The St Paul Cult in Malta – An evaluation of the contributions of Monsignor Giuseppe De Piro and Saint George Preca

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It all starts here

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ABSTRACT

Key words: Faith, St Paul, church, cult, tradition, contributions, archives, instrumental.

According to tradition, but not definitely corroborated by either historical or archaeological sources, the Maltese islands received their seed of faith in A.D. 60 by the Apostle Paul, when he was on his way to Rome, as recorded in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

The aim of this study is to examine the background of the cult of St Paul in Malta; to investigate the efforts of Mgr G. De Piro and Fr G. Preca in safeguarding the Roman Catholic faith and the cult of St Paul; specifically their contributions when Malta became a British colony and was placed under a Protestant administration; and whether or not their contributions are still valid today. To achieve this, we will carry an exegetical research of the *Acts of the Apostles* chapters 27, 28:1-10, historiography, modern literary studies.

The best primary sources to investigate these two personalities are the archives of the Missionary Society of St Paul (MSSP), and of the Society of Christian Doctrine (SDC). These archives provide the core of the authentic findings of the enormous wealth of religious literature these priests were able to produce, as well as the testimonies of both Founders. Their spiritual and theological writings include books, pamphlets, articles, sermons, letters and other religious materials.

When the British settled in Malta (1800-1964), the Maltese were very religious and completely loyal to the Roman Catholic Church, but their religiosity had no sound theological basis. Hence, the majority of the Maltese could have been easily influenced by Protestant proselytism and Freemasonry. Both Mgr De Piro and Fr Preca foresaw the need of a sound catechetical teaching, so that the Roman Catholic faith would be better understood and appreciated. They could read the signs of the times.

Mgr De Piro and Fr Preca provided catechetical information and spiritual literature in Maltese, which were almost non-existent at the time; and groups of lay persons were well trained and educated in religious matters. To understand better how the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr Preca were so vital to safeguard the Roman Catholic faith and the cult of St Paul, it was imperative to study the history of the local

church during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the socio-political situation, and the Church-State problems. This study shows the indefatigable work and sacrificial life led by both Founders and how the Roman Catholic faith was not only saved during the British administration but also became much stronger.

In the course of this study, we will investigate how the faith of the Maltese and the cult of St Paul helped to save them from calamities, misery and in time of war; and if the contributions given by Mgr De Piro and Fr Preca are still valid today where the roots of Christianity and Christian tradition are being threatened once again.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study presents the salient features of Monsignor Giuseppe De Piro's life, works and writings. It will also refer to the original and other material including testimonies for the Cause of the Canonisation of the Founder of the *Missionary Society of St Paul* (MSSP). The first testimonies that took place between January and November 1987 were *ne pereant*, and those between 1988 and 1992 were officially witnessed by the Diocesan Ecclesiastical Tribunal. All the decrees, correspondence and other documents pertaining to Monsignor De Piro found in the De Piro Archives (DPA) at the Society's Motherhouse were transcribed by Fr Tony Sciberras MSSP and then printed. These are only used for private circulation. We would like to thank Fr Tony Sciberras for the access to all materials found in these Archives and for his great help and valuable advice as an expert about Monsignor De Piro.

The study about Fr G. Preca is the result of research and reference to the original work, writing and other materials including the documented testimonies, for the cause of the Canonisation of the Founder of the *Christian Doctrine Society* SDC – St George Preca. Mr N. Camilleri, the present Superior General of the Society made it possible for us to use original books and works of Fr Preca as well as to have access to Fr George's archives (ADG = archives of Dun Gorg). We are greatly indebted to Mr N. Camilleri who made it possible to discover the enormous spiritual wealth left by the first canonised Maltese Saint, as well as for all the valuable material put at our disposal.

I am most grateful for the professional guidance, help and encouragement of my promoter Prof. Vitali Petrenko. My sincere thanks go also to my co-promoter Prof. Nico Vorster for his expert advice and coaching, and to Dr Ester Petrenko for meticulously proofreading my thesis. Furthermore, I would like to express my great appreciation for all the help extended to me by the Liaison Administrators Ms Peggy Evans and Ms Tienie Buys. My thanks also go to my friends Grace and Jane Mifsud, and my cousin Carmen Cassar for their invaluable help in obliging with all computer technicalities. May I express my very warm gratitude to my friends Ms Lina Brockdoff and Ms Ivy Debono for their valuable suggestions and great moral support.

A final whole-hearted word of thanks goes to my (now late) husband Richard who was a source of great encouragement throughout my studies, and my daughter Marisa for her

superb and constant support in more ways than one, and who strongly encouraged all my efforts. Last but not least, I am grateful for my son Joseph who contributed so much with his encouragement from a far away country, and provided a valuable selection of books from his private library, especially from his Melitensia corpus.

Without the help of all the above-mentioned this thesis would have remained my dream.

DEDICATION

To my late husband Richard for his encouragement and support throughout this study.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAM	Archives of the Archbishop of Malta, Archbishop's Curia, Floriana.
ACM	Archives of the Cathedral, Malta
ADG	Archives Dun Gorg (Archives Fr George)
AIM	Archives of the Inquisition, Malta
ANV	Notary Archives Valletta
AO	Acta Originalia
AOB	Acts of Birth
AOM	Archives of the Order of St John, Malta
ASPC	Archivium Parocchiale San Caetano
ASPG	Archives of St Paul's Grotto
ASV	Archivio Segreto Vaticano
DOI	Department of Information
DP	Diocesan Process of the Cause of Canonisation of Mgr De Piro
DPA	De Piro archives, Agatha's, Rabat – Malta
GM	Government of Malta
Misc.	Miscellaneous
MS	Manuscript
Mgr	Monsignor
MSSP	Missionary Society of StPaul
NIV	New International Version
NA	Notarial Acts
NLM	National Library of Malta
NSO	National Statistics Office
RDG	Rivista Dun George (Review Fr George)
SDC	Society of Christian Doctrine
vol./s	volume/s

BIBLICAL ABBREVIATIONS

Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Col.	Colossians
1 Cor.	Corinthians
2 Cor.	Corinthians
Gal.	Galatians
Gen.	Genesis
Heb.	Hebrews
Jn.	John
KJV	King James Version
Lk.	Luke
Mk.	Mark
Mt.	Matthew
NIV	New International Version
Rom.	Romans
Thess.	Thessalonians
1 Tim.	Timothy
2 Tim.	Timothy

NOTE:
1. The English version of the Bible used throughout this study is: *The New Jerusalem Bible*. Standard Edition 1985 *ed*. Henry Wansbrough, London: Darton, Longman & Todd.
2. When "Maltese Islands" are mentioned this stands mainly for Malta and Gozo.

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CHAPTER 1.0: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Since the first century A.D. a number of Maltese are said to have been converted to Christianity as attested in the Bible (Acts 28:1-11) and over the years the Pauline tradition became an integral part of Maltese life and culture. Before Malta became a British colony in 1800, only the Roman Catholic faith was practised by the Maltese people. Though very religious and completely loyal to the Roman Catholic Church (Koster, 1988:79), the faith of the Maltese people had no sound theological basis. Therefore, Protestant proselytism, Freemasonry and the contact of Maltese people with British residents presented a challenge to the Roman Catholic faith.

1.2 Problem Statement

Two Roman Catholic priests played significant roles in confronting the challenge to the traditional faith of the Maltese islands: Mgr Giuseppe De Piro and St George Preca. Different authors have written books, booklets and articles from different standpoints on Mgr Giuseppe De Piro and St George Preca. These publications focus on Mgr G. De Piro and St G. Preca as the founding fathers of the Missionary Society of St Paul (MSSP) and the Society of Christian Doctrine (SDC). The best and most accurate publications are penned by Alexander Bonnici (1980; 1981; 1989), the biographer of both St G. Preca and Mgr De Piro (Bonnici, 1988), and Maltese church historian. Fr Alexander Bonnici felt it was his mission to leave to posterity documented and scientifically researched accounts of important events in the life of the Church. Fr Alexander Bonnici is considered as one of the leading church historians and biographers. He collected trustworthy information not only from archives but also from several persons who personally knew and/or came in contact with Mgr De Piro and St George Preca.

Additional research and studies have been written on Mgr G. De Piro by various individuals such as Satariano (1993); Cilia (2001); Fr Sciberras MSSP (2005). Similarly, further research on St G Preca includes that of Camilleri (1997) and Bonello (2007). All are members of the MSSP and SDC.

Though certain aspects of the lives and work of Mgr G. De Piro and St G. Preca have been researched, no one has focused on their combined contributions when the Roman

Catholic faith was threatened during the British administration, and when the seed of faith played an important part in the life of the local people and needed to be nurtured. The threat that the Maltese Catholics faced at the time was not so much an overt threat of religious persecution, but the danger that the Maltese could be indoctrinated by Protestant proselytic efforts as well as Freemasonry. The majority of Maltese had no sound theological basis. Their faith was based on tradition not conviction. This research therefore seeks to extend the research already done on Mgr De Piro and St G. Preca's contributions to safeguard the Roman Catholic faith during the British administration; and further asks if their contributions provide guidelines to safeguard the Roman Catholic faith in an age of secularism and religious diversity This study seeks to identify and examine the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr Preca at that time and to evaluate the extent to which these contributions may remain applicable in the twenty-first century with special reference to the history of the Church and Dogma.

1.3 Central Theoretical Problem

The central theoretical problem to investigate in this study is:

How did Mgr De Piro and St G. Preca contribute to safeguarding the Roman Catholic faith of the Maltese, after Malta became a British Fortress Colony and placed under a Protestant administration together with Freemasonry infiltration; and are their contributions still applicable today?

The questions that naturally arise from this problem are:

How did the Maltese inhabitants welcome the Apostle Paul and what was the impact he made on them; how did the seed of the Christian faith reach the shores of Malta?

How was the Roman Catholic faith safeguarded when Malta became a British colony? What was Mgr De Piro's contribution?

What influence did Protestantism have in Malta and how did the local church provide a sound catechetical formation, when religious and spiritual literature in Maltese were almost non-existent (the official language was Italian), and what part did Fr Preca play in this process?

How were Mgr De Piro and Fr Preca instrumental in subduing Protestantism and safeguarding the Roman Catholic faith during the British colonisation of Malta?

How did the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr Preca help the Roman Catholic Church in Malta to safeguard the cult of St Paul in order to celebrate the centenaries of the 'Baptism of Malta'[1]; and how did the faith of the Maltese and the cult of St Paul save the inhabitants from calamities, misery and in time of war?

1.4 Aim and Objectives

Aim

The aim of this study is to examine the background to the cult of St Paul in Malta, and to investigate the efforts of Mgr G. De Piro and St G. Preca in safeguarding the Roman Catholic faith and the cult of St Paul, specifically their contributions when Malta became a British colony and placed under a Protestant administration, and the infiltration of Freemasonry.

Objectives

The objectives of this study in relation to the aims are:

To describe how the seeds of the Christian faith reached Malta, to set a background for the cult of St Paul, and to critically assess the impact of the Apostle Paul on the inhabitants of Malta. Additionally, to examine and assess the value of the Christian faith in Malta since A.D. 60.

To identify and assess the situation that existed in Malta during the British presence; to investigate Mgr De Piro's strategies and his contributions in safeguarding the Roman Catholic faith.

To identify how the local church tried to ward off the influence of Protestantism; and provided a sound catechetical formation when religious and spiritual literature in Maltese was almost non-existent (as the official language was Italian); and what were Fr Preca's efforts to found the Society of Christian Doctrine.

To evaluate the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr Preca, and the common aspects of both founders of the Missionary Society of St Paul and the Society of Christian Doctrine who were instrumental to subdue Protestantism and safeguard the Roman Catholic faith when Malta was a British colony.

To examine how through the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr Preca the church in Malta safeguarded the cult of St Paul in order to celebrate the centenaries of the

'Baptism of Malta'; and what part did faith and the cult of St Paul play in time of calamities, misery and in time of war.

1.5 Central Theoretical Argument

The central theoretical argument of this study is that Mgr De Piro and Fr Preca contributed to the enhancement of the Roman Catholic faith in Malta during the period of British colonisation by teaching catechism to young and old through the Missionary Society of St Paul and the Society of Christian Doctrine. They carried out this mission through evangelism, and by living an authentic life as they preached and taught.

1.6 Methods to be Used

This study will employ exegetical research of the *Acts of the Apostles:* chapters 27 and 28:1-10, using historiography and modern literary studies. A detailed study will be carried out into the works, writings and teachings of Mgr De Piro and St G. Preca published by various authors. We will research the archives of Mgr De Piro (DPA=De Piro archives) where we find housed all the treasures of the writings, diaries, sermons, sketches, articles, and the first testimonies that took place between January and November 1987 (*ne pereant*), and those between 1988 and 1992 that were officially witnessed by the Diocesan Ecclesiastical Tribunal.

Furthermore, we will research a number of books, articles, writings, sermons, and other contributions written by Fr Preca and by various other authors; including articles in *Rivista Dun Gorg* (RDG=Review of Fr George); as well as gaining access to the archives of the Society of Christian Doctrine: Archives Dun Gorg (ADG=archives Fr George), including *Congregatio de Causis Sanctorum* (Italian version) about the Beatification and Canonisation of St George Preca, Rome, 1997. Other studies will include literary analysis, such as the history of the church in Malta (Bonnici: 1967; 1975), and the socio-economical situation (Cassar: 2002; Frendo: 2004; 2012), as well as the Church-State relation in Malta at the time.

After the investigation and evaluation of the particular contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr Preca, we will elicit the common efforts of both individuals to protect the Roman Catholic faith in Malta during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We conclude our research with an assessment of the extent to which their contributions remain applicable in the twenty-first century.

Note. “Baptism of Malta” refers to St Paul’s Shipwreck on Malta in A.D. 60.

CHAPTER 2

THE SHIPWRECK OF ST PAUL AND PAULINE LOCALITIES

2. St Paul

The question as to whether St Paul was ever shipwrecked and, if so, whether it was in Malta or elsewhere is still a topic of considerable controversy. Melite was mistaken for the Dalmatian island of Meleda (today Mljet). Among the various controversies of the shipwreck of St Paul, a revolutionary theory emerged with the dissertation "*St Paul the Apostle's True Journey to Rome"* by Dr H. Warnecke published in 1987. Warnecke advanced the theory that the island was Cephallenia (Galea & Ciarlò, 1992:67-99) in the Adriatic; but this interpretation was not widely accepted. "If Cephallenia was not called Melite, it has to be one of the other two possible islands. Since the Dalmatian Mljet has to be ruled out for various reasons, it is certain, that Acts 28:1 can only refer to Malta, south of Sicily" (Galea & Ciarlo, 1992:13). According to T. Barling, Warnecke's attempt to historically prove that Melite of Acts is not Malta but Cephallenia, is definetly untenable (Barling, 2008:480). J. Wehnert of the Faculty of Theology in the University of Tubingen remarked that Warnecke's thesis is trivial in historical and textual evidence (Galea & Ciarlò, 1992:67-99). E. Teuma in his article *Mljet, the island of Melita in the Adriatic: does any ground for controversy remain?* showed the reasons why Mljet could not be the island where the apostle Paul was shipwrecked. He wrote that after some years the Croatian archaeology superintendence conducted an in-depth survey of the island, its marine environs and prevailing winds, and concluded that Mljet was not the Melita mentioned in the *Acts of the Apostles* (Teuma, 2011:11).

It is however outside the scope of this study to enter into the merits of the arguments as to whether St Paul was ever shipwrecked and if so whether it was in Malta or elsewhere. What is undeniable is the tradition in the Maltese islands that St Paul was shipwrecked there and part of our research focus lies on this tradition.

There are various pieces of documentary evidence which show a strong Pauline tradition in the Maltese islands. The length of this tradition seems to be in the region of at least six to eight hundred years, if one were to follow the evidence available in two distinct documentary sources: the earliest written descriptions of Malta mention the Pauline tradition and the name of certain places are confirmed in early documents. In

his 1536 description of Malta, Quintinus (Jean Quentin) makes explicit reference to the Maltese strong belief in St Paul. "The natives believe as firmly and with certainty that St Paul has been in Malta just as much as they believe that St Peter has been in Rome" (Vella, 1980: 43).

Thus, it appears that the Pauline tradition in Malta pre-dates the arrival of the Knights of St John in 1530. Quintinus' observation comes from an examination of document-references to St Paul in place-names in Malta preceding the arrival of the Knights. The National archives in Malta are invaluable in tracing such references since the transactions recorded in Acts of Sale and other forms of transfer of immovable property invariably contain many useful references to place-names which help identify the property transacted.

The place names recorded in various deeds preserved in the National Archives include various localities in St Paul's Bay to the north-east of the island as well as Rabat in the centre of the island, Birkirkara also to the centre, and Munxar in the sister island of Gozo. Perhaps the earliest explicit evidence of the oral tradition that St Paul actually preached in Malta is found in the multiple references to the Church of St Paul's in Rabat (Wettinger, 2000:502),[1] the first of which dates back to 1495 and by 1548 has a notarial deed specifying that *in loco sive ecclesia sancti pauli extra muros loco discoperto ubi divus paulus apostolus predicabat fidem cristianam melitensibus* ("in the place or church of St Paul outside the walls the place discovered where St Paul the apostle preached the faith to the Maltese"); while the tradition that St Paul used a cave or grotto in Rabat during his supposed stay in Malta appears to have existed already by 1366 as attested in another notarial deed referring to San Pawl ta l-Għar (Wettinger, 2000:503).[2] The fact that St Paul's Bay has been known by that name since at least the fifteenth century is attested in the references to Sancti Pauli in the militia lists of 1417 (ACM, 437:18) and *Sancti Pauli de la marina melite* in 1486 as well as in later documents (Wettinger, 2000:503).[3]

There is no concrete or indisputable evidence that the Pauline tradition actually existed before the fourteenth century A.D. Indeed some historians have suggested that there may have been a complete break in all forms of life and that the Maltese islands may have remained uninhabited for some time between the arrival of the Arabs and the Castillians in 1410. In his article "The Arabs in Malta", Wettinger wrote that Maltese Christians must have joined the great number of refugees fleeing from Sicily before the Arab

advance to safer places such as Calabria on the mainland (Wettinger, 1986:91). Wettinger in his contribution "Meeting People" in the Sunday Times (Malta) said that it is possible that there were no indigenous Christians left on Malta for the whole period ca A.D 1000-1150. Maltese Christians were diminishing and possibly phased out (Wettinger, 1989:4). According to T.S. Brown, Christianity lost its hold because most of the population fled before or soon after the Muslim invasion (Brown, 1975:84).

Due to the lack of relevant surviving documents, we will never know with certainty whether the Christian faith was actually introduced to Malta by Paul in the first century A.D. or whether it percolated to the Maltese islands in much the same way as it did to other parts of the Roman Empire, before and after the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313. The first archaeological evidence available to date of the arrival of Christianity in Malta is more consistent with a fourth Century A.D. presence rather than a first century one, but this is not conclusive evidence that St Paul did not set foot on the islands or that his supposed presence in Malta bore no fruit.

By the sixth century there is reference to the existence of a Bishop of Malta. In A.D. 533, Belisarius restored the Maltese Islands to the Byzantine Empire. This is not conclusive evidence that Christianity continued to be practised unbroken during the five hundred years after St Paul's supposed stay on Malta in Ca A.D. 60. It simply attests that Christianity was present to some extent during that period. There is no archaeological or documentary evidence of the existence of a Pauline tradition from the third to the eight centuries. The arrival of the Fatimid Arabs in Malta in 870 and the consequences of over 220 years of Muslim rule undoubtedly had an impact on the religions practised in the islands. The actual extent of the survival of the practice of the Christian religion until the second Norman re-conquest of Malta in 1127 is unknown.

The first evidence of the Pauline tradition as mentioned above post-date the determined effort by rulers based in nearby Sicily to Latinise and garrison Malta post 1224, until then Malta appears to have remained a strong Muslim segment in the Maltese social landscape. It is an open question as to whether the Muslims in Malta were assimilated, wiped out through disease or expelled. The available scientific (genetic pool) evidence however suggests that most contemporary Maltese males most likely originated from Southern Italy, including Sicily and up to Calabria (Capelli 2005:1-20). If there has been a Pauline tradition before that – and that is not borne out by any evidence - the

bearers of that particular Pauline tradition do not seem to have lived on in the genes of the Maltese who have survived since the thirteenth century.

It is well documented that the Maltese language is largely based on an Arabic (Semitic) dialect and Arabic-speaking communities existed in Sicily as far back as the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. So the waves of immigrants from Sicily and peninsular Italy to Malta, in the three centuries before the arrival of the Knights, do not automatically translate into Italian or Latinate speakers arriving in Malta. The new arrivals may have spoken a language (since evolved into modern Maltese) which would have been just as close to the one spoken by the Fatimids and other Arabs during their previous political and military domination on Malta (See Brincat Joseph M., Maltese and other languages: A linguistic history of Malta, Malta 2011).

On arrival the Knights found a Pauline tradition which probably developed during the preceding three centuries. Although principally devotees to St John, the Knights would not have shied away from encouraging any other Christian devotions of their Arab-speaking subjects (Brincat, 2011:261-266) if that helped engender loyalty and obedience. So, one finds various Grand Masters of the Order paying homage to the Pauline tradition (most notably Wignacourt and Cottoner) which clearly flourished in parts of Valletta and Rabat.

It is interesting that Wignacourt installed the Chaplains of the Order in a palace facing the Church of St Paul and the Grotto of St Paul. This must have been done in full knowledge of the existence of the Pauline tradition and possibly helped boost it further. The Order of St John soon realised the religious and ideological potential of this historical and devotional connection and tried to foster and secure its widespread recognition. The Knights tried to use aspects of this same cult and the devotion to St Paul for its iconographical and ideological purposes.

