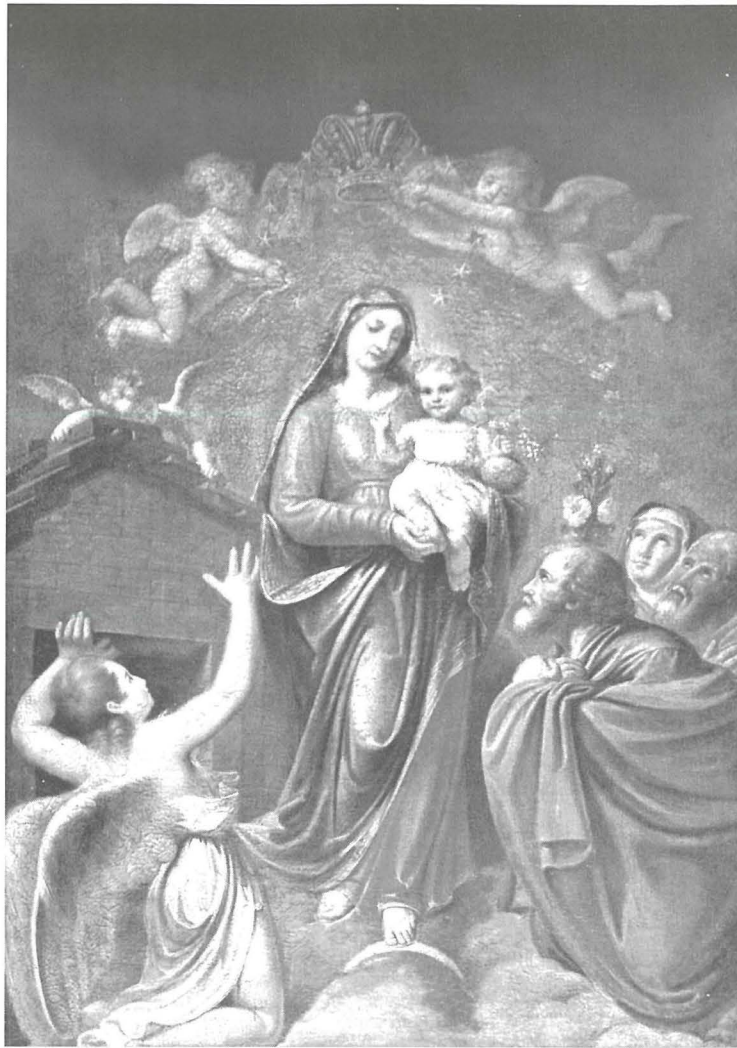
vice-parish priest in the village, recorded the story for posterity. He wrote that he had heard it from a tailor in Nadur called Salvu Grima. Salvu was a serious and reliable man, he wrote: a very old gentleman. He had heard the story from his mother, 'and from others'...

A certain Anglu Grech, known as *Ta'Xini* and from Ghajnsielem, kept sheep and goats and was a devout disciple of the Madonna. He was known to recite the rosary on a regular basis – even while tending his flocks and working in his fields.

One evening, while watering his animals at the spring from which the village takes its name, he saw an apparition, a majestic lady dressed all in white and immediately recognisable as the Virgin Mary, who commanded him to build a statue in her honour, *under the title of 'Loreto'*.

Hearing the story, the other villagers responded immediately, raising funds for both the sculpture and a niche to hold it. And that is how 'Our Lady of Loreto' was created.

Would Anglu have even heard of Loreto, otherwise? It is not impossible, for the strange legend about the relocation of the Holy Family's home had been recounted



since the eventual failure of the Crusades, towards the end of the 13th century, and the repositioned house had become a popular place of pilgrimage.

Returning sailors – and there may have been a few from Ghajnsielem recruited by ships putting in for water and fresh food at Mgarr – could have been acquainted with the story.

Like many stories in the history of Ghajnsielem, it comes down to a matter of faith, rather than of recorded history.

Even so, it is a great pity that the Church has not made more of it. 'Visitations' by the Blessed Virgin Mary to remote villages may not be unique but they are, surely, worth shouting abroad. Think of Lourdes, Fátima... even Ta'Pinu: all of them sites of mass pilgrimage and tourism.

Instead, the shouting on behalf of *Our Lady of Loreto* occurs only in Ghajnsielem, for one single week, towards the end of summer each year.

*Revel Barker, a former newspaper reporter and editor, first visited Gozo in 1974 and has been resident in Ghajnsielem for 28 years. He is currently writing a history of the village.*

# PASTA ATZORI

*Produced by Nicky Atzori*

Lasagne  
Ravioli  
(fresh gozo cheese & rikotta)  
Ravioli al salmone  
Tortellini (meat & cheese)  
Gnocchi di Patate  
Tagliatelle  
Spaghetti  
Spaghetti Neri  
Barchette  
Cannelloni  
Maccaroni

"Casa Atzori", Benghazi Street, Ghajnsielem.  
Tel.: 2156 2731 Mob.: 9988 0811