For Malta and the Order of St John, the Pauline cult had considerable political, devotional and ecclesiastical implications, as St Paul was seen to have promoted the Maltese ecclesiastical as well as the national and cultural identity and prestige. To have an important Pauline shrine in Malta raised the prestige of the state of the Order too. Hence, it was only logical that the Grand Masters should try to exploit this cult to further their own power, history and glory. Soon after the Grand Master Wignacourt received permission from the Pope, on 24 April 1617, the administration and

guardianship of the Grotto passed to the Grand Master of the Order (Abela, 1647:348-355). Shortly afterwards Wignacourt built a college for chaplains looking after the Grotto.

The Grotto began to attract rich and influential people to come to Malta. In fact, the first nominated rector of the new institution was the Spanish hermit Juan Benega who had diplomatic connections and was a friend of the Pope. Benega was not only a pious, efficient and diplomatic person; he was above all an intelligent and powerful organizer. Through his personal friendship with Pope Paul V and with Grand Master Wignacourt, Benega succeeded in the historic transition of St Paul's Grotto to the Order of St John (Azzopardi, 2006:5). The bequests and support of the various Grand Masters for St Paul's Grotto signifies that the Order kept on fostering the Pauline tradition also to further its own political ends.

Given the low literacy rates in Malta in the time of the Knights and the growth of primary school education in the second half of the nineteenth century under British rule, it is perhaps neither surprising nor unusual that Fr De Piro and Fr Preca took the initiative to latch on to the Pauline tradition in the written form. The faith of the majority of the Maltese was more by tradition than by conviction, in the light of the facts that new social and political ideas were being aired and introduced in Malta. Fr De Piro and Fr Preca visualized that the Roman Catholic faith was being threatened. As the cult of St Paul was greatly enhanced during the sojourn of the Knights of the Order – and the Maltese population enthusiastically loved and regarded St Paul as their protector – both priests entrusted their new mission under the patronage of St Paul.

St Paul, originally called Saul was a controversial figure. He was loved and hated, revered and feared. Initially Saul was a militant anti-Christian; who persecuted the Church of Christ violently and tried to destroy it. He dragged many Christians into prison and voted in the Sanhedrin for their death. He was also present at the martyrdom of St Stephen (Acts 8:1, 3). The encounter of Saul with the risen Christ is portrayed in Luke's narrative and Paul himself refers to the event in his letters. The *Acts of the Apostles* gives us these accounts in chapters 9:3-6; 22:6-10; and 26:14-18. His conversion had turned him from a man of the Law to a man of great faith in Christ with a marked missionary vocation. In time Paul realised that the cross was the proof of God's love and the supreme sacrifice for the human sin.

Paul is one of the distinguished figures of the first generation of Christians who worked hard to spread the Good News. He is one of the Christian founders who, with his great personality, sown, watered and spread Christianity outside the Jewish territory. This happened after the first two decades of Christ's death. The *Acts of the Apostles* gives an extensive account of his work. Out of the twenty-eight chapters, about sixteen are dedicated to his missionary work. Paul's letters to the various Christian communities which he founded reveal his personality and his great spirituality. In these writings one can also trace Paul's theological thought. They attest to Paul's great theological depth and his capable reflexion, creative and stimulant zeal as a result of his personal experience of Christ.

2.1 St Paul's Shipwreck

"Once we had come safely through, we discovered that the island was called Malta. The inhabitants treated us with unusual kindness" (Acts 28:1-2). These words written in the first two lines of chapter 28 are of utmost importance for the history of Christianity in Malta. These words document the first meeting of the inhabitants of Malta with Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, and at the same time, the beginning of the relationship of the Maltese with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

St Paul's shipwreck and landing on Malta is the most descriptive narrative in the *Acts of the Apostles*. When reading the concluding chapters 27 and 28:1-11, one is immediately struck by the numerous nautical details provided. Such minutiae description of a sea voyage is unique, nothing similar is found in the Bible. The descriptive nature of the narrative serves to show the difficulties that Paul encountered in his apostolic ministry in service of the Christian message.

Soon after they left "the 'north-eastern' hurricane burst on them from across the island" (Acts, 27:14). Acts 27 clearly shows: the condition of the sea and the weather; the pre-announced tempest by Paul to the captain; verses 13-20 are the climax – the tempest; then there is a bridge between the tempest and salvation as foretold by Paul. Salvation is threatened, Paul foretells them again. Acts 28:1-10 present confirmation of divine salvation for Paul and the Maltese. Paul was destined to reach Rome, the terrors of the stormy sea and elements "only accentuate the invincible divine plan that directs his journey" (Brown *et al.*, 1993:764).

The fact that the island's name remains unknown till the very end shows that they were being driven by divine forces and that the whole situation was far beyond their control. The ship was left completely free and was driven by the sheer force of the sea. Throughout the voyage, everything is destined to perish except the members of the crew and the voyagers. Paul was a man of great faith and he invited all on board to have faith. He takes the opportunity to reveal the source of his relationship with God: it is the 'God to whom I belong" and the one 'I serve'. The angel "promised deliverance of all on Paul's account, betokening his role in God's wider plan" (Brown *et al.*, 1993:764).

The navigation of Paul from Caesarea to Rome is perhaps the most renowned account of the whole book of the *Acts of the Apostles*. In 2 Corinthians he speaks of three shipwrecks and of twenty-four hours at the mercy of the waves on a dismantled boat; but this does not compare with the horrible tempest lasting fifteen days that ended by casting the boat and crew on the shores of Malta (Picucci, 2008:20). It is noteworthy that the narrative by St Luke provoked through history the admiration of sailors. Lord Horatio Nelson confessed that his naval victory of Copenhagen was due to re-reading the account in the same morning (Picucci, 2008:20). Specialists, archaeologists and historians, who are interested in Greek-Roman nautical science, praise chapter 27 of the *Acts of the Apostles* as the best old classical text on this subject (Picucci, 2008:20).

According to tradition, the shipwreck took place in St Paul's Bay in the North East coast of Malta in A.D. 60. Luke's description says that they headed for the beach, but the cross-currents carried them into *a shoal*: a 'place of two seas' (*topos dithalassos*). Up to the present day, this place is still called in Maltese '*l-Ghazzelin',* which means: where two under currents meet. "The bows were wedged in and stuck fast, while the stern began to break up with the pounding of the waves" (Acts 27:41).

A study published rather recently presented the shipwreck episode as the most fitting conclusion to the whole book of the Acts itself (Borg, 1986:48). The theology of St Paul in the whole book of Acts "achieves considerable momentum through the storm and Paul's eventful arrival" (Borg, 1986:48). The long narrative of the shipwreck is very unusual to Luke who was rather concise in his writing. Luke might have had a historical aim, that is, the new religion was not only to reach the Jews and the Greeks, but also all races – such as those of a Punic culture. Tradition says that the Apostle had brought salvation to the gentiles of Malta; and that he convinced a certain number of the inhabitants of the existence of God; he cured the sick both physically and spiritually.

Through the narrative of the tempest Luke wants to give his message of salvation. The details of this writing show that Luke was an eye-witness. His narrative is like that of a reporter of what he sees and hears on the ship from the protagonists of the crew. The shipwreck was to take place on an island (Acts 27:26), the place where it is necessary to end. This necessity seems to adjourn the inevitable plan of God. He affirms that the angel had confirmed the 'necessity' that he should appear before Caesar. Paul's fellow travellers were granted salvation by God in virtue of the divine favour accorded to the apostle. Luke wants to stress Paul's readiness to face all sorts of hardships in order to spread the Christian message to many people in various places. Difficulties and hardships are present all along Paul's preaching activity in the formation of so many Christian communities.

It is interesting to note that at first the name of the island is mentioned and then Luke reveals the true identity of its people. They are not only kind-hearted but have a sense of hospitality. The islanders gave them a warm welcome. Once it was raining and cold, they lit a huge fire for the benefit of the whole group. The fire is another term to give a Christian message. Although the islanders could not communicate by verbal language (barbaroi), their kind gestures were more than enough to show their hospitality towards the whole group.

Far from representing death, the shipwreck brought new life to the Gentiles. This salvation is consolidated with the divine confirmation that empowered the apostle during various scenes of the tempest: he, a prisoner, saves all the others (Acts 27:44) including soldiers, as anticipated by the angel (Acts 27:23). The salvation of Paul from the sea and his shipwreck on Malta represent the beginning of the news of redemption of a saved generation that will spread in time all over the globe. Paul's voyage to Rome through Malta is the natural bridge to diffuse Christianity. The true identity of Malta is a capable bridge to spread the divine message to the whole world.

The shipwreck of St Paul on the island is considered by many inhabitants as one of the single-most important events in the island's history which brought the inhabitants of these islands into the Christian fold, where they still belong, after almost twenty eventful centuries. The island of Malta, like all other early places of Christianity, traces back the origin of its belief to St Paul. Tradition plays a very important part when it speaks of Paul's presence on the island of Malta. This event has had long lasting effects

on the beliefs, traditions and culture of the islanders. The book of Acts indeed proves to be an invaluable source of information on the spread of early Christianity. In the following section Luke gives us a description of how the shipwrecked were welcomed on the island.

2.2 The Baptism of the Maltese Islands

According to the Acts of the Apostles:

> The inhabitants treated us with unusual kindness. They made us all welcome by lighting a huge fire because it had started to rain and the weather was cold. Paul had collected a bundle of sticks and was putting them on the fire when a viper brought out by the heat attached itself to his hand. When the inhabitants saw the creature hanging from his hand they said to one another, 'That man must be a murderer; he may have escaped the sea, but divine justice would not let him live.' However, he shook the creature off into the fire and came to him no harm, although they were expecting him at any moment to swell up or drop dead on the spot. After they had waited a long time without seeing anything out of the ordinary happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say he was a god (Acts 28:2-6).

From the point of view of Paul and his fellow travellers, Malta must have looked more homely than any other place visited in the course of his missionary journeys. The *Acts of the Apostles* tells a number of stories when writing about the treatment he received from the inhabitants of other countries whom Paul evangelized. In Malta, Acts shows how Paul and his shipwrecked companions were looked after with 'rare humanity'.

The Maltese acted quickly with the shipwrecked because they were watching from a distance and were ready to offer their assistance. In the narrative of the *Acts of the Apostles*, Luke gives a sublime and picturesque account. The terrifying tempest for several days and nights, and the drama that Paul and his fellow travellers experienced is inspiringly described in a few sentences (Acts 27). The picturesque imagery is the description of the survivors on the shore and the warm welcome by the inhabitants who went to help the shipwrecked. The warmth of the fire lit on that cold and rainy day is matched by the warmth of the Maltese (Azzopardi & Pace, 2010:39).

Thanks to Paul's knowledge of Hebrew, he managed to understand the inhabitants who spoke Punic, a language which, according to St Augustine, was related to Hebrew (Picucci, 2008:25). But more than words it was facts that spoke for themselves. The crowd was amazed when Paul was bitten by the viper, shook his hand, threw it into the fire and nothing happened to him. After the incident of the viper, those present were

filled with awe. The inhabitants then, as now, regarded this episode as the first miracle performed on Malta, and the site became hallowed ground. Those who witnessed the miracle had repeated the story, from one generation to another, thus becoming a tradition. The Apostle's image in Malta either in painting or as a statue is always shown with St Paul shaking the viper into the fire.

The viper is portrayed by Acts as the instrument chosen by Divine Providence to convince the people who welcomed Paul on their island and lit the fire to warm the shipwrecked, that Paul was the messenger whose words were to be taken seriously. For the local inhabitants the serpent was associated with the earth: the goddess of fertility – mother-earth. Serpents were inscribed in the stone of the prehistoric temples in Malta and Gozo, and the Maltese were probably still devoted to them at the time.

The Maltese were great believers in justice, in that God who rewards the good and punishes the evil. Paul first escaped the tempest at sea, but when bitten by the viper it seemed as if divine justice caught up with him (Acts 28:4). The islanders presumed that the goddess of "Justice" has allowed Paul to escape shipwreck only to strike him down as soon as he set foot on land. The inhabitants knew very well that when someone was bitten by a viper he would drop down dead immediately. When they saw that nothing happened to Paul, they saw in him a supernatural power. This incident prepared them to accept the teaching he wanted to deliver to them: the gospel (Bezzina, 2002:21).

After the shipwreck, Paul and all the two hundred and seventy-five survivors were received by Publius, the chief man of the Island. He welcomed them and entertained them, showing great hospitality for three days. At the time, Publius' father was in bed suffering from fever and dysentery. When Paul went to see his father, he recited a prayer, laid his hands on his father's head, and he was miraculously healed (Acts 28:7-9). Paul said a prayer to show that his father was cured by God and not by Paul. This was a liturgical act. Publius was so moved that he was converted to Christianity. The healing of the father of the *Protos* (Chief man) could have had a double meaning – healing from dysentery (body sickness) and healing of the soul from sin.

Paul's miraculous activity made the inhabitants realise that Paul was neither a murderer nor a god since he was constantly assisted by God. The God of Paul who heals is associated with life and not with death. Paul healed the Maltese sick people brought to him, but to all he preached the mystery of Christ. His listeners paid attention to what he

told them and to the word of God. This gave the idea of God as a healer, a forgiver and a saviour, and not of a God as an avenging Judge – a sign of conversion on the part of the Maltese. According to tradition, the word of the miraculous healing went round and other sick people on the island also came and were cured. The message of the miracles did reach Gozo through the seamen that plied between the islands (Bezzina, 2009:63).

The conversion of the Maltese, as portrayed in Acts, was a two-stage conversion. During the first stage the inhabitants gave up their long-established beliefs in older deities; with Paul's shaking off the viper into the fire. Their minds and hearts were now open to receive some alternative account of how to meet the threats of sea or land. The second stage was Paul's healing of the father of Publius and of other sick persons; these were signs of the new faith. Acts 28:1-10 portrays the Maltese, at least those who were watching the final break up of Paul's ship from the safety of the shore, from spectators to partakers of the crowd on the shore. Paul's coming to Malta was a healing experience (Acts 28:9) – an evangelization by miracles.

St Paul, after preaching the Christian faith to the Maltese, baptised those who professed Christ, crucified and raised from the dead, as the true God. The Maltese who were very religious in nature[4] – listened to the new solutions about the eternal problem of humanity – the origin of humanity and destiny after death – and they probably thought that these solutions were well worth believing.

Paul remained in Malta for three months, preaching the good news, baptising those who wanted to accept his teaching, and healing the sick. When the weather improved and the shipwrecked could continue their voyage to Rome, the inhabitants wanted to show their gratitude. Those who embraced the new faith thanked God and the Apostle by giving him and his companions all that was necessary for their journey before starting their voyage to Rome. This testifies that quite a number of the islanders had accepted Christ's gospel (Borg, 1986: 48). The Maltese identity has been shaped in a special way by the passages of Acts 27 and 28:1-10.

When it was time to leave, St Paul did not leave the converted inhabitants orphans, he left them Publius as a representative of Christ. According to tradition, Publius became the first Bishop of Malta (Kendal, 2014). Trophimus was travelling with Paul on his way to Rome and fell ill in Malta; Paul did not cure him because it was necessary to leave him behind in Malta to help Publius organize the new church. Paul in his second

letter to Timothy writes that Trophimus fell ill at a place called Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20) but the Maltese tradition firmly believed to be Malta. When Trophimus eventually left Malta he went to France and became the first bishop of Arles (Abela, 1647:234).

Hence, in A.D. 60 St Paul founded a Christian Community in Malta – the Maltese tradition of an apostolic church. In spite of the scarce documentation, there were enough indications that when Paul left Malta to proceed to Rome, Paul left behind him an *ecclesia domestica* (domestic church). The author of the *Acts of the Apostles* identified persons and houses to show the foundation of a Christian community, where he establishes a church. Publius and his household are named with singular emphasis.

Paul and all the survivors left Malta probably roundabout after A.D. 60 (Bezzina, 2002:20). Paul was not only preaching to a Jewish, Greek or Hellenistic audience but also to the 'barbarians'. The account of Paul's departure from Malta shows the generosity of the Maltese, as well as their hospitality. Hospitality is the hallmark of the Maltese character. The gesture of gratitude and heartfelt solidarity before the shipwrecked left the island complements Paul's gift to the Maltese. For the Apostle of the Gentiles, Malta was like no other destination; whereas during his missionary travels he had encountered all forms of hostility and physical abuse, his three-month stay in Malta was a peaceful one. Even though Paul could no longer be present physically with the Maltese he was united to them spiritually.

A strong tradition affirms that a number of Maltese together with their chief citizen were converted to Christianity (Bonnici, 1967:10). This does not mean that all the inhabitants were converted. One cannot expect that Christianity would spread like wild fire throughout the whole archipelago. The official religion of the state was still being practised and pagan temples were still being built in the capital *Melite* such as the one dedicated to Apollo in the second century. There are no records that the *whole* population of Malta was converted to Christianity. Luke, in his account of the *Acts of the Apostles*, does not mention a *general* conversion of the islanders, though one may come to the conclusion that after the many miracles performed by St Paul a significant number of the inhabitants became Christians. According to tradition, after the miracle of the viper and the healing of the father of Publius, from that time on, Christianity became rooted in the Maltese islands (Abela, 1647:348-355).

Among the shipwrecked, the three protagonists of the dramatic episode were: Paul the Apostle, Luke (the Antiochene doctor and author of the *Acts of the Apostles*) and Julius, the Roman centurion, who saved Paul's life when the soldiers suggested killing the prisoners (Acts 27:42). Another companion was Trophimus, a Christian from Ephesus who accompanied Paul on his third missionary journey. Trophimus was with Paul in Jerusalem at the time of his arrest (Acts 21:29); consequently was held as a fellow-prisoner in Paul's voyage to Rome. In his narrative, Luke was always including himself: "We boarded a vessel … and we left from …" (Acts 27:2). Luke was one of the workers who preached the gospel together with Paul. As a clever historian, Luke singled out Publius, as "the first citizen." Being a doctor, Luke also mentioned Publius' father disease with the exact words of old medicine.

Since their conversion to the Christian faith, the Maltese people fostered a great devotion towards the Apostle of the Gentiles, who wrote "… it was I who fathered you in Christ Jesus, by the gospel" (1 Cor. 4:15). St Paul was always, and still is considered as the Spiritual Father of the Maltese. He is the principal Patron Saint of Malta and St Publius, the first Bishop of Malta, together with St Agatha are secondary Patron Saints of the Archdiocese of Malta. The association of Malta with the great Apostle of the Gentiles thus emanates from the narrative in Acts.

Throughout Acts Paul is shown as the apostle most dedicated to the universal scope of salvation in Christ. In his missionary journeys he wanted to bring the good news to all the areas of the Greco-Roman world. The shipwreck on Malta represents Paul going even beyond Jewish or Hellenistic worlds into the Punic world, which had been historically a rival civilization to that of the Greeks and Romans. In this way, the universal scope of Paul's mission of bearing witness to salvation up "to the ends of the earth" found new land and new pagan people. By tradition St Paul is supposed to have grafted the seed of faith in the existing community of A.D. 60. It was the beginning of a new development, like the biblical mustard seed which later grew to give shade and to welcome birds to settle on its branches. It was a point of departure, a point of constant reference. The strength of the cult of St Paul in Malta is manifested by the various Pauline localities in Malta. We will now proceed to discuss some Pauline localities.

2.2.1 Pauline Localities

The Pauline cult is also defined by a series of specific locations. One would expect to find quite a few localities that bear the name of St Paul in Malta. St Paul's Bay

(Wettinger, 2000:502) is the bay where according to tradition the shipwreck took place. From time immemorial the place where the shipwreck took place had been called "*l-Ghazzellin*" from the Greek word *topos dithallassos* (where two under currents meet) and phonetically in Maltese there is a great resemblance between the two words. Hence, the name of the locality "*l-Ghazzellin*" at St Paul's Bay, is supposed to have been the place where the Apostle Paul was shipwrecked.

According to tradition "The Church of the Shipwreck at St Paul's Bay" was an old chapel constructed on the site of the first miracle performed by the apostle Paul. The first mention of this chapel is by Quintinus (Vella, 1980:45; Wettinger, 2000:502). A chapel rebuilt on the same site is attested in the notarial deed of Luca Sillato in 1441 (MS, 69:47).

Pwales is the name of an area and cliff along the road between *Il-Wardija* and the innermost part of St Paul's Bay. If Pwales is the broken plural of the Arabic word *bulus* (Paulo) according to Aquilina (1990:1097), then there might be an allusion to the name of St Paul. Abela (1647:25) associates *Pwales* with St Paul's Bay because of the shipwreck of the Apostle.

The Island of St Paul is an islet with a large statue of St Paul sculptured by Sigismondo and Salvatore Dimech. The conspicuous statue is four metres high, placed on a pedestal over eight metres high made by F. Spiteri. It represents St Paul holding a book in one hand and outstretching the other preaching to his listeners. At his feet lies a flame. Beneath this statue, a Mass was celebrated on 19 July 1960 by Cardinal Luigi Traglia as part of the celebrations marking the Nineteenth century of the arrival of St Paul on Malta (Hedley, 1960: 10).

Not far from St Paul's Bay is a small hamlet called *Burmarra*d ("the heir's plot"), the place where according to tradition the hereditary estates of Publius' father were found. In this locality is the chapel of *San Pawl Milqi* ("St Paul welcomed"), it is said to have been the spot where the Apostle met Publius for the first time. The plot at *Burmarrad* and Publius' palace at Mdina are indicated as the places where Paul and his companions were sheltered for the first three days after the shipwreck and where the Apostle miraculously healed Publius' father (Bonnici, 1967:14).

As reliable documents dating back to the time of the shipwreck of St Paul on Malta are not available, tradition is an important witness to early Christian life. The word 'tradition' in this study refers to the long established beliefs, customs, and practices, often rooted in past centuries and faithfully transmitted from generation to generation, generally by word of mouth. It is not easy to determine the origins of a tradition. It is handed down through generations with richness of colour that keeps accruing in the process. Traditions are important as long as they are felt relevant to one's life and form an integral part of one's culture, heritage and history. They provide knowledge of the past and help to understand it. Every tradition should be understood in its broader cultural context. Traditions weave together relationships and interactions between the past, present and future. They are a point of reference, a cultural criterion that can evaluate who we are and what we value. Tradition is a major cultural resource that carries weight and ought to be granted a rightful place in Church history (Bezzina, 2008:64).

After the revelation of Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul received the oral tradition about Jesus from the apostles. This tradition Paul passed on to the Corinthians and exhorted the Thessalonians to hold on to the traditions which they received from him (2 Thess 2:15). The tradition of St Paul was the 'Good News' that Christ died for human sin; that he was buried and rose on the third day. It was anchored in the gospel of Jesus as the Messiah and risen Lord (Mk 16:6; Mt 28:6; Lk 24:34). The Pauline tradition rests on the edifice of the Universal Church founded by Jesus Christ of which Paul is one of its pillars. Before the written gospel there *was* the gospel. This early form of the gospel was passed on orally, preserving Christ's teachings in the years before the four Gospels were written.

Several places in Malta show great devotion towards the Saint in whose honour they built various chapels and churches. The cult of St Paul has spread in all the towns and villages of the Maltese islands. Pauline churches will be referred to in this chapter. We will show how the Maltese did not keep this treasure donated by the Apostle within the shores of the Archipelago but have spread it in a very generous way to the four corners of the world. We will now mention very briefly three conspicuous sites which focus on St Paul's shipwreck.

2.2.2 St Paul's Grotto

Jean Quintin d'Autun, as quoted by Horatio C. R. Vella (1980:45), referred to St Paul's Grotto as follows: "Near the city there is a cave dug in a rock, with two altars within; they say St Paul was in custody in it for three months along with other prisoners, healing at the same time the islanders …" Quintin went on to say that from that cave, pieces of stone were cut off by visitors who confirm openly throughout Africa, Italy and Rome that they were healed from the bites of serpents and scorpions (Vella, 1980:47). The report of Mgr Dusina's apostolic visit in February 1575 is the first document which acknowledged and confirmed the miraculous properties of the stone from the grotto (NLM, MS, 643:54).

St Paul's Grotto is located just outside the walls of the ancient city of *Melite*. One tradition holds that this was the place where Paul was imprisoned. A.A. Caruana in his written document about this cave: *Monografia Critica della grotta di San Paolo nel sobborgo di Melite, l'antica capitale di Malta* (*Critical monograph of St Paul's Grotto in the suburb of Melite, the old capital of Malta*) identified it as a Roman dungeon similar to the Tulliano prison in Rome (Caruana, 1896:14). At an unknown period the cave was transformed into a shrine and there were a church and a cemetery surrounding it by 1366 (Wettinger, 1990:65-67; Wettinger, 2000:503).

It is recorded that in the sixteenth century many pilgrims used to take home chippings of the rock which if pounded into dust and diluted in wine or water were said to be an effective medicine against all disease (Dusina, 1575:36-37). According to G. Zammit-Maempel "the indigestion from powdered objects or the drinking from cups made of *terra sigillata melitensis* (Maltese sealed earth)" might have had a protective as well as a curative effect on poisoning … (Handbills, 1978:218).

St Paul's Grotto has a deep religious, cultural and historical significance. The Cathedral Chapter of Mdina on 13 May 1617 declared that the Grotto of St Paul is "the foundation stone of the Church in Malta" (AO, vol. 9:37). It constitutes a national, indeed an international shrine. This Grotto has been traditionally venerated as an apostolic sanctuary and the cradle of Christianity in the diocese (AO, vol. 9:37).

To the present day St Paul's Grotto is still the most significant part of Malta's cultural and spiritual heritage, character; and the central shrine of the Pauline cult. This Grotto

welcomed many distinguished visitors since the sojourn of the Knights of the Order to the present day.

2.2.3 San Pawl Milqi

The Italian Archaeological Mission[5] excavated *San Pawl Milqi*, a **small** church documented by the name of *Milqi* (welcomed) in 1673 (Luttrell, 1977:125): a paleochristian church very close to where St Paul's shipwreck supposedly took place. This church was thought to indicate the place where the Apostle Paul was welcomed and entertained by Publius as documented in the *Acts of the Apostles* (Acts 28:7-9), and which the Italian Mission seemed to confirm after excavating the remains on the site of a Roman villa. Cagiano de Azevedo, in 1966 presented a preliminary report on the excavations of this site and came out with remarkable findings: identifying Christian symbols four engravings in stone representing: (i) a fish, (ii) a Greek cross, (iii) a ship and (iv) a bearded-head and the Greek name PAULOS (Mission, 1963:153-154). These finds were disputed by Margerita Guarducci (Guarducci, 1966:1).

To substantiate his claims Cagiano (1966:21-50) described his finds as *piccoli e poveri ma molto significativi* (small and poor but very significant), but because they were plainly dismissed by M. Guarducci (1966:144-151) these excavations were regarded as inconclusive and dubious (Buhagiar, 1996:15-30). A team of Italian archaeologists re-opened the excavations at the site on 20 June 2013 as a result of a close collaboration between the Museum Department and the Italian Archaeological Mission to Malta. These are jointly conducted by the Universities of *La Sapienza of Rome* and *La Cattolica of Milan* (DOI, 2014:1).

The remains on this site were considerably damaged during the World War I. The archaeologist, T. Zammit expressed his concern as follows:

> It is a shameful scandal that the remains of Publius's villa are accessible to all and sundry and every one is free to destroy them … Unless proper action is taken, everything will soon disappear. The day when the hill is considered holy ground can only dawn if people are made aware that the vestiges of Publius's villa prove beyond doubt the written words of the *Acts of the Apostles* … Pilgrimages shall in future be organized annually and the faithful shall kneel down to kiss the ground of that fortunate house … (Zammit, 1930:40).

We will proceed to the third site: the hypogeum of *St Paul's catacombs*.

2.2.4 St Paul's Catacombs

The underground cemeteries scattered in many places on the island provided the first reliable evidence of Christianity in Malta. The major burial-sites belonging to the late Roman and Byzantine periods were found at Rabat, outside the walls of the ancient capital *Melite*.

2.2.4.1 The Funerary Triclinia (*Agape* tables)

A characteristic feature of the Maltese catacombs is the funerary *triclinium* (a*gape table*). Maltese funerary *triclinia* were commonly called *agape-tables*; first coined in the twentieth century, because "feast ritual formed an important element of the Christian way of life" (Buhagiar, 1993:158). *Agape* tables "are so common in Malta that they represent a distinctive feature of Maltese Christianity" (Stevenson, 1978:148). These were used for the celebration of farewell banquets for the deceased.

The *triclinium* (*agape* table) was normally excavated at the very entrance on the side of the main gallery or hall of the hypogeum; it was the focal point of attraction. This is a table and couch hewn out of one stone forming a single architectural unit within an absidal exaedra, standing at a higher level from the ground, the *mensa* (table) and the *stibadium* (seat) forming one whole unit.

In the very early Christian liturgy the *agape* was considered as important as the sacrament of the Eucharist. In the beginning of the third century A.D., the "*Canons of Hippolytus* allowed the two rituals to be held together as an *amnesis*, or as a commemoration of the dead" (Borg, 1986:55). This is the first available literary source attesting the introduction of both rituals together in a Christian funerary cult. *Agape* was "a formal expression of the intimate fraternal bonds of christian charity and love which permeated the daily life of each community from the very first days of christian existence" (Borg, 1986:54). This 'Love-feast' was celebrated together with the Eucharist during the meetings of early Christians. Although these catacombs had a variety of detailed tomb architecture they had no elaborate paintings.

2.2.4.2 Decorations

The striking aspect of the Maltese hypogea is the apparent lack of decoration. Christian art started with decorative motifs and with symbolical and allegorical representations, later it developed into a realistic art. Christian symbols were found in local catacombs and on funerary artefacts excavated from them. The *Cross* was considered by Christians

as a symbol for their identity and centre of devotion; simple crosses, hooked crosses, crosses in the shape of a trident, an anchor, or coupled with a ship were found in local catacombs. The cross was mostly represented on walls; urns or bilychnis (two-wick clay lamps) had the Constantinian monogram XP.

Paintings were even less common. Other Christian symbols in Maltese catacombs were: *alpha* (beginning) and *omega* (end); the *fish* – the Greek word for fish: *Ixthys*: initial letters of the Greek clause "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour." The iconography of the Orant (standing figure with outstretched arms in an attitude of prayer) was a common painting. According to M. Buhagiar (1993:172) the graffiti of two birds and a tower-like building at the back found in St Paul's catacombs could have represented a light-house; in early Christian tomb-iconography of the light-house symbolized the happy ending of the journey of the soul to the hereafter. After discussing some Pauline localities and sites we will now present the cult of St Paul in Malta.

2.3 The Cult of St Paul in Malta

According to tradition the Pauline cult in Malta as historical evidence for Christ goes back to the beginning of Christianity, that is, since St Paul was shipwrecked on the shores of the island. The message which the Apostle Paul conveyed to the Maltese was his personal experience of the Risen Christ. St Paul, the great apostle of the Gentiles, holds a prominent place in the Church, and for many Maltese, second only to its founder. From the earliest times till this very day, there is a solid cult of St Paul throughout the Maltese islands. The Maltese can boast of a rich Pauline heritage. The bond between St Paul and the Maltese national conscience is very great and strong. It is a conscience that was moulded within the context of the Pauline tradition, that is, the Maltese Christian roots.

It is to the Malta passages in Acts, that many artists, writers, musicians, poets and the faithful turn for inspiration when expressing Malta's Pauline phenomenon in their work. The power of Christ-God is the motor that renders St Paul's life as one of the most represented iconographic themes – the iconography of St Paul shaking the viper into the fire (Acts 28:1-6). Although safe on land, Paul's first miracle takes place in the proximity of the sea. Paul is normally represented standing amidst a crowd of attentive Maltese, calmly shaking off a viper into a fire, with the tempestuous sea and a disintegrating ship in the background. The book in St Paul's hand is usually interpreted as the book of Epistles, and the sword as the Spirit which is the word of God.

The cult of St Paul is greatly felt throughout Malta and Gozo, Wherever you roam in the country or in the main streets of cities and villages, side-streets or narrow alleys Pauline veneration presents an image of St Paul; even in a very remote village-alley it is very common to find a statue of the saint, beautifully sculptured in local globigerina limestone. To find Pauline art in Malta, one does not need to go to a museum. The image of St Paul constantly watching over his spiritual children is found everywhere. The presence of St Paul is the basis of the Maltese Christian heritage and a major source of Maltese culture.

On entering Mdina, the ancient capital, an image of St Paul in mosaic welcomes all visitors. This image in mosaic replaces an earlier representation which was put up as a votive sign of thanksgiving for saving the residents of Mdina from death after the earthquake of 1693. As soon as one sets foot through the main gate to enter Mdina, over the inner-side is a stone statue of St Paul, flanked on either side by stone reliefs of St Publius and St Agatha, Patron Saints of the Maltese islands.

At Greeks' Gate, another entrance to Mdina is an oil painting of St Paul baptising the Maltese. Another relief of St Paul with sword in his right hand and a cross in his left is found above Greeks' Gate. Other evidence of Pauline cult is in the name of the Mdina Bastions, of the College of St Paul which used to be run by the Jesuit Fathers. Stone effigies of the saint are found in Inguanez palace and St Dorothy's convent. Various paintings and statues of St Paul are found practically in every church on Malta and Gozo.

At *Saqqaja* Square, Rabat, Malta, there is a prominent niche with the image of St Paul; various persons confirmed that between 1798 and 1800, they witnessed the effigy of St Paul lacrimate. At the time the representation of St Paul had no niche (Notarial Acts of Vincenzo Caruana, 1866).

Numerous painted or sculptured images of St Paul adorn not only the Maltese churches, but also hundreds of niches in public streets and on numerous houses of the two islands. Malta's Paul is represented generally holding in his left hand a book often with the inscribed words "I became your father in Christ through the gospel" while lifting his right arm to shake the viper into the fire. In all the towns and villages on Malta there is at least a street which bears the name of St Paul. Pauline symbolism is ubiquitous in the

Maltese islands. It is found in all churches, in street niches and statues, in Maltese art, music and literature.

On the Maltese islands there are over 315 Roman Catholic churches. The patrimony and wealth of the islands are in the beautiful churches and the great treasures within. The Maltese people have always shown their faith brought to them through St Paul by building big and magnificent churches, centres for the living of their committed life. Churches dedicated to St Paul are found in various towns and villages on Malta and Gozo. A few churches dedicated to St Paul will be referred to in the following section.

2.3.1 Churches Dedicated to St Paul

The Metropolitan Cathedral at Mdina is dedicated to the conversion of St Paul. On entering the main door, above the inner side there is a Latin marble inscription which reads: "This Temple Is Dedicated To The Divine Paul First Father Of The Maltese People Welcomed Here As Was His Shipwreck In What Once Was The Home Of The Governor Of The Island The Bishop And Martyr St Publius". This proudly proclaims the firm belief of the Maltese that they owe their Christian faith to St Paul. This is one of Malta's most deeply rooted traditions and effects one of the main facts of national sentiment.

Hal Safi is a small rural village where the parish church is also dedicated to the Conversion of St Paul.

The Collegiate Church of St Paul's Shipwreck in Valletta is one of the most important churches in the capital city. This was one of the first churches to be built in the new city; and is now a national monument to the Apostle Paul. It was closely connected with the building of Valletta and the Order of St John (Terribile, 2007:4).

The Collegiate Church of St Paul's Shipwreck, Rabat, Malta is the site where the parish church of St Paul at Rabat was built. It was built at the boundary of the classic city of Melite; the old capital of Malta, in Roman times and is also called: The church of St Paul's outside the wall. (Bonello, 1510:61; Wettinger, 2000:502).

The Parish Church of the Shipwreck of St Paul in Munxar, Gozo is another church dedicated to this event in another small rural village

The Chapel of the Miracle of the Viper at St Paul's Bay: The origin of the first church built on the site is unknown. Lack of archival sources make it difficult to establish exactly when the tradition connecting St Paul's Bay with St Paul's shipwreck started. According to tradition, this chapel was erected if not on the spot, very close to where the shipwrecked reached land and where they were welcomed by the local inhabitants and a fire was lit to warm them. In fact in Maltese the chapel is referred to as *San Pawl tal-Huggiega* that is, 'St Paul of the blazing fire' (Buttigieg, 105/6:456; Vella, 1980:45).

According to Scripture, Malta was one of the first places where St Paul is supposed to have sown the seed of Christianity Throughout almost two millennia the cult of St Paul always played a very important role in the life of the Maltese This study shows the impact St Paul's shipwreck had on the Maltese people and how the *Acts of the Apostles* itself portrayed the Maltese. Research is pushing the boundaries of the historical establishment of Malta's Pauline cult beyond the realms of mere tradition.

As shown in this chapter, whether the shipwreck of St Paul took place in Malta or not there is still a very strong tradition in the Maltese islands of the cult of St Paul. Although there are no written documents of early Christianity in Malta, excavations of several hypogea brought to light funerary artefacts and decorations dating back to the fourth century A.D. There is documentary evidence of a strong Pauline tradition for at least eight hundred years in St Paul's Bay and Rabat as documented in notarial acts since the twelfth century. The cult of St Paul is still greatly embraced by the majority of the Maltese.

Notes

1. **[San Pawl] Barrani** St Paul's at Rabat: *Sancti Pauli di fora*, 8.viii.1510, Not. P .Bonello, NAV, MS. 588, f. 61; *Sancti Pauli Barrani, ecclesia*, 25.vi.1495, Not. J. Sabbara, NAV, R 494/1; *in loco sive ecclesia sancti pauli extra muros loco discoperto ubi divus paulus apostolus predicabat fidem cristianam melitensibus,* 19.viii.1548, Not. Br. De Caxario, NAV, R. 175/21, f. 793. MEANING Outer St Paul's [church]; St Paul's {church} outside [the walls of Mdina]. (Wettinger, 2000:502).

2. **[San Pawl tal-Għar]** The church of St Paul's at Rabat: *sancti pauli de cripta, ecclesia*. 1366. copy ca. 1500 in Cath. Mus.,Md., CEM, AO, vol. 9, f. 38. MEANING St Paul's of the Cave. (Wettinger, 2000:503).

3. **[San Pawl] il-Baħar** St Paul's Bay: *de Sanctu paulu, guardia*, 1417 Militia Roster, Cath. Mus., Md., ACM, Misc. MS. 437/4, f. 18; *Sancti pauli de la marina melite, contrata*, 15.xii.1486, Not. J. Sabbara, NAV, R 494/1.; *sancti pauli, contrata*, 9.iii.1487, Not. J. Sabbara, NAV, R 494/1.*sancti pauli tal bahar, contrata*, 16.viii. 1539, Not. G. Buttigieg, Nav, R 105/6, f. 456. MEANING St Paul's [church] by the sea. (Wettinger, 2000:502.

4. Since prehistoric times the Maltese built a great number of temples scattered all over the Maltese islands as well as pagan temples during the Roman period.

5 Michelangelo Cagiano de Azevedo was appointed director of the excavations and later was entrusted with the scientific supervision of *The Missione Archeologica Italiana* from the University of Rome between 1963 and 1972.

CHAPTER 3

THE THREAT FROM THE COLONISING BRITISH: MONSIGNOR GIUSEPPE[1] DE PIRO (1877-1933) – FOUNDER OF THE MISSIONARY SOCIETY OF ST PAUL

Now that Malta was governed by a Protestant country, there was the threat that Protestantism and Freemasonry could infiltrate Maltese society. Therefore, the local church authorities did their utmost to safeguard the Roman Catholic faith. Proselytisation of the Maltese was one of the important issues in the suspicious attitude of the Maltese Church towards the British rulers: what the Maltese Church feared most was an attempt on the part of the Church of England and other Protestant Churches to convert the Maltese to Protestantism. In this chapter we assess the situation that existed in Malta when the Maltese island became a British colony, we present the strategies used by Mgr De Piro; the contributions he made as the Founder of the Missionary Society of St Paul and as a strong defender of morality.

3. Historical Backdrop

The British took over the protection of the Maltese islands, at the end of the French occupation in 1800. Soon after Malta became a British colony. The Maltese archipelago was under the British rule from 1800 (Frendo, 2004:10-11) – [officially from 1814 and 1815] (Frendo, 2004:40) until Malta's Independence in 1964. After the Treaty of Paris in 1814 and its ratification in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna, Malta became the possession of Britain (Frendo, 2012:45). The Maltese had absolutely no say in this matter, Malta was ruled by Governors, and Lieutenant-Governors, mostly military men who ruled with an iron hand. This state of affairs was not expected by the Maltese and had already been highlighted by a highly educated ecclesiastic, Onorato Bres to the British Commission in 1812. Bres complained that Malta was being run as a military dictatorship when the Maltese expected and deserved the right to govern themselves. Bres' declaration fell on deaf ears. Malta was not a conquered country but under the protection of Great Britain (Cassar, 2002:145-150). The importance of Malta as a British colony was due to the strategic position in the centre of the Mediterranean. During this period, the Roman Catholic Church was the most powerful institution in Malta, as it proved to be for many centuries (Koster, 1988:79-90).

During the British colonial period the Roman Catholic Church in Malta began to face the problem of Protestant proselytism which presented a threat to the Roman Catholic faith. Before the British settled in Malta, Protestantism with Lutheran tenets had already reached the shores of Malta during the sixteenth century. The first to introduce such a doctrine was Fr A. Axiac, teacher of the school run by the administrative body, known as the *Università*, and a Frenchman, Fr F. Gesualdo who ran a grammar school at Mdina (Vella, 1964:11). Fr Gesualdo, initially a Roman Catholic, turned Protestant and later on founded the *Confraternity of Good Christians* to disseminate Luther's beliefs in Malta. He was tried for heresy and was found guilty by Bishop D. Cubelles; the acting Inquisitor, and was burnt at stake in 1546 (Bonello, 2000:14).

British Protestants in a very subtle way also threatened the faith of the Maltese people. Originally the British tried to introduce a kind of Anglican Protestantism among the Maltese, but did not succeed (Cassar, 2011:36). In 1814, The Biblical Society (of Malta) was formed by the (Anglican) Church Missionary Society; it was forbidden to describe itself 'of Malta' and was restricted in its activities (Bezzina, 1988:49). The New Testament was translated by G. Cannólo, a Maltese, under the direction and with the help of the Rev. W. Jowell, at that time one of the Representatives of the Church Missionary Society in the Mediterranean (Hartwell, 1836:106). Copies of St John's Gospel translated into Maltese were sent to Malta for distribution; the Gospel of St Matthew was published in 1814 and the succeeding books were sent at different times when completed (Hartwell, 1836:106). The British brought the *Church Missionary Society's* printing press to Malta in order to print the Bible and other religious books. This printing press was directed by G.P. Badger who left Malta in 1841 and returned to England. The following year Badger became an Anglican priest (Cachia, 2000:168).

Proselytism was carried out mostly when the British Protestants started settling in Malta and began to organise classes and even small schools mainly for Maltese people where they learnt English language and other subjects together with the teachings of the Protestant Church of England (Azzopardi, 2002:41, 61-62, 105). The British were opening gratuitous schools for poor children. These actions by British Protestants in Malta led to fierce resistance from the local Roman Catholic Church. Lady Strickland founded a public school for Maltese boys, St Edward's College, that was founded on the tradition of English public schools (Cassar, 2002:193; Frendo, 2012:228). The suspicions of the Maltese Church Authorities against British schools for proselytising

the Maltese to Protestantism were somewhat diminished when in 1820 a Roman Catholic priest, Fr Vella was nominated member of the Committee of the Anglo-Maltese Society. Their fears were relieved still further in 1833 when the Archdeacon of the Cathedral, Dr Fr A. Falzon, together with the Protestant clergyman Fr J. Clough, were both elected Vice-Chairmen of the Society (Azzopardi, 2002:45).

A Maltese priest, Fr M.A. Camilleri turned Anglican and visited Gibraltar around mid-1843. He was welcomed by the Bishop, G. Tomlinson who made M.A Camilleri translate the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Anglican Church into Maltese. This book was printed in Malta in1845 with the title *Ktieb it-Talb ta' Għalenija* which means *Book of Common Prayer* (Cachia, 2000:173-174). The book had 300 pages and 120 pages with all the Psalms and was considered a great work. The same Bishop of Gibraltar made Camilleri revise the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles translated by the Maltese Vassalli; and all the New Testament in Maltese. The New Testament was published in 1847 (Cachia, 2000:174-175).

A strong Protestant influence was once again experienced in 1846 when the London Committee of the Anglican Missionary Association bought a large house in St Julians, a suburb of Sliema, where it opened "The Malta Protestant College". This college was divided in two sections, a school for boys between the ages of five and fifteen, and a college for adults from fifteen years upwards. This college presented a great attraction to those who loved learning and education. Subjects taught ranged from religious and moral instruction (according to Anglican principles), English, Latin, ancient and modern Greek, French, Italian, German, Arabic, Turkish, Mathematics, History, Geography, Writing, Book-Keeping, Physical and Natural Sciences, and the Art of Teaching. All students were taught how to sing, and private lessons were also available in drawing and music for those who were interested (Azzopardi, 2002:61). Students were also admitted from far away countries such as: Arabia, Eastern countries, Egypt, Persia, Turkey and other destinations.

The Malta Protestant College closed down in 1865 and the building was bought by three Maltese gentlemen who intended to open a Catholic school to counteract the influence of Protestantism. These gentlemen wanted the new school to be run by a religious Order and they asked the Jesuits who were already running the Seminary in Gozo to take charge of this school as well. When the Jesuit Fathers applied for the necessary permission to open the school the Government refused to issue such permission. A few

years later, business people together with several Maltese families asked Pope Pius IX to send the Jesuit Fathers back to Malta and open the desired college. The Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Earl of Carnavon gave his consent, and in 1877 the Governor, Sir Arthur Borton, issued the licence for "The English College of St Ignatius in St Julians" (Azzopardi, 2002:106). In 1928, British Protestants attempted to replace Italian and French members of religious Orders by English ones in established schools, such as the Jesuit fathers and the De La Salle brothers (Frendo, 2012:228).

Soon after the British became rulers of the Maltese islands, the Navy, Army and Air Force personnel settled all over the islands. After some time the Service people brought over their families, their presence mostly being felt in the new city of Sliema. New contacts originated between these young British families and the local girls whom they employed as nannies and house maids. Furthermore, British people were mixing with residents in their social life. According to the 1891 Census the population of Sliema rose from 3685 in 1881 to 8237. This was due to the influx of British families (Zammit, 2000:17). According to the 1891 Census the population of Malta rose from 149,782 in 1881 to 165,037 (NSO: 2012). This shows that over one third of the increased population settled in Sliema. According to a communication by Mr G. Lanfranco (writer and historian) (2012), it is popular belief and tradition that in the city of Sliema, residents were nicknamed *tax-xelin* (worth a shilling) because Protestants used to go near the doors of the church and offer one shilling and a small loaf to those who were ready to sympathise with Protestants (Borg 2014).[1]

Protestants invited the Maltese to their religious congregations and Archbishop Mattei protested against such propaganda (Bonnici, 1975:189). When Rev. J. McNeill held Protestant Mission Services at Malta's Royal Theatre, the Archbishop of Malta, P. Pace, wrote to the British Governor saying: "that no severe blow can be struck at the religious and civil sentiments of this population; … the right of exercising religious worship in public .. has been reserved exclusively to the Catholic Church" (Despatch, 1906:4). A copy of a resolution passed at a public meeting protesting against the imposition of a law placing the Roman Catholic religion in Malta on a footing of equality with those of all other creeds was sent by the Governor to the Secretary of State (Despatch, 1906:5). The Archbishop sent a cordial letter to King Edward VII signed by all the Chapter of the Cathedral asking the King not to sanction the proposed alteration of the Royal Instructions (Despatch, 1906:6). The Archbishop's appeal was ignored and his reply

was: "I cannot but express my deep regret and that of my parishioners, at the liberty of religious worship which has been sanctioned in these islands against all our expectations by the Government of Great Britain …" (Despatch, 1906:7).

The local church authorities were alarmed and saw this as a great challenge and a real threat to the Roman Catholic faith. As time went by a few Maltese turned Protestants. Schools run by the British were now teaching English to Maltese children. Ecclesiastical Authorities realised how in the span of a few years these translated books and other Anglican literature would find their way in the hands of a new young generation. Mgr De Piro and Fr George felt that they had to do something to safeguard the Roman Catholic faith in Malta. Both believed that due to the lack of catechetical teaching the majority of the Maltese were not able to distinguish the major differences between Catholicism and Protestantism, such as: for Protestants the Bible alone is the source of God's special revelation to humanity which teaches all that is necessary for salvation from sin (Houdmann, 2014:1); while for Roman Catholics it is Bible *and* tradition. Hence, different versions of the Bible circulating around the island presented a threat to the local population.

Another source of concern was the disagreement between Catholicism and Protestantism about the authority of the Pope. Protestants believed that Christ alone is the Head of the Church and that the Church's authority comes only from the Word of God (Houdmann, 2014:2). Therefore, the word of God and grace are sufficient for salvation according to Protestants. Besides other differences the Protestants believe that justification is by faith alone; that the sacraments are only two not seven; and that the Virgin Mary should not be venerated (Stravinskas, 1998:823). Most Protestants claim that Mary bore children other than Jesus. The term "Mother of God" among the Protestants has been controversial. Our Lady called *Theotokos* "Bearer of God" has been adopted by the universal Church at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

Mgr De Piro and Fr George were concerned that the authority within the Roman Catholic Church as taught in Malta could also be greatly influenced. Maltese people were taught and indeed believed that the authority of the Church lies within the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, while the Protestants believed that the authority of the Church lies in Christ the Head of the Church who reigns over his Church through the Spirit and Word.

Church-State relations were also severely shaken by the marriage question. The Foreign Marriage Act declared valid mixed marriages contracted under certain conditions, deviated from former agreements and concerned the local church. Eventually the Government who was initially adamant refrained from legislating for or against mixed marriages (Bezzina, 1985:328-329).The validity of marriages as a legal contract was based on the Canon Law in accordance with the Council of Trent. The abolition of Ecclesiastical Courts soon led to an increase in clandestine marriages (Bezzina, 1988:52).

Besides Protestantism, Malta was facing another threat at the time: the spreading of Freemasonry. The earliest reference to the first warranted Freemasonry lodge, "Parfait Harmonie" in Malta goes back to 1730. This comes from an extant French document dating back to 14 February 1730. The Roman Catholic Inquisition ordered Freemasons to leave the Maltese islands, obliging several Knights of the Order and Maltese nobles to go and settle elsewhere in 1741 (Pisani, 2004:1). Now that Malta was a British colony, regular Freemasonry was imported to the Maltese islands primarily via the presence of foreign military personnel. Freemasonry prospered during the British rule (Pisani, 2004:2).

A petition for the creation of the Lodge of St John and St Paul was submitted to the United Grand Lodge of England early in 1815. The warrant for the lodge was signed by the Grand Master, the Duke of Sussex, on 27 November 1815. The St John and St Paul Lodge is the oldest in Malta. It was established by Provincial Grand Master Waller Rodwell Wright on 12 April 1815 when the inaugural meeting was held at the 'Hope Tavern' in South Street, Valletta; and is still the oldest Masonic Lodge in Malta to this day (Pisani, 2004:2).

In 1815, The Bishop of Malta, Monsignor Mattei condemned Masonic activity as "subversive of the Roman Catholic religion and striking at the very roots of Christianity" (Pisani, 2004:2). The Governor, Sir Thomas Maitland, ignored the Bishop's complaint and supported the right to practise Freemasonry in Malta. The Church in Malta had to work hard if she were to save the Roman Catholic faith and the cult of St Paul.

Other Lodges were set up in later years, including those of the Irish and Scottish Constitutions. There were seven lodges in Malta with a total of 584 members in 1900,

and these rose to 1484 in 1919 (Pisani, 2004:2). Meetings took place in various locations in Valletta and the Three Cities. A suitable building, 'Casa Viani' was acquired by Alexander Macfarlane as a Masonic Hall in 1907 (2009:1). It is still in use by Freemason Lodges at the present time. Although membership increased significantly during the British occupation the number of Maltese Freemasons did not increase much.

Why was the Roman Catholic Church in Malta so preoccupied with Freemasonry? One of the main reasons was that Freemasons often claimed that they make use of and honour the Bible, but Bible verses were often misused or distorted. This can easily be seen in the case of a short ceremonial passage of the ritual which combines the Mediterranean Pass and the Order of Malta: Lesson 1 (Acts 28:1-6), when St Paul was shipwrecked on the shores of Malta in A.D. 60, instead of the NIV version the Masonic rituals generally use the KJV version. The purpose of reading the Bible was to provide the background for the Sign of the degree; and not to teach the great truths of Christianity (Wayne, 2010:3).

Mgr De Piro and Fr George were well aware that Freemasonry was incompatible with the Roman Catholic faith and with the Protestant faith. Very few Maltese, if any at all knew that Freemasonry teaches a universal religion which asserted that a person can please God while remaining in any religion (Cath. Answers, 2014:2). Freemasonry is a parallel religion with the Catholic faith. The New Catholic Encyclopedia (2014) states: "Freemasonry displays all elements of religion, and as such it becomes a rival to the religion of the Gospel. It includes temples and altars, prayers, a moral code, worship, vestments, feast days, the promise of reward or punishment in the afterlife, a hierarchy, and initiation and burial rites." Although Freemasonry is patronised by persons belonging to a certain strata in society and rich people, who at the time were not many in Malta, Mgr De Piro and Fr George saw a threat in the similarities of several elements found in Freemasonry.

Another factor which might have preoccupied Mgr De Piro and Fr George is that Freemasonry is also a secret society and its initiates subscribe to secret blood oaths that are contrary to Christian morals (Cath. Answers, 2014:2). Historically, one of Freemasonry's primary objects has been the destruction of the Roman Catholic Church; this is especially true of Freemasonry in certain European countries (Cath. Answers, 2014:2). In fact, the Roman Catholic Church imposed the penalty of excommunication

on Catholics who become Freemasons. This penalty was explicit in the 1917 code of canon law (canon 2335), and is implicit in the 1983 code (Canon 1374).

This was the situation in Malta during the British presence. The local church realised that the majority of the Maltese people would find it very difficult to adhere to their Roman Catholic faith and the cult of St Paul in the present situation. The low standard of education among the majority of the people and the lack of theological education of a number of clergy came to the fore. The need to raise the level of general education and theological education were a positive result of Protestant influence. This was a milestone in the field of general education in Malta. The faith of the Maltese needed to be strengthened in order to understand and appreciate better the teachings and dogmas of Roman Catholic faith. This proved to be a great challenge for the local church as well as for the faithful. How could one tackle this problem? Who was capable to take the lead? This study will show how and why both Mgr De Piro and Fr G. Preca made great efforts to safeguard the Roman Catholic faith and to give a basic moral education to everyone. In this chapter we present Mgr De Piro and his mission.

3.1 High Ideals at an Early Age – Vocation to the Priesthood

Joseph De Piro was born on 2 November 1877 at Mdina, Malta; son of Alexander De Piro and Ursola Agius Caruana. God blessed them with nine children, Joseph was the seventh born. His parents were both of noble blood (DPA, 2001:1; Bonnici, 1988:3). Joseph was brought up in a truly Roman Catholic family and gradually grew up to be a noble child not only in his ancestry but also in character. His mother Ursola was a devoted Roman Catholic, and a very spiritual person. She was deeply religious and found strength in God and prayer. Throughout his life Joseph was very close to his mother; was well aware of her generosity, and in his difficulties he turned to her for help (DP, 1987:7).

At an early age Joseph showed a talent for painting and drawing. Joseph copied details from great masters, like Michelangelo, Raffaello and Perugino; many of his sketches are kept in the De Piro Archives. When he was only fourteen years old he drew the face of the suffering Jesus: the image of the Holy Face. The authentic expression of the image of Christ made a very impressive drawing for a fourteen year old (Bonnici, 1988:324). He put this drawing in a frame and hung it on a wall in the family palace at Mdina. Since the age of fourteen Joseph felt a great urge to evangelize everyone and adopted this image as his model.

A special devotion to the Holy Face of Jesus was established by Pope Leo XIII in 1885 and this devotion was soon introduced and spread in Malta. This could have influenced Joseph since early days, because he wanted to give himself totally to God. (DPA, 2001:1, n.5). At the age of fourteen when he felt a call to the priesthood (DPA, 2001:1, n1), and he shared this ideal with his father, the latter immediately disapproved (DP, 1992:1122, 1133). In order to test his vocation his father invited him to go to Florence to stay with some family friends. Joseph went but when he returned, he told his father that his mind about the priesthood was still the same (DP, 1992:1122, 1133).

Although Joseph came from a noble family, he learned the trade of a tinsmith (DP, 1992:1010). Though this kind of work was looked down upon by noble people at the time, his parents taught their children the value and nobility of manual work. Joseph also joined the Royal Malta Militia on 11 October 1892 and served up to 23 February 1896 (DPA, 2003:3j). His military training strengthened the formation Joseph received from his parents, such as discipline, order, determination, comradeship, a sense of loyalty, and a love for his country. Joseph took a three-year course in Arts and Sciences at the Royal University of Malta in 1894. After finishing this course he began to read Law. He opted for law, with the idea that he would be able to help the poorer people in need of legal aid, but after the first year he gave it up. At the age of eighteen, while still at University and the Royal Malta Militia, Joseph was accepted as a member of the *Congregazione degli Onorati* (Congregation of the honoured) (DPA, 2001:1). This was the first Marian Congregation in Malta (Bonnici, 1968:70).

Joseph's father fell suddenly ill in 1898, and passed away at the age of forty-nine. He felt deeply the loss of his father, but at the same time felt that God was paving the way to the priesthood. Joseph wanted to come to terms with himself, and to assure himself about his religious vocation. Though he wanted to give himself entirely to God; he was not sure whether he would be able to live the celibate priestly life. When his father died, Joseph began to weigh the *pro* and *con* of a priestly life to ensure he makes the right decision in choosing his way of life. (DPA, 2001:1-2), Joseph began again to weigh the *pro* and *con* when he was about to decide whether to go to St Joseph's Institute, Malta, or to the *Accademia Ecclesiastica* (Ecclesiastic Diplomatic Corps). But once again, Joseph opted to live a life of poverty and give himself to others; instead of living comfortably and gaining social status (DPA, 2001: 3, n. 8).

Joseph was a man of prayer and after a novena (special prayers on nine successive days) to Our Lady of Pompei, imploring Our Lady to show him clearly the road God wished him to take, he took his final decision to follow his vocation for the priesthood on the 8 May 1898 (DPA, 2001:2) and gave up his studies at the Faculty of Law (DPA, 2001:1-2, nos 4, 5, 12). When Joseph discussed the subject with his mother, she encouraged him to start his studies of philosophy and theology without delay (Bonnici, 1988:24). To prepare himself for the priesthood Joseph dedicated more time to reading spiritual books. While reading the lives of saints he was struck in a special way by the life of St Alphonse Maria De Liguori, which made a notable impression on him (Bonnici, 1988:23). From a very young age he believed that whoever wanted to lead a perfect life would not fear death, but would see it as the stepping stone to eternal happiness (DPA, 2001:1).

Joseph left Malta for Rome on 10 July 1898, and on the 14th he wrote his first letter to his mother (DPA, 1989:1-2, vol.1). He resided at Capranica College and attended the Gregorian University to follow a course of lectures in philosophy. Joseph's health was very frail and during his first year at Capranica it seems that he had some trouble. In fact when he returned for his first summer holidays, the Rector of Capranica sent him a letter to inquire about his health (DPA, 2001:4d). While studying his third year of theology, Joseph was invited by the Bishop of Malta, P. Pace to continue his studies at the *Accademia Ecclesiastica dei Nobili*, in order to take part in the diplomatic corps of the Church (DPA, 1988:3). Since his mind was set on doing pastoral work he declined the offer, because he was determined to settle at the Institute of St Joseph in order to be with other priests and to look after orphans and underprivileged children.

Joseph was ordained priest on 15 March 1902 in the Basilica of St John Lateran, Rome. Back in Malta he celebrated his first solemn Mass in the Cathedral, Mdina, on 30 March 1902, Easter Sunday. Soon after, he returned to Rome in order to carry on with his studies. Fr Joseph fell seriously ill on 11 July 1902 and the doctor discovered that he was suffering from tuberculosis. This was a great blow for him; he felt that all his plans were frustrated for good. With a heavy heart he said *fiat voluntas tua* (Thy will be done) and abandoned himself to the will of God (DPA, 1988: 4).

Fr Joseph went to receive medical treatment in Davos, Switzerland, where he spent eighteen months (DPA, 1988:3). Due to his illness, he thought that his dream to settle at the Institute of St Joseph in order to be with other priests and to look after orphans and

unprivileged children was doomed (DPA, 1988:3). At Davos he did not only regain his strength physically, but it was also a time of prayer, reflection and searching God's will. After being completely cured, Fr Joseph returned to Malta on 2 March 1904 and was assigned pastoral work as an assistant parish priest in the small rural village of Qrendi.

3.1.1 Pastoral Work

In Qrendi, Fr Joseph continued his convalescence, he went for rest; but things turned out to be different; he was attentive on his health, but at the same time he was also involved in pastoral work. After some time he became more than a full time priest and involved himself in various ministries of the local church. Fr Joseph used to spend long hours hearing confessions (DP, 1987:48). He soon realised that not only the laity needed more spiritual attention, but also the local priests needed to continue strengthening the formation received at the seminary; therefore, he planned and organised ongoing formation of the priests, including those of the nearby parishes (DP, 1992:997). During his pastoral work in this particular Parish he organized social activities especially for the feast of the Patron Saint of the village. Fr Joseph was a priest dedicated to the service of the Diocese

The pastoral contribution of Fr Joseph was strengthened by his exemplary life. He was a very charitable person and a great benefactor to many poor children and grown ups both in Malta and in Gozo. Charity was his hallmark and that of the De Piro family. People in need often asked each other; "Have you been to the De Piro's?" (DP, 1987:49). Fr Joseph worked in the Parish of Qrendi until 1907. It was in this quiet countryside that God kindled Joseph with the first inkling of missionary fervour. The young priest turned to St Paul to intercede for him to lay a missionary foundation. It was after years of hard work, great sacrifices and prayer that Fr Joseph became the Founder of the Missionary Society of St Paul.

Fr Joseph was a citizen who loved his country deeply. When the Maltese archipelago passed under the British administration, Malta began to experience enormous economic difficulties. In the early nineteenth century Malta was going through a phase of economic hardships. The majority of Maltese families had many children, wages were very low, food was scarce, unemployment was rather high, and social services were non-existent (Frendo, 2004:65-68). The only charitable institutions which helped to alleviate the poverty of the Maltese people were all run by the Roman Catholic Church (Frendo, 2004:66). With the exception of a few, most Maltese people were illiterate,

education was optional and many could not afford to pay school fees. The life of the village people was often dominated by middle-class people, the professional and especially the clergy.

From the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of Maltese professional persons and a few clergy began to take the lead in the political life of the Maltese people. They organised political movements mostly of a nationalist inspiration in order to oppose the British Government and to put pressure on the current Government to start giving certain constitutional and political rights to the Maltese people, which would eventually lead to self-government (Frendo, 1988:185-211). These movements and parties represented the legitimate political rights and aspirations of the Maltese people (Frendo, 1988:185-214). Following a chain of events, and after the 1919 *Sette Giugno Riots* (7 June Riots), the British colonial authorities granted self-government to the Maltese people in 1921 (Koster, 1988:80; Cassar, 2002:203-204). However, during the following four decades, whenever the British felt that their interests as colonial rulers of these islands were seriously threatened, the British colonial authorities withdrew self-government from the Maltese and imposed direct colonial rule (Cassar, 2002:210, 213, 230).

After the ravages of the First and Second World Wars, poverty in Malta forced a great number of Maltese to migrate to various countries in the hope of finding a better future. Besides going to North African territories, quite a number ventured to far away countries, such as: America [United States], Canada and Australia.. Fr De Piro was always concerned how these emigrants were to keep practising their faith. He realized that the best solution would be to send Maltese priests to look after their spiritual needs. To solve this problem, Fr De Piro thought that the best way to reach these expatriates would be to prepare youths who would be dedicated to evangelize in other countries.

3.2 The Birth of a Missionary Society

Fr De Piro's vision was to share with others the gift of faith which the Apostle gave to the Maltese. According to a communication with Fr T. Sciberras (2011) the motto of Fr Joseph was: "Let us give to others what St Paul gave to us." He not only wanted to share this with the members of his Society, but also wanted to evangelize various other countries. Fr Joseph looked at the person as a whole and always kept in mind that human needs are not only spiritual, but also temporal. His main characteristic was his holistic approach towards the exercise of charity.

As a priest Fr Joseph was completely dedicated to the local Church and he specifically promoted the missionary aspect of the Church to the faithful in Malta, to Maltese emigrants and to the *ad gentes* (to other people). Fr Joseph dedicated most of his time and energy to the underprivileged and to evangelization, especially through the foundation of his Missionary Society.

Fr De Piro's project was to work among the Maltese abroad as well as those in the Navy, and on merchant ships. His wish was that the great missionary St Paul, was not only to be a protector of his Society, but also his name to be included in the name of his society: *The Missionary Society of St Paul*. Fr De Piro wanted the members of his society to follow Christ, wherever he called them. When he was planning the beginning of his Society, on the 1 August 1909 he drafted the first promises to be made by prospective members. On 3 November 1909, Fr De Piro wrote to Pope Pius X to receive permission to start a Religious Society with the aim of training missionaries that would work in other countries, especially with Maltese emigrants (DPA, 1989:12).

In the original Constitution (DPA, 2003, (1):12) Fr De Piro exhorted the members of his Society to imitate St Paul's generosity. He insisted with the members to preach the devotion to St Paul (DPA, 2003, (1):18). The rules of the Society of St Paul were:

1. The Society of St Paul, the Apostle, is a congregation of missionary priests and lay catechists united in a community life.
2. The Society binds itself to encourage its members to perfect themselves in the love of God and neighbour, by teaching Christian virtues, and, in particular, living a life of perfection, in obedience, chastity and poverty.
3. It will undertake to look after people lacking evangelical workers in their midst, with the Maltese who are away from their native Island; it will also undertake to look after charitable institutions.
4. All members, after the necessary time of testing, will take the vows of obedience, missions, poverty and chastity.
5. The habit will be a black cassock with a black sash. After the first profession, the catechists will receive the Rosary beads of the Blessed Virgin, which will hang on a thin tape round their neck and be tucked in their sash. The Priests' cross will bear the Christ crucified.
6. The candidates should have the right aptitude to receive their formation according to the aims of the Society.

7. Members will sever relations with the Society should they leave or be dismissed.
8. The Superior General will be chosen for life. He will be assisted by four Counsellors. According to the rules, he has the right and duty to ordain all things in a way that will help the Society to attain its aims (DPA, 2003, (1):1-2).

Fr De Piro rented a very small and modest house in Mdina, very close to his mother's palace, which was to be the home for the first members of the Society. Pope Pius X imparted his blessings to the opening of the home through a letter by La Fontaine, Bishop of Cassano in January 1910 (DPA, 1989:15). On 21 February 1910, Fr De Piro sent a letter of thanks to Mgr La Fontaine, an Apostolic delegate who paid visits to Malta, in order to inform him about the preparations of the Society. He also added that before starting their work they felt that they should be worthy of the Pope's blessing, to whom they already felt responsible (DPA, 1989:16).

On 6 June 1910, Fr De Piro and his companions, Fr G. Grima and Fr J. Mamo, presented a petition to the local Archbishop, Peter Pace, to obtain permission to open a house in Mdina. The petition was similar to the one sent to the Pope but added two requests: (i) the house as a residence for the members, (ii) the name would be "The little house of St Paul," because St Paul stands for the ideal of missionary work. The Archbishop granted his approval that very same day and asked for the Statute of the Society (DPA, 1989:18).

Archbishop Peter Pace blessed the premises and declared the house "open" on 12 June 1910. At the end of his speech Fr De Piro invoked the help of God, the intercession of Our Lady and the protection of their Father, St Paul (DPA, 1989:22). On 27 June 1910, Fr De Piro sent a letter to his benefactor, La Fontaine to congratulate him on his appointment as secretary of the Sacred Rites (DPA, 1989:14), and also gave him the latest news about the Blessing of the "Little house of St Paul".

The first two young members began to live in this modest house on 30 June 1910. Fr De Piro left the comfort of his mother's palace and preferred to live in this small house, devoid of any comforts. He was born rich and noble but was not enticed by wealth and the comforts it could provide. Fr Joseph wanted to instil in his members the virtue of poverty. When he went to live there as a poor man, the two young members saw in him a model for their future life as missionaries. The society of St Paul was born in silence and poverty.

Fr Joseph was not after worldly honours. On 7 November 1910 he received the news that he would be promoted to a Monsignor (DPA, 2001:3), but on 11 November he responded in a letter to the chaplain of the Archbishop, that it was impossible for him to accept (DPA, 2001:9). He made every effort to decline and courteously thanked the Dean of the Cathedral. On 17 January 1911, Fr Joseph wrote to the Archbishop that he did not deserve this honour. He explained to him that he did not wish his spiritual sons to aspire for worldly honours. Two days later the Archbishop replied and told him to accept this appointment as an act of obedience (DPA, 2001:12).

Self-denial was the virtue Mgr De Piro wished to instil among the members of the Society (DPA, 2003, (2):36). He did every thing possible to kindle missionary ardour within the hearts of his members. The aim of the Society was to strive to perfect its members in the love of God and neighbour through the observance of the Christian virtues, particularly those of perfect obedience, chastity and poverty; to save souls by helping those people who lack the good news; and by taking care of those houses where orphans, old people and other poor people were sheltered.

As a missionary society it needed generous hearts to help in various ways. The Jesuit Fathers offered their help by educating their young members in their College at Birkirkara free of charge. While the Augustine Fathers of St Mark in Rabat accepted students from the little Society of St Paul for philosophy and theology. Mgr De Piro believed that academic studies were not enough for the young members, practical crafts were also necessary for all members. Therefore masters were called to teach them a trade.

On 30 June 1914, a brief outline of the Rules of the Institute for foreign missionaries was presented in order to be recognised and approved by the Church. Pontifical approval took some time because there was a misunderstanding. It was not clear for ecclesiastical authorities in Rome, whether the Society of St Paul was exclusively to look after the spiritual welfare of Maltese emigrants or to train missionaries who would sow the seeds of faith among unbelievers all over the world, or in some particular land. The approval from Rome came on 11 March 1921, and the diocesan approval on 14 November 1921. Archbishop Maurus Caruana issued the decree recognising officially, according to Canon Law, the Society of St Paul. The decree is printed in the Rules of the Society of St Paul (DPA, 2003, (1):iv).

Mgr De Piro was nominated secretary to Archbishop M. Caruana in March 1915. The precision of his work and swiftness in responding to correspondence was admired. During his three years as secretary, he exemplified dedication to the Archbishop. This period was also very important for Mgr De Piro's contact with the Maltese who had immigrated to other countries and with the priests who were working with them (DPA, 1989:26, 39, 44-45, 61-66). It was well before 1915 that Mgr De Piro first thought about the Maltese emigrants (DPA, 1988: 6). But now as secretary to the Archbishop he became more conscious of the urgent situation of his expatriates.

The first priest from the Society of St Paul, Fr Giovanni Vella, was ordained on 20 September 1919. It was a day of great rejoicing for the Founder and his community (DPA, 1989:n.2). Two days later, the newly ordained priest celebrated Mass in the church of St Agatha, in Rabat; and on that day the Founder took the name of 'Rector of the Maltese Society for Foreign Missions' (DPA, 1989: n2.). He was eager to see missionary enthusiasm grow among his spiritual sons.

The first humble home of the Society in Mdina, which had witnessed many trials and many joys, had to be given up in 1921 as the owner of the house, Mgr A. Mifsud passed away and the property was bequeathed to the Sisters of St Dorothy. The members of the Society had to move to a rather small apartment in one of the Mdina palaces – 'Xara Palace'. This place was considered as the second cradle of the Society.

The Society was officially recognized on 14 November 1921 by the decree *Auctoritate Nostra Ordinaria* (Authority by our Ordinary) issued by Archbishop M. Caruana, that is, the Society of St Paul was now made known and declared founded, canonically approved and recognized by Canon Law (DPA, 2003 [1] iv). The Archbishop issued a second decree (DPA, 2003 [1] iv), in which the Rules and Constitution of the new Society were approved, and the Society began to function according to its own Rules on 18 March 1924 (DPA, 2003 [1] v). They stated that the aim of the Society was to help people who were in need of evangelical workers (DPA, 2003:37).

3.3 An Outstanding Personality

Mgr De Piro was an effective member of the general Committee of the XXIV International Eucharistic Congress. This Congress was held in Malta in 1913 and he participated in the celebrations which were held during the Congress (DPA, 2001:1-2). He was involved in the arrangements for the Legate of the Pope, Cardinal Dominic Ferrata to celebrate a Pontifical Mass at the Cathedral, Mdina. Mgr De Piro invited the Cardinal Legate to the palace of the De Piro family in Mdina. The Archbishop chose him as co-rector of Manresa retreat House, Floriana, Malta in May 1913 (DPA, 2001:12). The only aim of the House was the evangelization of secular and regular clergy who attended the retreat. Mgr De Piro was nominated a member of the Commission for the formation of young priests on 29 June 1915, and Archbishop M. Caruana nominated him deputy in the Commission for temporal administration at the Seminary on 5 July 1916 (DPA, 2003: 1).

On 30 September 1918, Mgr De Piro was nominated Rector of the Major Seminary, at Mdina (DPA, 2003:4). During his two years as Rector, he practised a great deal of charity towards the seminarians who could not pay their fees. Mgr De Piro improved the material aspect of the life at the seminary. The seminarians under his care noted his fatherly kindness and his interest in those under his care. As Rector he also asked for a rise in the servants' salary (DPA, 2003:14).

On 23 May 1920, Mgr De Piro became a member of the *Camera Pontifica Maltese* (Maltese Pontifical Chamber) (DPA, 2001:29). By 24 November 1920, he was promoted Dean of the Metropolitan Chapter, Malta (DPA, 2001:25). For a few weeks, he was acting parish priest of the Gudja parish, Malta. When the First World War was over the Maltese Government organized some festivities to celebrate (DPA, 2001:28) and the Archbishop chose Mgr De Piro to take care of the organization of the celebrations (DPA, 2001:28). Archbishop M. Caruana chose De Piro as his representative (DPA, 2001:28).

3.3.1 Member of the National Assembly (1919-1921)

Mgr De Piro, being the Dean of the Cathedral Chapter was chosen again as a member of the Senate. He took part in events of national importance, such as the drafting of the first Constitution of Malta and Acts of Parliament (GM, 1923: 109-110). As a delegate for the Malta Clergy, he presented an important 'Memorandum' regarding the presence

and duties of the clerics in government affairs. He emphasized that the religion of the Maltese islands should be the Faith of the Roman Catholic Church. Mgr De Piro felt the responsibility to ensure that legislation in Malta should be truly that of a Christian country. Mgr De Piro always showed his appreciation of the religious traditions and the cultural heritage of the people of Malta.

During the upheavals which arose during the second session of the National Assembly held on 7 June 1919, he felt it was his duty to intervene even in this difficult moment. Tension due to the political and a grave economic situation reached a peak on 7 June 1919, better known as *Sette Giugno*, when rioting broke out in Valletta, leading to a bloody confrontation with British armed forces (Cassar, 2002:203). In these *Riots* Mgr De Piro fought for the legitimate rights of those who took part in them. The shooting of four men by British soldiers, made all Maltese join forces and forget their different opinions.

The following day, 8 June, a Committee was set up to collect money for the families of the victims who died or were wounded the day before, and Mgr De Piro was chosen as cashier of this Committee (Bonnici, 1988:297). As a Maltese patriot, with deep love for his country, Mgr De Piro foresaw the need of the Maltese to be free, to govern themselves. Through his kind and calming words he united the Maltese during the uprisings of 1919. The last meeting of the Central Commission of the National Assembly was held on 10 August 1920. Through his intervention with the British Government, and as a member of the National Assembly, he was one of the most important persons who led the Maltese to self-Government in 1921. This was considered as a milestone in Malta's constitutional history.
Eight years after the Riots in the periodical "Malta" one reads:

> Fr Joseph De Piro, a priest whom nobody can accuse of any fault, is an example of integrity, devoted dedication and holiness. He is also a patriot, who was involved in heartbreaking events – the disorders and deaths on 7 June 1919. On this occasion he was in the midst of firing and close to the injured. De Piro is, for the Church and his native country, an exemplary priest and an ideal patriot. Everyone should love and admire him (1927:2)

Mgr De Piro's efforts to be present at all the meetings and his active participation in them are a proof of his dedication to his country. But his love for whatever was Maltese was expressed more directly when the Central Commission discussed the language problem. He was among the members who were in favour of the use of the Maltese

Language in the future Parliament (GM, 1923:191-192). His great interest was to seek both the spiritual and temporal interests of the Maltese.

How did Mgr De Piro promote a missionary spirit? How could he awake a national conscience? Mgr De Piro began to publish an Almanac under the title "Saint Paul: Almanac of the Institute of Missions" in 1922. He presented parts of missionary papal encyclicals, its summaries or papal speeches (Almanac, 1926:143-144; 1927: 183-184). He also brought to the readers information and news about activities in favour of the missionary dimension of the Church (Almanac, 1930: 256-258).

The main reason to publish the Almanac was to draw attention, and to awake love towards the missionary ideal, and to make known that a Religious Society came into being for missionaries to be trained to care for the souls in far away countries (Almanac, 1922:3). This is evident from the title and the contents of the Almanac. In his articles Mgr De Piro exhorted his spiritual sons and revealed his zeal for spreading the Kingdom of Christ, and his hope that one day the society would be able to bear witness to the good news across the world.

In *Words of Introduction* in the Almanac issue of 1923, Mgr de Piro reminded his readers how many Maltese who migrated to various countries kept alive their faith. In a speech by the Maltese representative in Egypt, in October 1922, Hugh Abela Hyzler said: "… far from our country, we also retain immaculate our holy Religion, the true, the great Religion of God given to us by Paul …" (Almanac, 1922:33).

Mgr De Piro used this yearly Almanac to publish information about the Missionary Society; in order to reach people from many different walks of life, making them know the Society and its activities; and to give information about the Christian life of Maltese communities abroad. He showed his great appreciation for what was being done in several countries for the benefit of the Maltese. Examples include the USA (Almanac, 1924:79; 1929:230; 1931:321); Carthage (Almanac, 1931:304-312); Marseille (1929:229; 1930:293; 1931:304-312); Tripoli (Almanac, 1929:246); Tunis (Almanac, 1923:33, 51-52; 1929:229-230); Egypt (Almanac, 1923:33); and Australia (DPA, 1989:44-45).

Mgr De Piro went twice to evangelize the Maltese in Tunis. The Maltese in Tunis organized a feast in honour of St Paul in 1922. Their main aim was to honour the

Apostle who brought faith to Malta on his way to his martyrdom in Rome (Acts 27:1; 28:11). Mgr De Piro went again to Tunis in 1930, this time he attended the Eucharistic Congress held in Carthage from the 7 to 11 May (Almanac, 1931:304). He was the representative of Archbishop M. Caruana. During this Congress he presented the evangelization to the Maltese with great enthusiasm. One of the functions was Children's Day, where about six thousand boys and girls, were all dressed in white with a red cross on their breast (national colours) and received Holy Communion from Cardinal Hlond's hands" (Almanac, 1931:308).

Mgr De Piro was a member of the *Unione Leoniana*. This was an association for spreading the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church in Malta, among all classes of the population, and thus paving the way for a sound Christian democracy. He was also President of the Special Consultative Committee for the restoration of St Paul's Parish church, Rabat, Malta, on 4 January 1925. Mgr De Piro was also chosen as the Archbishop's representative on the committee of the Zammit Clapp Hospital (DPA, 2001:8), and his representative on the organizing committee for the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York in 1927.

3.3.2 Mediator between the Church and Lord Gerard Strickland

Mgr De Piro was so involved in the social life of his country that one could say that he was also active in its political life. Lord Strickland was the Prime Minister of Malta between 1927 and 1932. Mgr De Piro, in addition to the manifold roles, was one of the Archbishop's representatives in the Senate. He undertook this role with as a sense of duty; otherwise he would have kept away from the political strife. Yet there was a notable occasion when he played a remarkable part in the political field. In the twentieth century, the Christian-based values of the cultural heritage of Malta's ancient identity – that is, the moral and physical virtues of the Maltese, and above all, the Maltese language – were the most distinctive feature of the community.

Strickland wanted to do away with the Italian language which was the language of the elite and the official language in Malta. He wanted to anglicise the Maltese citizens as soon as possible. According to Cassar (2002:172) during the nineteenth century, a Maltese person was considered educated if he/she knew Italian. For countless generations Italian was the language of the Court of Law and of the Church. During this period the Church was very strong and was involved in the parochial and national life of the Maltese. It had full control in higher education and charity. When the Roman

Catholic Church accepted British protection it did not forfeit any privilege. The Declaration of Rights of 1802 strongly declared that the British Government had to uphold and protect the rights and religion of the Maltese.

One of the issues which caused most of the friction between Lord Strickland and the Roman Catholic Church was the participation of the clergy in Parliament. Strickland expected the Archbishop and Bishop of Gozo to take a stand against the participation of ecclesiastics in local politics and to direct the ecclesiastics in the Senate to support the government (Cassar, 2002:206). But the Archbishop held the right to have representatives in Parliament. In fact, in the Third Legislature formed on 17 October 1932, the Archbishop nominated two Monsignors as members of the Senate. Mgr De Piro was one of them (Schiavone, 1992:134). In Parliament Mgr De Piro was a strong defender of morality. He emphatically asserted that 'morals' should not be a political question; and that all parties must deem it their duty to protect the morals of the Maltese islands.

Lord Strickland, in order to side-step the local church authorities, attempted to deal directly with Rome. He travelled to Rome with his deputy, Sir A. Bartolo, hoping to see the Pope but he only succeeded to get an informal meeting with the Secretary of State (Frendo, 2012:232-236). Rome agreed to send an apostolic visitor to study the situation in Malta. In fact, the Vatican sent a higher-ranking Apostolic Delegate, Mgr P. Robinson to conduct an independent enquiry and to investigate ecclesiastical interference in colonial politics. The Apostolic Delegate studied the situation in Malta between 3 April and 2 June 1929.

According to an extremely liberal and broadminded high dignitary of the Roman Catholic Church in Malta, Strickland was considered "to be definitely responsible for the alleged change for the worse in the mental and moral attitude of a great majority of the people of the lower classes" (Frendo, 2012:229). Politico-religious troubles in Malta started before 1928. As political tensions escalated and the Church was holding firm, Strickland was doing his utmost to induce the Vatican to make a concordat between Roman Catholic Church and State in Malta, to limit the role of the Roman Catholic Church to religious matters. The British hoped that Mgr Robinson would blame the clergy for all the political trouble that there was in Malta.

After a thorough investigation Mgr Robinson reported that Strickland created a state of despotism both in spiritual and temporal matters (Frendo, 2012:252). The published report stated that at that time Malta: "is subjected to a regime of terror and inquisitorial despotism, in which the opposition is disarmed and its papers gagged, the Church menaced, justice suspended, the Constitution in danger, the country in turmoil, Church and religion openly vilified" (Frendo, 2012:252-253). However hard Strickland tried to have an audience with the Pope but he did not succeed. Pope Pius XI publicly announced that he had refused to grant him audience and would not see him (Frendo, 2012:262). After Mgr Robinson's report Strickland was declared as *persona non grata* (an unacceptable person) to the Vatican. Although Strickland was posing as a practising Roman Catholic he was also a practising Freemason (Frendo, 2012:226).

As the General Elections were approaching, the Archbishop of Malta and Bishop of Gozo by means of a pastoral letter (1 May 1930) declaring it sinful to support Strickland's party, his allies, his newspapers and anything having to do with him (Frendo, 2012: 263). As a result of the Episcopal interdiction elections were suspended halfway through the election campaign. The clash between Strickland and the Roman Catholic Church was due to the fact that he wanted to introduce the supremacy of the State in ecclesiastical affairs which brought about the politico-religious dispute in Malta. The Bishops took action when politics invaded the altar.

According to sources it was through the initiative of Mgr De Piro, his tact and particularly his sincerity and earnestness that the unfortunate politico-religious dispute, which caused so much harm to the island, was put to an end. After many interventions Mgr De Piro succeeded in establishing peace between Strickland and the church (DP, 1992:969, 994, 1006, 1036-1037, 1056, 1068-1069, 1077, 1079, 1084, 1092, 1100, 1104, 1117, 1122).

Mgr De Piro had several other duties. As already stated he was Canon and Dean of the Cathedral Chapter and Director of six ecclesiastical charitable Institutes. Besides being the Founder of the Missionary Society of St Paul which had already four communities in Malta and a mission in Abyssinia in 1932, he undertook other responsibilities and ministries.

3.4 Father of Orphans and Underprivileged Children

3.4.1 Director of Fra Diegu Institute, Hamrun, Malta

Mgr De Piro began his apostolic work in the Homes of needy children when he was still a priest. Fra Diegu Institute was the first one entrusted to him on 2 August 1907. This was the first diocesan Institute (DPA, 2001:1). He involved himself wholeheartedly in the running of this Institute, not only in the beginning, but also in later years when he was burdened with many responsibilities (DP, 1992:1003). This Institute was run by the Franciscan Sisters.

According to the Franciscan Sisters, Mgr De Piro was a very humble director (Bonnici, 1988:191-193). Although he came from a noble family, he was able to mix with the young orphan girls. He was firm in his administration and his first concern was that the girls should get a proper education. The girls looked at him as a loving father (DP, 1992:1005, 1059); he insisted that the girls were to be closely watched at all times and that they were not to be left idle (DP, 1992:1055-1056).

Mgr De Piro loved the children very much and used to go round collecting money for Fra Diegu Institute (DP, 1992:1003). During the hard days of the First World War, when the general social condition severely affected the contributions of the people, he personally paid the bill for the bread consumed at Fra Diegu's Institute (DP, 1987:7).

Mgr De Piro sought to give a holistic formation, besides learning academic subjects, the girls were taught crafts and practical subjects. He took great care of the spiritual aspect of the girls' life. Mgr De Piro was very particular about the way they were prepared to receive their First Holy Communion and also helped in their preparation (Bonnici, 1988:185). He insisted that there should be a number of priests who visited regularly to cater for the spiritual needs of the young orphans (DP, 1987:6).

Mgr De Piro attempted to radiate peace and joy by giving importance to recreation in the girls' upbringing. Through organized plays, outings and games, he wanted to make the orphans' lives a very happy one. He believed in the importance of recreation to the extent that he remembered it even while writing his will: Art. N. 8 (DPA, 2001:9). The director bequeathed to Fra Diegu Institute the sum of one hundred pounds so that the annual interests, at more than four per cent, are used for the Christmas tree for the joy of the girls of the institute.

He not only extended charity to the residents of the Institute but also the members of their families, whom he used to visit and help financially those who needed it (DP, 1987:9). Mgr de Piro not only cared for the girls during their stay at the Institute, but also after they left the Institute. The documents in De Piro Archives provide evidence of this. We find several petitions in this archive written by the director to the Archbishop of Malta asking him to help the girls either to enter into religious life or to get married (DPA, 2001:78-79, 80-81).

The director was very meticulous in his accounts. All financial interests regularly received were noted and dated in the ledgers, and everything was done in an orderly manner. His files and correspondence were kept in an impeccable way. When the accountant, Mr A.M. Galea, asked Mgr De Piro what he expected as remuneration for his work of administration, Mgr De Piro replied that he had no intention of asking any payment (Bonnici, 1988:191).

3.4.2 Director of Jesus of Nazareth Institute

In 1895, G. Curmi a resident at Zejtun, a town in the south of Malta, was moved by the miserable situation of many poor and orphaned children and began to help these children by teaching them catechism (DP, 1992:199-200). She invited a group of young women to join her, and they formed a religious congregation in order to take care of those poor children in 1913 (DP, 992:200, 913). While moving from one house to another, the number of children was steadily increasing. Consequently G. Curmi had to think about building a larger home that could accommodate one hundred and fifty children.

Mgr De Piro was assigned the responsibility of the second ecclesiastical charitable Institute, Jesus of Nazareth, at Zejtun in 1922. He was not only the director of this Institute, but also the co-founder of the Missionary Sisters of Jesus of Nazareth. G. Curmi obtained the Archbishop's permission to get a loan and build a larger institute in 1925. Mgr De Piro assumed the responsibility of the project and the foundation stone was laid the same year (AAM, Suppliche, 1925, n.47). He encouraged G. Curmi, and later suggested that the institute should have a missionary character. Mgr De Piro also helped her in dealing with civil and ecclesiastical authorities, suggested that the two Societies should work together.

After five years full of anxieties and consolations, the Archbishop was invited to bless the basic section of the new institute in 1930. In his address, Mgr De Piro thanked his benefactors and said that certain benefactors wanted to remain anonymous. To the amazement of all present he exclaimed that, in the beginning their accounts showed a balance of 70 pounds, while their project was worth more than 4000 dollars. This shows the great faith Mgr De Piro had in Divine Providence.

Unlike Fra Diegu's Institute, here the director did not talk frequently to the girls, because the girls were very shy to talk, although he always spoke gently and kindly to the girls, and enjoyed their company (DP, 1992:914-915, 925) and encouraged them to talk freely (DP, 1992:920). Mgr De Piro was also keen on preparing the girls to face life, with its many problems. His method of education was very simple and effective. He wanted children under his care to receive sound formation which would serve them when they were to leave the orphanage and have to fend for themselves. Like a good father, he was concerned about their future, he thus made it a point to find suitable work and see them settled in life.

Mgr De Piro was convinced that in this Institute a Missionary Congregation was about to flourish. In fact, a group of six young women together with the Foundress, G. Curmi wrote to the Archbishop to receive permission that their community could be called 'Missionaries of Jesus of Nazareth'. He also asked that the Statute would resemble the rules of the Society of St Paul as far as possible. Mgr De Piro intensified his efforts to obtain recognition from the church, so that the Sisters could be united in their own Religious Congregation. These Sisters had a special missionary charisma, and Mgr De Piro was visualising that they would be very suitable and a great help to the Society of St Paul.

The first objective of the Congregation was to take care of abandoned children, boys and girls, excluding new-born babies, both in Malta and abroad. Their second aim was to help young girls when they leave charitable institutes. Mgr De Piro was confident that the approval by the church would be obtained. In fact, he left in his Will a small perpetual legacy for vocations to the future Congregation (ANV, R.723/90:f.3522). Mgr De Piro died a month and a half before the Archbishop authorized the publication of the decree.

3.4.3 Director of St Joseph's Institute, Santa Venera, Malta

In Malta there were only ecclesiastical charitable institutes for girls. The first home for orphaned boys was founded in 1888 by Mgr Francesco Bonnici. Mgr De Piro felt the desire to join Mgr Bonnici since his first year as a Seminarian in Rome (DPA, 1988:1). In fact, he kept regular contact with Fr E. Vassallo, the director, and Fr G. Bugeja, his assistant at St Joseph's orphanage in Santa Venera, Malta. Mgr De Piro used to send donations for the boys living in that institute (DPA, 1989, vol.3: 5-8, 10, 11, 13). This Home depended almost entirely on voluntary charity for its running.

After two years of being Rector at the Major Seminary in Mdina, Mgr De Piro requested to be relieved of the post. He wished to dedicate himself more fully to the religious missionary Society which he founded a few years earlier (DPA, 2003:14). Archbishop M. Caruana accepted his request. Mgr De Piro was nominated director of St Joseph's Institute and he gladly accepted this post in 1922. Mgr De Piro had in mind that St Joseph's Home could be a fertile ground for prospective vocations to join the missionary Society of St Paul. As already mentioned, his desire to involve himself in the running of the Home was so strong that he refused the opportunity to further his studies at the *Accademia Ecclesiastica* in Rome. In fact, one of the aims of the new Society was to look after St Joseph's Institute (DPA, 1988:6).

During the period between 1905 and 1922 members of the Society of St Paul used to replace the Christian Brothers who were in charge of the boys at St Joseph's Home for a week, when they went for their yearly retreat. It was thus not surprising that when Fr G. Bugeja, the director of this Home, suddenly passed away on the 23 November 1922, Archbishop M. Caruana nominated on the same day Mgr De Piro to take over the administration of the Home. Thus, he became the director of a third ecclesiastical charitable institution. This Home presented another challenge, the boys greatly lacked discipline. It was only through his love, humility, patience and kindness that he could win them over. During the 1987 testimonies, one of the boys (N. Attard) described Mgr De Piro as a kind hearted man and a disciplinarian (DP, 1987:120).

The boys in this institute came from the lowest strata of society. Most of them came from families with social and moral problems, from broken families and with other problems. The children besides being poor were in many cases dirty. There were about one hundred and forty boys at the home when Mgr De Piro took over as director.

Directing the institution was not an easy job. He could not afford to serve only as an administrator; but also the heart of the place. Mgr De Piro lived in the institute and looked after all its needs (DP, 1992:781). Many a time, before going to bed, he went to visit all the boarders. The boys used to call him "Padre". Several religious congregations and institutes addressed him as "Father" because he helped them both spiritually and financially (DP, 1988-1992:449).

According to sources, Mgr De Piro had a gentle way of correcting the boys; he never used harsh words and always treated them with kindness as it was his typical attitude in all institutes. He spent quite some time talking to the boys about their difficulties and problems (DP, 1992:782). As in the other institutes he helped the holistic growth of the boys, both spiritually and temporally. When the boys were sick he made it a point to give all the attention needed, although very busy he always found time to go and see them, and asked if they needed something more and if he could be of any service to them (DP, 1987:276).

The director ameliorated those things that were good and gave a great incentive to upgrade education. Mgr De Piro also held a prize giving ceremony every year. Besides academic subjects the boys were taught a trade, this was a benefit because it prepared them for life, and would help them find a job when leaving the Home. He even formed the St Joseph's Music Band. Every boy was free to join and those who opted to enlist had certain incentives as well, such as getting more pocket money. Those who took part in the band also had the opportunity of visiting many villages and towns (DP, 1987:118).

The director always gave due importance to recreation, games and proper use of free time for the boys. In winter they performed theatricals at the institute and played indoor games, while in summer they went swimming. The boys looked forward for the calendar feasts and holidays, Mgr De Piro was adamant that the traditional sweets for every feast served in Maltese families should also be enjoyed by all the boys of the Home. Holidays and festivities were faithfully observed (DPA, 1992:116-118).

Another aspect in the boys' upbringing was money saving. They did not receive direct remuneration, but money was saved for them and given to them, together with a suit, when they left the Institute (DP, 1992:451c). A highlight in the lives of the boys was when they left St Joseph's Institute and were capable to be accepted back in their

families. Mgr De Piro was always in solidarity with the boys and in contact even with their families. He prepared the boys for life and helped them to find a job and settle in life. When the boys left the Institute, they did not suffer any stigma because of their social condition. They were well brought up and mastered a trade; they did not find it difficult to be accepted for work or to marry. One of the boys, Nazzareno Attard said that those who were willing had every opportunity at the Institute to leave as mature, responsible persons, capable to face life (DP, 1992:443).

Mgr De Piro also helped financially relatives of the boys in St Joseph's Home and of the girls at Fra Diegu. He did not abandon the past students who were at some time or other at the Institute. The director donated clothes, tools for their trade, when they were poor and sick, unemployed or wanted to emigrate. He also helped a mother, a sister or an uncle of a former resident. He furthermore gave donations to relatives of his employees. If any of his employees were injured while working at St Joseph's place, he helped them financially. Mgr De Piro gave a pension to his carpenter when he retired and to the wife of the shoemaker, whose husband probably died while still at work (DPA, 1992:81-122).

Mgr De Piro had a lot of support: together with an organized good staff, he had great support from his family especially his mother and other benefactors among whom one can mention Mr Alphonse Maria Galea (Philanthropist). Mgr De Piro gave all his wealth to the institutes and made sure that the employees of this Home received a just salary. Mgr De Piro cautiously gave some extra pay to those who needed it without letting anyone else know about it (DP, 1992:993).

3.4.4 Director of St Joseph's Institute, Għajnsielem, Gozo

On the sister island of Gozo there was no orphanage for boys. Therefore, the Bishop of Gozo, Michael Gonzi, and the Gozitan parish priests sought the expertise of Mgr De Piro. The latter accepted as long as the Home in Gozo would be a branch of St Joseph's Home in Malta, and be run by the Society of St Paul. This Home was inaugurated on 21 May 1925, feast of the Ascension. This was a landmark for Gozo. In charge of the Home was Fr M. Callus, one of the first priests to be ordained within the Missionary Society of St Paul (DP, 1987:239, 252; DPA, 2001:31).

The same day the first three boys were admitted to the Home. Mgr De Piro often visited the boys in Gozo, and gave them sweets as a means to talk to each and every boy. He

envisaged a holistic formation of each boy in Gozo, just as he did in every institute under his care. One of the boys, M. Ciangura during his testimony said that compared to other children they lacked nothing (DP, 1987:12). In comparison to other children these boys were privileged because they also learned a trade. In Gozo's St Joseph Institute, they could learn tailoring, carpentry and shoe making (DP, 1987:243).

When Mgr De Piro became director of St Joseph's Home in Gozo, he made it a point that if there was a music band in Malta, there ought to be a similar one in Gozo. He wanted the institute boys to learn music and become musicians. Mgr De Piro always looked after the particular needs of the Gozo Home and regularly sent all possible help. Mgr De Piro was not only the first director but also the one who moulded it into being. Another boy, L. Rapa during his testimony said that Mgr De Piro had three special virtues which helped him in the running of the Home: his determination, courage and methodical character (DP, 1987:29, 35). Above all it was his great faith in Divine Providence. When faced with difficulties, he used to tell the boys that God knew what he was doing and would not leave them alone.

3.4.5 Director of The House of Infants, St Venera

The same year (1925) of the opening St Joseph's Institute in Gozo, Mgr De Piro toyed with the idea of opening a house for infants in the vicinity of St Joseph's Institute, at St Venera. Mgr De Piro realised that a number of newly born babies and toddlers badly needed a place of shelter and someone to look after them. To help with this project, he sought the assistance of the Sisters of Jesus of Nazareth. Mgr De Piro opened a house to welcome babies and children up to the age of seven; and in exceptional cases ten years. This house was put under the patronage of St Francis de Paul, and in 1927 De Piro became its director.

3.4.6 Director of the Birkirkara Oratory

The Oratory of Birkirkara, the first Institute to teach Christian Doctrine was inaugurated on 31 July 1910. The Founder of this Oratory was M. Casolani who financed the building. The Oratory was named 'Domenico Savio' and was entrusted to the Salesian Fathers. When the Salesians gave up the Oratory in 1912, due to a shortage of priests in their congregation, the De La Salle Brothers took over and renamed it after St John Baptist De La Salle (DPA, 1997:26, nos 2-3). The Frères had to give up the Oratory in 1918 because of the lack of brothers. M. Casolani with the help of Fr M. Sammut dedicated themselves to the poor boys of Birkirkara.

M. Casolani wrote to Mgr De Piro and asked him if he would take over the management of the Oratory in 1925. Mgr De Piro made it quite clear to the Archbishop, that he would take over only on behalf of the Missionary Society of St Paul, and that there should be no interference in its running by any other congregation. For its part the Society continued the spiritual welfare and accepted responsibility for all future expenses. Mgr De Piro accepted this offer as a gift from God.

M. Casolani and Mgr De Piro became great friends because they shared the same ideals. M. Casolani donated the Oratory to Mgr De Piro in the name of the Society of St Paul in 1927 (Almanac, 1931:335-336). Mgr De Piro also had in mind to utilise the Oratory as a place for aspirants who wished to join the Missionary Society of St Paul as either priests or brother-catechists. Birkirkara Oratory would serve as a kind of Training School, while the novitiate proper would remain at Mdina or Hamrun (Santa Venera) or at St Agatha's when this building would be completed. The bond between the Oratory and the Society of St Paul was of great importance; the Training School became the cradle of vocations which flourished and grew into a strong missionary Society (Almanac, 1933:427).

Together with these responsibilities Mgr De Piro was a co-operator in the foundation and growth of Maltese religious congregations, such as the *Daughters of the Sacred Heart* and the Franciscan *Sisters of the Heart of Jesus*. During his lifetime Mgr De Piro was assigned six orphanages, for boys and girls. Although he had a very busy life he never resigned from any of the orphanages and always did his best to improve every particular one.

3.5 St Agatha, Rabat: a worthy project – the Motherhouse

As the number of members of the Missionary Society of St Paul increased Mgr De Piro wanted to move and settle in a place they could call their own. His aim was St Agatha, the small church, where Mgr De Piro and the members of the Society received the first member into the Society – when Fr G. Vella was ordained priest in 1919.

Mgr De Piro, as Superior of the Society of St Paul, on 12 June 1922 petitioned the Chapter of the Cathedral and presented all the documents pertaining to the church of St Agatha, so that the church could be ceded to the Society. The Archbishop's decree was

issued on 24 April 1923 declaring that the church of St Agatha, Rabat, was ceded to the Society of St Paul; and from then on St Agatha's church became the property of the Society of St Paul (AAM, Suppliche 1923:n.124).

Mgr De Piro had for many years dreamt of building the Motherhouse close to St Agatha's church. He bought at his own expense more land (ANV, MS: 20: n.522) close to St Agatha's church. The Founder wanted to build this Missionary Institute over the silence of *Our Forefathers Tombs* (Almanac, 1936: 489), that is, on top of St Agatha's catacombs. Archbishop M. Caruana laid the foundation stone of the Motherhouse of the MSSP Society on 3 October 1932. An inlaid cross cut from the miraculous stone of the cave of St Paul was inserted on one side if this stone (Bonnici, 1988:371).

Mgr De Piro's maxim was: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain ..." (Ps, 127 {126}) (Bonnici, 1988:59). During the blessing of the first stone the Founder compared the sign of the Cross, which the Archbishop was about to bless the foundation stone, to the emblem of the Society (Bonnici, 1988:372). In June 1933 there were four students preparing for ordination and the Society moved to St Agatha, where the few rooms attached to the church were already built and the members could live in. At last the members of the Society were in a 'home' they could call their own. The first community moved into the new building on 24 July 1933, and it has been the Central House of the Missionary Society of St Paul ever since.

The Founder was convinced that this was the right place where the young members could receive their formation and training for their future missionary work. Today this is their Motherhouse, the central home of the Society that is spread across the world, just as the Founder dreamt and prayed it would be (Almanac, 1933:407). This edifice receives those who, with a generous heart befitting their youth, accept the invitation they hear from on high to devote themselves to spread Christ's kingdom on earth through their work (Almanac, 1933: 410). In his last will Mgr De Piro bequeathed this property to the Society of St Paul (DPA, 2001: art.2).

3.5.1 Mgr De Piro's Missionary Spirit

As already stated, due to the socio-economic conditions of Malta during the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries many Maltese families were compelled to migrate to various countries. Mgr De Piro helped these emigrants by finding diocesan or religious priests and nuns who could evangelize and were willing to follow Maltese

migrants. Mgr D. Darmanin, Archbishop of Corfù, Greece, wrote to Mgr De Piro and thanked him for sending Fr A. Galea to work in his diocese where there were many Maltese (DPA, 1989:24a). Fr W. Bonett also wrote to Mgr De Piro asserting that in the Archdiocese of Queensland and other regions in Australia they needed at least twenty priests (DPA, 1989:44-45).

The idea of Mgr De Piro to set up a Congregation of Priests under the patronage of St Paul, was conceived when he was still a Seminarian in Rome. After returning to Malta, he had in mind to live in the institute of St Joseph, Hamrun, because he sensed that God wanted to form a Congregation in Malta that would spread in various countries. The Founder felt that St Joseph's Home could serve as a nursery for future vocations. The missionary activity was the greatest urge Mgr De Piro had for his Society. In spite of the fact that the Congregation was already doing much work in Malta and Gozo, especially in the church's charitable institutes, and the teaching of catechism at the Oratory in Birkirkara and elsewhere, the Founder was yearning for the moment when he would be able to send the first members to the missions.

When Mgr De Piro celebrated the silver jubilee of his priesthood in 1927, Archbishop M. Caruana in his letter of congratulation wrote:

> I am looking forward to giving the missionary Cross to those magnanimous young men who, like our Father, the Apostle Paul, will go to all parts of the world, where Faith and Love will spur them to make known the name of Jesus, and extend the Kingdom of God (Almanac, 1928:1; Bonnici, 1988:54).

To the great joy of Mgr De Piro, Brother Joseph Caruana, one of the first two members of the MSSP, left Malta and went to Addis Ababa in Abyssinia, today Ethiopia in 1927 (Almanac, 1929:221-227). This catechist who went to Ethiopia had joined the Society since its foundation in 1910. Mgr De Piro also wished to go to the missions. In fact, he planned to go with another priest and two catechist brothers of the Society to Br Caruana and see what the possibilities were for the Society to work more in that African country. This visit was scheduled for the end of September, but unfortunately Mgr De Piro never went to Ethiopia due to his sudden death on 17 September 1933.

Mgr De Piro regarded Jesus as the Master of the missions, and the missionaries as workers for God. He believed that the missions *ad gentes* (to other people) were set up in the name of God, and that it was God who calls the evangelizers and sends them to the *ad gentes* countries, In fact, before starting his article "Malta and God's call to the Missions" in the 1930 issue of the Almanac he quoted Christ's words: "Go therefore

and make disciples of all nations …" (Mt. 28:19). This command of the Lord shows who is the sender of evangelizers (Almanac, 1930:288). For him the missionaries were those who:

> Had their hearts full of the love and zeal for God; lived a balanced life between the spiritual and material aspects; worked in order to implant the love of God in the hearts of unbelievers; introduced the faith where it was not yet known (Almanac, 1926:151); helped Jesus save every one (Almanac, 1928:199).

According to Mgr De Piro, the missionary has to use certain tools in order to evangelize: to use evangelical words that can pierce the hardest hearts; words that bring victory to the kingdom of heaven; and the continual sacrifices of the messengers of the word of God for the salvation of souls. When teaching the Christian religion, missionaries have to persuade unbelievers from their deceptive superstitions. Just as the mission cares of the soul, so it also cares for the body by civilizing their bad customs, teaching them trades, sciences and many other worthwhile matters (Almanac, 1933:435-436).

The Founder looked at St Paul as the model of every missionary. St Paul is a heart alight with the love of God, a heart full of great love towards his devotees. Mgr De Piro urged his members to pray to St Paul for: the conversion of unbelievers, the return of lapsed Roman Catholics to the church; the spreading of the good news; all the missionary works; missionary vocations and for the institute of the missionaries under his patronage (Almanac, 1932:376).

3.5.2 Minister of the Word – A Fervent Preacher and Teacher

Mgr De Piro reckoned that in certain villages the teaching of catechism to children was very poor; they learnt everything by heart, mostly prayers and some simple truths. When he found out that at Mtarfa, one of the suburbs of Rabat, Malta, the children did not learn any catechism he began to go there himself on foot. He insisted on the teaching of catechism and taught catechism in the children's charitable institutes under his care. Mgr De Piro, knowing the zeal that Protestants have for the Bible, made it a point to give children from a very early age, a good catechetical formation and to make everyone realise the importance and responsibility of learning catechism. This was a very positive sign for the promotion of a good basic knowledge of Scripture among the local population.

Mgr De Piro taught catechism also through his Missionary Society of St Paul and hired a room in order to teach boys catechism. He even made available the first House of the Society for the teaching of catechism. The Founder addressed his members towards the evangelization of the faithful through the teaching of catechism (DP, 1992:1112); and gave continuous attention to the development of catechetical evangelization. His first evangelization was addressed to the Maltese. Mgr De Piro thought that this was the best way to safeguard the Roman Catholic faith in Malta, when Protestant proselytism was trying to infiltrate into Maltese families.

Mgr De Piro was a "Minister of the Word." He evangelized through his preaching. Before communicating the Word of God he prepared himself well. Mgr De Piro wrote his sermons and panegyrics. In the De Piro Archives one finds sermons which he used to write, some were complete sermons, ready to be delivered. Mgr De Piro urged his listeners to appreciate the great treasure St Paul brought to the Maltese: the gift of faith.

There are two hundred and thirteen of these sermons. Besides these, there are others which are incomplete. Other sermons do not seem to exist anymore. Mgr De Piro not only wrote the sermons but also put them in files according to the themes. The archives house four hundred pages of complete talks or at least notes of sermons. Five important themes are almost constantly referred to: Jesus Christ; the Blessed Virgin Mary; the Saints; Christian life and Religious life. His sermons were full of religious instruction and spiritual formation to help his listeners lead a good, virtuous moral life.

Mgr De Piro's preaching was pastorally orientated; with his word he wanted to help the congregation to come closer to God. Thus, his homilies tended to be simple. At the same time, the texts reveal sound biblical and theological foundations. The word of God was the basic source; his preaching abounded in references from the Holy Scripture. Mgr De Piro quoted both the Old and the New Testament with several references to the Pauline letters. 'Who can separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom. 8:35) was a favourite text. These sermons were delivered at a time when the Holy Scripture was not widely diffused among the faithful like today. Mgr De Piro was familiar with the hagiography and with the writings of the early Fathers of the Church (DPA, 1987:3 vols).

The themes of his preaching were: *The Word of God* where he emphasized that whoever loves God wants to hear about God; one needs to focus on the essence of what is being

said to apply to oneself, and not to others; we speak about defects so that we learn how to prevent them and not how to do away with them. *Jesus' presence among us – the incarnation of Jesus Christ*; *Jesus' crucifixion***:** was another moment revealing God's presence among us. *The Sacred Heart of Jesus; God the Father*: Mgr De Piro referred to God the Father as the Father of mercy, who gives man a chance to reform himself and do penance (DPA,1987:vol.3: 343). *The Holy Spirit:* "It is the third Person of the Holy Trinity who descends upon the universe to regenerate it" (DPA, vol.2:18.); together with themes on *St Paul and other saints*.

The Eucharist was one of his favourite themes: to show the humility of Jesus he exclaimed "All his divinity and humanity are hidden under the common form of bread and wine, all silence …" (DPA, vol.3:394). Mgr De Piro explained that the Eucharist is the closest union that a creature can have with God; there is no union more intimate than that between humanity and God. Jesus becomes part of the human's body, as blood and bone; Jesus becomes part of human's mind with which a person thinks, and part of a human's heart with which the person loves. Mgr De Piro urged his hearers to repeat with St Paul: "I live, yet not me, but Jesus lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). He compared the Eucharist with a furnace of divine love. Mgr De Piro preached that Jesus instituted this sacrament not to be honoured by us; Jesus' aim was to give mankind food that gives life to his soul; and taught that when a person receives Holy Communion he/she becomes like Jesus (DPA, 1987, vol. 1:114-116).

Besides *Our Lady*, other topics preached by Mgr De Piro included in the three volumes indicate that he preached also many Sunday homilies (DPA, 1987: vol.1:1-53), retreats or spiritual exercises for religious communities, especially nuns (DPA, vol.2: 308-421). There are also sermons about priesthood, marriage, religious life, the missions, death and others (DPA, vol.3:296-298, 305). Very often he reminded his congregation that the words of the Bible are addressed to everyone. He stressed the love of God for a sinful humanity. His preaching conveyed the fervour of his love for God. Every word he said moved his listeners, because he lived what he preached and was convinced of all he said. His words and way of life made a great impact on many people.

Mgr De Piro did not consider himself an orator or a writer. When he preached, he did so because a priest has to preach. He used a very simple style of speaking to the people. Yet he spoke through his faith and from the depth of his heart. Mgr De Piro spoke to the heart of his listeners. His written sermons show that he had a very positive outlook on

humanity, God and God's mercy. His character reveals that he was a man of great faith, gentleness, compassion, love of God, and of neighbour.

Mgr De Piro was a very spiritual person, a man of prayer and perseverance who did not give up when facing difficulties. He had a strong intellect, realistic, practical and prudent. Mgr De Piro always lent a listening ear to everybody; and helped people whenever they called for help. Even when people called at night either to confess or to ask for something, he always obliged (DP, 1988-1992: 993). Mgr De Piro worked hard to pave the way for the future. He sowed the seed, grafted the plant, but the fruit was to be gathered by those who came after him. He left these guiding words to his spiritual sons:

> Every one of you must love the Society. Its welfare must be at the heart above all else: whether you yourself or your brothers be concerned. Every son of the Society must do his best to offer up every sacrifice that will be required from him to attain this object (DPA, 2003 (1) 39).

The Password of the Society is: "I will follow you wherever you go." Today, Mgr De Piro's great work is being continued by the Missionary Society of St Paul in different parts of the world, as he wished. For the welfare of the Society of St Paul and for the six Homes under his care he gave his wealth as well as his health. Although there was no notable growth to the Society during the Founder's life-time, the seeds sown in love brought forth abundant fruit after his death.

3.6 Mgr De Piro's Death and Legacy

Mgr De Piro died at the age of fifty-five, after leading the procession of Our Lady of Sorrows, in the parish of St Caetan Hamrun, on 17 September 1933. On entering the church he delivered a few words about the message of the feast and then devoutly knelt for Benediction, when suddenly he felt unwell, and in his kneeling position he collapsed into the arms of the priest next to him. Benediction was given by another priest, with Mgr De Piro still present before the raised monstrance containing the Lord whom he had loved and served so well.

The sudden death of Mgr De Piro was a great shock not only to his mother and family, but also to the majority of the inhabitants of both Malta and Gozo. The children in the Homes felt greatly the loss of a father. The following day the press was quick to report his sudden death. His corpse (dead body) was taken to St Joseph's Home in Santa Venera were he was laid out for the general public who wished to pay their last respect. A Solemn Requiem Mass was celebrated on the 19 September by the Vicar General,

Mgr P. Galea, as the Archbishop was away from the Island. Mgr De Piro was buried in the family Vault, at the Addolorata Cemetery. On 16 September 1948, the mortal remains of the Founder were transferred from the De Piro Family Vault at the Addolorata cemetery, to the crypt of St Agatha's church.

His memory is still engraved in many hearts, even today. He won the respect and love from those who had the privilege of knowing him. When his responsibilities and work came to be entrusted to other directors, his methodical character proved to be of great help. In every Institute, Mgr De Piro wrote on his desk: "A place for everything and everything in its place" (Bonnici, 1988:391).

Since his death, missionaries of Saint Paul's Society set foot for the first time in Melbourne, Australia in 1948, where the first three MSSPS began their mission in their new home in Carlton in 1951, Swanbourne, Perth in 1956, North Sunshine, Victoria in 1964, East Sydney in 1965, and Horsely Park, close to Sydney also in 1965. Their main work in Australia was with Maltese immigrants where thousands of Maltese emigrated after the Second World War. The work carried out by the MSSP members in Australia yielded fruit and a house was opened for the formation of youth at Wantirna South, Victoria in 1970.

The Missionary Society of St Paul was already carrying out its missionary work in London, United Kingdom, in the fifties. Apostolic work was being carried out in Windsor, Canada since 1959, and Kingsbridge in 1965 in the province of Ontario. The Society opened other fields of apostolic work in Dearborn, Detroit, U.S.A. in 1978 and Victoria Park, Perth, Australia in 1979.

The first three MSSP members inaugurated a new mission in Perù: *San Pietro* in *Aplao* in 1968. After four years, in 1972 a new parish was entrusted to them in the village of *Acequia Alta*, and three years later that of the village of *La Tomilla*. MSSP members were also doing pastoral care in the parish of *Chiquibamba* in 1981. The Society opened a Formation House, in the capital of Perù, *Lima*, for prospective local missionaries in 1992. Today in Perù, the Society has eleven Maltese priests, five Peruvians, and a good number of students.

The first two MSSP members in Asia arrived in Pakistan, *Faisalabad*, in 1981; these also render their services in Karachi and Lahore. In Lahore they help the local church in

two minor seminaries, and philosophy at the Major Lahore Seminary. In this country the Society works in order to help the poor, the orphans, the widows and elderly people by means of medical and educational projects.

The Society also established itself in Toronto and Ontario in 1999; and in the same year two Maltese members were assigned a new mission in the Philippines. They began to study the Philippine language and to perform pastoral work in Manila. Four years later a third member joined them. They focus mostly on University youths. Another member was sent to join the group in 2007 where together they launched a new project in 2009: formation of international students who besides studying theology did pastoral work in their parish in Manila. These students come from countries where missionaries of St Paul are found.

Hence, today Missionaries of St Paul are found not only in Malta, but in various countries where they are trying to sow the seed of faith which St Paul endowed their forefathers. This Society was founded to help humanity both spiritually and temporally. The aim of Mgr De Piro has been realised and the good he intended to do has been very fruitful.

The Superior General and his Council in 1998 decided that their residence should be in the heart of the Roman Catholic Church, in Rome, so that the Society would have direct contact with the church. This house was inaugurated on 8 May 1998.

The diocesan process of the cause for the beatification and canonization of Mgr De Piro started on 1 February 1985 and has been closed on 25 January 2003. Fr Tony Sciberras MSSP was chosen as the postulator of the Cause. The Apostolic process is still going on. Hopefully one day he will be raised to the honour of a Saint. The heroic practice of virtues proves Mgr De Piro's stature at par with the saints that the Roman Catholic Church has put for the veneration of humanity.

After presenting an over view of Mgr De Piro's life and his contributions, one can appreciate the important role he played in order to safeguard the Roman Catholic faith when Malta became a British colony. Mgr De Piro not only tried to invest in the teaching of catechism, but he also upheld the right of ecclesiastics in the Senate. As director of various Children Institutes he made it a point to give a sound foundation of catechism from a very early age, gave a sound catechetical formation to his MSSP

members and catechists, as well as, to all the congregations who attended his sermons. When Lord Strickland wanted the Bishops to stand against the participation of the clergy in local politics, Mgr De Piro played a remarkable part to defend such an important right. In Parliament he was a strong defender of morality.

Note

1. As from this chapter the English translation of Giuseppe (Joseph) is used.
2. Church historian, Prof. Mgr. V. Borg confirmed that the parish priest of Naxxar in mid-nineteenth century wrote in his records that every Sunday some parishioners used to walk from Naxxar to Sliema to receive a shilling and small a loaf from British Protestant Pastors (2014).

CHAPTER 4

THE CHALLENGE OF PROVIDING A SOUND AND CATECHETICAL FORMATION: THE CONTRIBUTION OF ST GEORGE PRECA (1880- 1962)

4. From Childhood to Priesthood

Fr George Preca was born on 12 February 1880 in Valletta. He was the son of Vincent Preca, a merchant and later a health inspector, and his mother Natalina Ceravolo, a teacher (AOB, 1879-1882:145). Fr George was the seventh child out of nine siblings. His parents were very good practising Roman Catholics. He was given the name "George" after his paternal grandfather. The etymological meaning of George is "Farmer". When Fr George became a priest he used to say that there was a resemblance between his name and his mission, he worked in the field of the Lord to win souls for God. His second name was Paul. Fr George also used to say that one of the greatest graces God can give is to be born in a good Christian family.

When he was a child his family lived in Valletta, the capital city of Malta. Fr George had a very normal childhood and was brought up like the other members of the family. But once, when he was about five years old, he went for a walk with the family-maid and when they were near the small chapel of *Our Lady of Pillar*, he felt something unusual. In this place, close to his home, he saw a tall and beautiful youth dressed as an officer. As soon as he saw this officer coming nearer, he was afraid and tried to hide behind the maid's long skirt; but the youth took George's hand, placed a golden watch on his palm, pressed his hand well and disappeared (Summarium, 1997:90-91; Bonnici, 1980:77).

After some time George opened his hand and to his great disappointment the golden watch was not there. The maid was unaware of what had happened, otherwise she would have told his parents. George kept thinking about it and after some time he asked his parents and the maid if they knew that someone had given him a golden watch as a present. That incident which remained impressed in his mind, George gave it a symbolic Meaning many years later (Bonnici, 1980:78); this will be referred to later in the course of this study.

When Fr George was about five and a half years he was saved from drowning by a boatman, called Michael (Summarium, 1997:77). Soon after he was struck by typhoid

and the doctor told his parents that most probably their son would not live long, but within a few days their child was completely cured and the doctor was amazed at such fast recovery. This event was related by Fr George himself on 21 July 1935 (Bonnici, 1980:85; Preca, 1935:1297). After some time the Preca family moved to Hamrun where Fr George remained for the rest of his life.

Fr George received the sacrament of Confirmation at St Caetan parish church, Hamrun on 2 August 1888 (ASCP, 1888:51). At the age of ten he served as an altar-boy and joined the parish choir. When he was still an altar-boy, one day Fra Diegu Bonanno, the Founder of Fra Diegu Institute, told him: "George, you will become a priest according to God's will" (Commission, 1965:14; Summarium, 1997:91). George sat for the admission examination to the Lyceum but was not among the thirty-one successful students in July 1892; however he sat again for the examination in September and this time he passed. He used to go to school daily on foot from Hamrun to Valletta (5 kilometres away) and back. As a Lyceum student he impressed his teachers by his flair for languages and his fine handwriting.

Although Fr George had a joyful character, he was very meek and rather reserved. When he was still a student at the Lyceum, very often he used to go to one of the quays of the Grand Harbour and introduce himself to English, Greek and French sailors by offering them a cigarette. He used to talk to them about religion and teach them important aspects of the Christian doctrine. This helped them to lead a good Christian life. Since he was a teenager Fr George realized that there was a great thirst for the teaching of Christ (Bonnici, 1980:97; Borg, 1963:619).

As Fr George was growing up, spiritual reading was one of his main concerns. At the age of fourteen, while reflecting on the meaning of life, he read in Italian the book *Preparing for Death*, written by St Alphonse Maria de Liguori (Bonnici, 1980:100). This book helped him to continue to seek the meaning of his life in God alone and therefore to lead a good life and to detach himself from material things and earthly pleasures. Fr George used to say that this book left in his heart an indelible mark and helped him a great deal in difficult moments during his life. *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis was another book that Fr George used as a model for him and for his Society.

Fr George used to relate how one day on his way back home from the Lyceum, he met Fr E. Monpalao who used to teach him Latin and Italian. His teacher was an edifying priest and rather advanced in age. One day Fr Monpalao asked George if he would like to accompany him part of the way back home, and George gladly accepted. During their conversation, Fr Monpalao told him: "Preca, you will grow up and people who love God will become familiar with you and you with them. They will find happiness through you and you through them, in a way that you can say with David the Prophet: "*Funes ceciderunt mihi in praeclaris*." ("My steps never stray from the paths you lay down", Ps 17:5) (Summarium, 1997:29, 91; Bonnici, 1980:102; Sammut, 2001:22). George hardly gave weight to the priest's words; because his health was rather frail, and his expecting to die early forbade him to make projections for the future.

From the Lyceum, Fr George passed on to the Diocesan Seminary. He was always struck by the zeal and spirituality of his confessor and spiritual director, Fr L. Galea, who was a saintly priest and who gave him a sound spiritual formation. Fr L. Galea died in 1905. Fr George used to narrate that some time after the death of his confessor, when he was still a Seminarian he saw Fr Galea in his dream telling him "God chose you to teach his people" (Commission, 1965:11; Summarium, 1997:8). Fr George continued to recount that he felt he was not capable to teach God's people; his health was very frail, he could never believe it and did not give it a thought at the time. Later in life, Fr George attached great importance to these extraordinary utterances.

When Fr George was a deacon, his health was rather poor; he was struck by a serious illness. His father called Professor E. Meli, who diagnosed that their son had only a few months to live because his left lung had already stopped functioning and had dried up (Summarium, 1997:30, 45, 78, 91; Bonnici, 1980:129). The deacon was expecting to die from day to day. He prayed to St Joseph and without anyone knowing how, a short time before the day of ordination, he recovered; and was ordained into the priesthood by Archbishop P. Pace at the Co-Cathedral of St John, Valletta, on 22 December 1906. Fr George celebrated his first High Mass on Christmas Day at the parish church of Saint Caetan, Hamrun. The new ordained priest always declared that he owed this miraculous cure through the intercession of St Joseph (Summarium, 1997:6, 46).

4.1 Difficult Times

The period between the 1920s and 1930s was a very vital one in Maltese history. It was a period of great political changes and debates on the subject of change. During this

period the ecclesiastical strength of the Church, which has been held for centuries, was being challenged. The need for a sound catechetical formation through the founding of the Society of Christian Doctrine and of the Missionary Society of St Paul was the best and only way to safeguard the Roman Catholic faith in Malta during the British rule.

Why were these two Societies so important for the preservation of the Roman Catholic faith when Malta was under the administration of a Protestant Government? It was a known fact that the population of the island of Malta was Roman Catholic and all the Maltese were church-goers. It was also a fact that the majority of Maltese church-goers greatly lacked general education and basic theological knowledge. Why did the Roman Catholic Church fail to educate its faithful in matters of faith? This could have been through the ignorance or fear of certain local church authorities who thought that cultural and traditional faith were enough. The education of the clergy also left much to be desired. When the Maltese Islands passed under British protection in1800, a new period opened for the Roman Catholic Church in Malta.

When the British set foot on Malta, instructions were given by General Ralph Abercromby to Major General Henry Pigot that all rights, privileges, and immunities in Church and State were to be confirmed to the Maltese people and that the Bishop of Malta was responsible for the Maltese Catholic fold. This was the outline of the general policy of the British authorities towards the Roman Catholic Church in Malta. As early as 1802, the Maltese made their feelings about their religion clear with the Declaration of Rights, signed in Malta on 15 June 1802 which affirmed that:

> Free men have a right to choose their own religion. Toleration of other religions is therefore established as a right; but no sect is permitted to molest, insult or disturb those of other religious sentiments; that no man whatsoever has any personal authority over the life, property or liberty of another. Power resides only in the law (Declaration of Rights 1802:no.8).

Hence, it was evident that at the time the representatives of the people had already envisaged the Constitution as being an inviolable charter. Although the Royal Commission of 1812 was not very pleased with this declaration, they realised that cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church in Malta was their only option.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century the majority of the Maltese were illiterate. The Church in Malta in no way exalted illiteracy, but, she did not always encourage education because she thought that illiteracy kept the doors closed to other erroneous doctrines and new ideas. Being aware of this, Governor Ponsonby (Despatch, 1833:492-

494) wrote to the Secretary of State, Lord Stanley, informing him that the Ecclesiastical Authorities in Malta were afraid that through education the Maltese could become Protestants. The British co-operated with the Church with regards to educational matters. Realising the extent of illiteracy in Malta, the British wanted to promote education. They knew that it had to be done in conjunction with the Roman Catholic Church and therefore transferred education entirely to the Catholic clergy. The Governor promised that the provided educational reforms were not to interfere with the Roman Catholic religion and that the Archbishop was ready to cooperate with the Government in the reform of the University and the establishment of Primary Schools (Despatch, 1833:492-494).

What the Church feared most was an attempt on the part of the Church of England and other Protestant Churches to convert the Maltese to Protestantism. Proselytisation of the Maltese was one of the important issues that the Maltese Church had to face during the British rule. Why was the Maltese Church so concerned about such an attempt on the part of the Church of England and other Protestant Churches? According to Arthur Bonnici (1975:189) the possibility of Protestantism spreading in Malta was a major preoccupation of the nineteenth century church. With the increase of English residents on the Island, Protestant proselytism could have easily influenced the population.

Lord Bathurst approved Governor Maitland's decision to support the Roman Catholic Church in Malta in its resistance to proselytism by any Protestant organization. The British and Foreign Bible Society were active in Malta since 1808. Malta was regarded by the Society more as a distribution centre for supplying the eastern Mediterranean than as a field for evangelization. However, in 1809 its agents had distributed copies of Martini's Italian translations of the Bible among the Maltese population causing the Church authorities to forbid its use by Roman Catholics (A.A.1826:615-617). Why was Martini's Italian translation forbidden by the local Church authorities? Maybe the local church came to know that these translations were prohibited by Pope Pius VII (1800-1823) when Napoleon II was excommunicated in June 1809. (Greider, 2013:308).

The Bible Society was still doing propaganda work in 1825. The Joint Treasurers of the Bible Society established in Malta applied for a licence to open a shop for the sale of Scriptures. Among these was a Maltese apostate C. Naudi, a former Professor of Chemistry (Bonnici, 1975:191). Maltese were lured by money to join the Society, and some even offered their help in Protestant churches without permission of the local

Ecclesiastical Authorities. These persons were not allowed to receive the Sacraments, and were reported to the Holy See (A.A. 1826: 615-617). Ordinance IV of 1839 was published and enacted; it stipulated that no printed writing was to be subjected or liable to the censorship exercised in these Islands by Her Majesty's Government. Archbishop F.S. Caruana feared that this could be a weapon against the Roman Catholic faith in Malta (Bonnici, 1957:107-155). One can understand the Church's objection to a liberal press. Cardinal Giulio Somaglia, the Papal Secretary of State, strongly protested to the Lieutenant Governor, Manley Power against the free distribution and sale of Protestant Bibles in Malta (Bonnici, 1975:190).

In Primary Schools, assuming that all children were Roman Catholics the Royal Commission of 1836 suggested that religious instruction in schools should be exclusively left in the hands of the clergy. Parish priests had a free hand to go and supervise the teaching of religion any time during the day. Governor Bouverie who wanted to raise the standard of education in Malta sent a letter to Lord Normanby, the Secretary of State, affirming that primary education was not adequate, but knowing that Rome was also against general education, it could hinder its progress in Malta (Despatch, 1839:325). The initiative of the British Governor to raise the standard of education seemed to be a step forward in primary education. This showed the great concern of the Governor for the well-being of Maltese children and to help alleviate the general illiteracy of the local population.

It was during Bouverie's governorship that Rome warned Archbishop F.S. Caruana against the Protestant proselytism that was going on in certain Primary Schools. When Bouverie was informed about this, the Governor said that he had no knowledge about this proselytism and declared that those schools were under the immediate control of Roman Catholic teachers and nothing was taught contrary to Roman Catholic doctrine (Despatch, 1841:619-620). Later it became known that since Dr G. Tomlison, Bishop of Gibraltar came to Malta in 1842, Protestant propaganda was revived in some primary schools. An apostate Maltese priest was teaching in certain schools; and Archbishop Caruana prohibited Roman Catholic parents, under spiritual penalties to send their children to such schools (A.A.M. Correspondence: 1842). This offered another incentive to local church authorities to show greater interest in education. In fact, theological education at University and Religious Houses was improved; a reform of studies in the Seminary of Malta was carried out and another seminary was opened on

Gozo; another initiative was the establishment of ecclesiastical schools and colleges run by Religious Orders.

What about the religious assurances of the Declaration of Rights of 1802? Was the King still the "Protector of the Roman Catholic Religion?" Even the Royal Commission of 1812 showed great respect towards the Roman Catholic Religion and the Pope. Any innovation in ecclesiastical matters was only to take place with the consent of the local Ecclesiastical Authorities and the approval of the Pope (Report, 1812:121-122). But it is good to mention, that although Governor Maitland made an all- sweeping reform, he followed on the Royal Commissioners' footsteps. He insisted upon the free exercise of Roman Catholic religion in Malta without suggesting any material alteration in ecclesiastical affairs (Laferla, 1945:95). Governor Maitland was not an exception; immediate successors adopted the same religious policy in Malta. In fact, whenever a Secretary or a Protestant Society attempted to curtail the rights of the Roman Catholic Church in Malta, the Governors almost invariably reminded them of the solemn guarantees given to the Roman Catholic inhabitants of Malta (Bonnici, 1960:49-53.).

The British realised that cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church in Malta was their only option; for various reasons, the British Government felt in duty bound to fulfil their promises. These assurances were given both by word and in writing more than once, and their policy was not to interfere with the religion of their colonies. Another factor was that the British wished to avoid what happened to the Maltese during the French occupation. Last but not least, it was in the interest of the British Crown to keep the best of relations with the Holy See (Bonnici, 1960:51-55).

As the number of English people, and consequently of Protestants residing in Malta increased, the need was felt by them to have a place of worship. The British began to build their Protestant churches in Valletta, Floriana and Sliema. An Anglican Cathedral was built in Valletta in 1844. A Methodist Church was built later in Floriana. A Maltese Dr C. Naudi was one of the proselytes who preached and read the Gospel in Valletta and in villages; he also translated Methodist literature into Maltese and Italian (Bonnici, 1975:198). The Presbyterians built a Church of Scotland in Valletta. In the late nineteenth century the Salvation Army settled in Floriana; and the Holy Trinity Church was built in Sliema, where most of the British resided in1872.

Years later, the Protestants began again an open systematic attempt at proselytism among the Maltese by distributing Protestant literature and inviting Roman Catholics to their religious services and sermons. Lord Bathhurst warned the Protestant missionaries not to cause any inconvenience through a systematic attempt to make proselytes. He also informed Governor Hastings that the Bible Society of London assured him that they would stop the distribution of Bibles to Roman Catholic inhabitants. The Ecclesiastical Authorities were extremely concerned because they knew that the laity had no sound knowledge of catechism. The activities of Protestant Missionaries were always frowned upon (Bezzina, 2002:178). Protestantism, freemasonry and dissent in general were the main fears of the Roman Catholic Church at the time.

Manuel Dimech, son of lower class parents, accused of complicity in murder and then in producing false currency, had educated himself in prison, ironically under the guidance of his spiritual director, Fr P. P. Borg, aided by Protestant minister, Rev. G. Wisely, Presbyterian of the Free Church of Scotland (Montebello & Galea, 2012:24). He became famous and notorious and criticised not only the Roman Catholic Church as old-fashioned; but also the Cardinal of Westminster who praised the massacres which the British were carrying out on the Boers in South Africa (Montebello & Galea, 2012:33). He also criticised the British for not helping his family financially while he was in exile. "Dimech affirmed that he would bring the Maltese about to *wage war* against their foreign ruler" (Montebello & Galea, 2012:36). "Dimech used to expose critically, bluntly, and sometimes crudely certain doings of the local Church or of members of it, in his circles, and especially in his weekly paper" (Frendo, 2012:137.) He wanted to get to the heart of matters and dealt directly with social and political structures, the root cause of the people's ailments (Montebello & Galea, 2012:29).

M. Dimech was an anticlerical and anti-imperialist self-made man who, through his activities and writings succeeded in challenging both the Church and the colonial authorities (Bezzina, 1988:63). Dimech was considered as an enemy of the Church and an enemy of British interests in Malta because according to Lord Plumer's letter the repatriation of Dimech could even upset the religion of the country (Frendo, 2012:136). In fact, Governor Plumer wrote two letters to the Foreign Office in 1920 and 1921 refusing to consider Dimech's return to Malta. In his letter dated 29 March 1921 Plumer wrote: "Rightly or wrongly Dimech is regarded in Malta as a dangerous enemy of the Roman Catholic Church … if Dimech is readmitted in Malta now at a time when the

establishment of the New Government is imminent, it will be interpreted as an attempt to subvert the religion of the country, and his return would for that reason be most undesirable;" at the end of his letter Plumer reiterated "I am unable to alter the opinion which I have already expressed that it would be unwise to insist on his being repatriated to Malta" (Frendo, 2012:134-135)

The prominent position of the Roman Catholic Church annoyed Protestant clergymen who came to Malta in the late nineteenth century. Rev. H. Seddall was so disappointed that in 1870 he wrote: "Religious fervour is one of the leading features in the character of the Maltese people, and it discovers itself … in the building of churches and chapels; the erection of images at the corners of the streets, to be devoutly worshipped by the populace" (Cassar, 2002:176.) This irritated Protestant pastors and missionaries now that Malta was a British colony and the Maltese were still good practising Roman Catholics. It was seen as intolerable that Malta as a British colony had been left for so long to its own devices.

The British could not understand that the number of priests, monks and nuns seen in the street were like the doctors, lawyers, nurses, welfare officers, teachers, civil servants and others who were running a *welfare state* based on voluntary offerings and dedicated services. The British managed to win the confidence of the masses largely by paying every respect to the religion of the Maltese. However, this did not stop the British from dismantling all ecclesiastical immunities and abolishing the Ecclesiastical Courts. The abolishing of Ecclesiastical Courts curtailed the church's power to enforce her laws as in the case of clandestine marriages. This was considered injurious (hurtful) to the welfare of society (Debono, 1831:434-438).

The need of enhancing the clergy's education, and the need of a good catechetical formation to the laity who had a shallow knowledge of Christian doctrine; became a catalyst for Mgr De Piro and Fr George to come on the scene.

4.2 Fr George Preca

This section will focus on the life and work of Fr George Preca, the first canonised Maltese saint. He was a friend of the working class, a pioneering educator and a promoter of the Maltese language. Fr George lived during a time when the working class, the poor and the needy were neglected. The poor were left in ignorance, even in their religious belief. Only the rich and the learned had a right to attain certain belief

and education. As it was a time when Protestantism and Freemasonry were trying to infiltrate into the Maltese islands, Fr George wanted to educate the people who for centuries were deprived by those in power. The story of Fr George is the story of Malta during the first half of the twentieth century, when the Maltese people became the protagonist for the first time in history. It was through the teaching and intense work of Fr George that the Maltese people overcame their inferiority and felt capable of looking forward, and courageously moved forward in all fields of life.

The impact that Fr George has made on Malta is amazing, especially when one takes into consideration the time when he emerged as a spiritual leader. The Church in Malta was still very conservative. Ignorance, both intellectually and spiritually reigned among the majority of the population. Sixty-nine per cent of the inhabitants were illiterate (Cassar, 2002:171). Fr George dedicated himself to work with peasants, to teach the poor and uneducated, and to instruct those who could not afford to pay for their education and thus prepare them for life. Fr George began to write in Maltese, when the official language was Italian. He was motivated by the need of teaching catechism in an efficacious way, that is, a theology which uses simple words; thanks to him Malta saw a spiritual rebirth. Fr George was a young priest with great foresight. "*Dun Gorg*", as he was amiably called, won the hearts of all who came in contact with him. His influence on the common man's spiritual life was radical and permanent. Fr George, the founder of the Society of Christian Doctrine, left a legacy of an Apostolic Society of celibate men and women who are dedicated to catechesis. More than a century has passed since the foundation of the Society of Christian Doctrine (*Societas Doctrinæ Christianæ* – SDC), known in Malta as the M.U.S.E.U.M. or "*Muzew*" Society.

4.2.1 The Need of a Sound Catechetical Formation

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Malta was going through a time when feelings of nationalism were gaining ground. There was a cry for Malta to be governed more and more by the Maltese. Socially and economically Malta was emerging from a state of economic hardships. Works of charity were mostly inspired and carried out by the Roman Catholic Church. Some secular leaders began to show a mark of the influence of foreign ideologies that were sometimes in conflict with religious traditions of Maltese life. A series of social changes were in the offing.

The great changes that were taking place in Malta, Europe and in the whole world, as well as within the Roman Catholic Church were the motives that compelled Fr George

Preca to found the SDC Society. The two main factors that influenced the lives of the Maltese were: the great religious and, in a certain way, political power of the Roman Catholic Church; and the great political power of the British as the colonial rulers of the Maltese islands (Frendo, 2004:75). During the years of British colonial rule in Malta, except for some isolated instances, there was good co-operation between the British colonial authorities and the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church in Malta, even though the British authorities were predominantly Protestant (Cassar, 2002:233-234; Montonati, 2003:51).

The majority of the population in Malta lived in great poverty. It was a time of economic depression, unemployment and a lowering of the standard of living (Cassar, 2002:199). The only charitable institutions which helped to alleviate their miserable state were those run by the Church (Frendo, 2004:66, 96, 97, 219 fn.52). Most of the people were illiterate because education was optional and was not always free – not until the middle of the twentieth century (Cassar, 1988:106-107). The middle-class people and professionals, together with the clergy, were influenced by Italian culture and were often hostile towards the British rulers and culture (Frendo, 1988:185-211).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, certain Maltese citizens began to take the lead in the political life of their country. They organized political movements mostly on national sentiments in order to oppose the British Government, and to put pressure on the Government to give certain constitutional and political rights to the Maltese people that would eventually lead to self-government (Frendo, 1988:185-211). These movements and parties represented the legitimate political rights and aspirations of the Maltese people (Frendo, 1988:185-214). Among these leaders were Mgr De Piro (Founder of the Missionary Society of St Paul) and Manuel Dimech.

The Roman Catholic Church at the time was inclined to be conservative in her teaching. Pope Leo XIII published his great social Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* about Roman Catholic Social Doctrine in 1891; but this encyclical did not influence greatly the Maltese Roman Catholic clergy who remained generally speaking unmoved by the encyclical. In fact, this encyclical although translated into Italian a few years after its promulgation, was translated into Maltese in 1921, thirty years after its publication.

During the time of the British administration the Maltese people were very religious in their own way and were mostly loyal to the Roman Catholic Church (Koster, 1988:79-

80, 91-92). But their religiosity had no sound theological basis. The religious formation of the Maltese was of no high level and their religiosity was often mixed with superstitious traditions (Montonati, 2003:27). Some instruction was given in a number of parishes either by nuns; or by some active good laymen, but real organization and a wholehearted dedication was lacking. Some parishes were rather neglected (Bonnici, 1980:139-153).

Children who were preparing for their First Holy Communion and for the Sacrament of Confirmation were often given catechetical instructions by older altar boys under the supervision of the sacristan of the local parish church (Bonnici, 1980:89, 92). In fact, this was one of the reasons why Fr George wanted to find a way to reach the faithful at various ages (Bonnici, 1980:139). Because the religiosity of the people on the islands of Malta and Gozo had no solid foundation on Sacred Scripture, their religious knowledge was not deeply grounded and could have been easily lost with Protestant foreign influence.

Catechetical instruction throughout the Maltese islands was not organized at all. The Maltese Church authorities would have liked that religious teaching for young and grown-ups be taken more seriously (Bonnici, 1980:139). A similar situation existed throughout most of the dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, Pope Saint Pius X in his Encyclical *Acerbo Nimis* (at these troublesome and difficult times) in 1905 lamented about the serious lack of organized and sound catechetical instruction and inadequate diffusion of religious knowledge in the Roman Catholic Church. This encyclical was probably another factor that urged Fr George to found the Society of Christian Doctrine.

When the British Government in Malta conceded the right of freedom of the press to the Maltese in 1839, some local newspapers and periodicals stood in favour of the Roman Catholic Church (Frendo, 2004:107). During that time, some Maltese Roman Catholics who had a good command of the English language were trying to help British soldiers and sailors who were stationed in Malta by instructing them in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and encouraging them to become Roman Catholics. Foremost among these was the cleric, now Blessed Ignatius Falzon (Frendo, 2004:114, 140 fn. 82).

Fr George venerated Blessed Falzon who directed a marvellous apostolate in Malta to convert non Catholics (Summarium, 1997:347). Other Maltese Roman Catholics began to translate excerpts from the Bible into Maltese. Guze` Muscat Azzopardi was given permission by the local Ecclesiastical Authorities to translate into Maltese the Gospel according to Saint Matthew and to publish it in 1897. It was only in 1959 that the first full translation of the Bible in Maltese was completed by Mgr P.P. Saydon (Montonati, 2003:28). Mgr Saydon managed to finish his project through the encouragement and support given by Fr George and members of the SDC (Bezzina, 2006:259).

When Fr George was still a seminarian, he happened to be in the sacristy of St Caetan's parish church at Hamrun, listening to a catechism lesson given by the sacristan to some boys. The sacristan was explaining the creation of the world and told them that God created everything. One of the boys asked the sacristan: "And who created God?" The sacristan without hesitation replied: "He was made by himself!" (Commission, 1965:14; Summarium, 1997:8, 79; Montonati, 2003:27). This answer shocked Fr George because it was not theologically correct since God has neither a beginning nor an end.

This was an eye-opener for the young seminarian. Fr George became much more conscious of how many Roman Catholic laymen, even those who led a good life and had good intentions, lacked a sound doctrinal formation. This incident urged him to do something, to find a solution to religious ignorance. Fr George realised that the religious teaching of the poorer people had very weak foundation. There was a group of youngsters who used to meet on the parvis (an enclosed area in front of a church) of Saint Caetan parish church and in a field opposite the church. The seminarian used to observe them as they crossed the road to play football. It occurred to him that these young men could be the nucleus for his idea to spread a sound teaching of the Roman Catholic faith.

The seminarian began to approach these youths; he used to sit on a stone slab in the field across the church, tell them a story and draw a lesson from it. Soon he started to talk to them about religious matters and before long, he started to teach them informally about God and other matters of faith (Bonnici, 1980: 124-125; Summarium, 1997:91). These youths were not used to hear sermons, and at times they pelted him with cigarette buds and teased the young seminarian; still, they were enchanted to hear him talk (Borg,

1965:619; Bonnici, 1980:125). Fr George was not disheartened by their behaviour but carried on with his encounters until he fell ill before his ordination.

4.3 The Birth of a Society

Soon after Fr George celebrated his Solemn Mass he fell seriously ill again, and spent days in the quiet of his room meditating and praying to God to illuminate him to follow God's will in his priestly mission. Most of his time was spent in deep prayer. When reading the Second Letter of St Paul to Timothy: "Pass on to reliable people what you have heard from me through many witnesses so that they in turn will be able to teach others" (2 Tim. 2:2) Fr George stopped and reflected. He made his own the words of Paul to Timothy (Summarium, 1997:46, 79); he felt that this was an inspiration by God, and that he had to do something about it.

The youths Fr George used to meet outside the Hamrun church, and who by then had become very fond of him, thought that once ordained he would have no time for them. But God's plans were different. As a newly-ordained priest this contact with young people in his parish presented to him a wonderful opportunity for the formation of the laity. Fr George, after a long personal preparation, asked the advice of his confessor and spiritual director, Mgr L. Attard, who approved his idea and encouraged him to find ways and means to act upon it (AAM, 1918-1919:282).

Fr George offered these young men great love; that is how he managed to draw them to him, and kept meeting these youths in a small chapel of Our Lady of Porto Salvo, known as *Nuzzu Chapel*, very close to the parish church of Hamrun. His persuasive words, the enthusiasm in his teaching, and his simple teaching methods were enough to keep these youths seated on the floor, listening to his messages for two or three hours. Among this group was Eugenio Borg, a Dockyard apprentice who had the traits of a leader. This first formal meeting took place on 2 February 1907, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord (AAM, 1918-1919:282).

Fr George rented a house, no. 6 Fra Diegu Street, Hamrun, where the group could meet, not far from the parish church and from his home. The first meeting was held there on 7 March 1907. This day is considered to be the foundation day of the Society of Christian Doctrine (Summarium, 1997:7; Bonnici, 1980:140). This was a vey small and humble house. It was here where Fr George delivered the first lesson, the most historical programme of this Society. It was not easy for Fr George to teach these youths, because

they used to smoke during the lesson and to put awkward questions. But it dawned on him that it was his true call to teach those who no one wanted to teach. Fr George was very patient because he believed that he could make some of them apostles of the religion of Christ.

In this house the group used to meet every day and newcomers were welcomed, both young men and married men. Fr George's words were very persuasive and his listeners were never tired of hearing him. Every lesson used to last for about two hours. His lessons were about God, Jesus Christ, *Novissima* (Death, Judgement, Hell and Heaven), and preparing for death from the book of St Alphonse M. de Liguori. Right from the beginning he wanted to prepare his listeners for death in order not to fear when they appear in the presence of God. Most of the first group of unruly youths changed their attitude and behaviour after these lessons. After each lesson the boys felt a great change and a sense of internal peace (Borg, 1963:620; Bonnici, 1980:136).

These young men were so fascinated by Fr George's teachings that they also started practising self-denial by doing sacrifices which he suggested to them, such as, to refrain from smoking. He encouraged them to learn by heart certain sentences from the Bible, especially from the New Testament. During the meetings, they read passages from the Bible, very often translated into Maltese by Fr George himself. At that time spiritual writing in Maltese was not easy to find, the official language being Italian. Fr George also passed on to them dogmatic, moral and spiritual formation in the form of question and answer, rather than long detailed explanations (Montonati, 2003:30). From the very beginning, he insisted with the members to exercise the virtues of meekness and humility.

The first group of youths seemed to integrate very well between themselves and they could now be called a company or a society. After about six months they wanted to give a name to this group. During one of their meetings, Fr George wanted to know what the boys would like to call the company. One of the members, Saviour Muscat, with a very happy disposition proposed the word *Museum* with half a smile on his lips (Commission, 1965:17; Bonnici, 1980: 170). At first it seemed rather strange; but later they were extremely pleased with it and accepted it with enthusiasm. The new name seemed to fit. Fr George liked this proposal: in a museum one keeps the most precious and valuable things worth preserving. In this company, youths and children were finding the teaching that illuminated them and gave them peace of heart. Fr George

commented that the Museum could give that most-wished gift which gave peace to one's soul.

Fr George wanted to give the word Museum a much higher and profound meaning, and created an acronym. The Founder tried to give every letter the meaning of a word, and the words together formed a beautiful prayer for the society who wanted to evangelize others. *Magister, Utinam Sequatur Evangelium Universus Mundus* ("O Master may the whole world follow the Gospel") (Bonnici, 1980:170). This prayer perfectly mirrors the missionary mandate of Jesus Christ: "Go therefore and make disciples … teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you!" (Mt. 28:19-20). This was the Founder's original idea. This group which later developed into a Society began to be called M.U.S.E.U.M. Society as it is still called to the present day. After two or three years, when the female section of the Society was founded, Fr George found an official name for the Society which was *Societas Papidum et Papidissarum* (the Pope's spiritual Children) (Bonnici, 1980:172).

After some time, Fr George began to introduce certain rules for the Society such as: members should be celibate. They should not smoke or refrain from smoking. They were not to put on a tie and cut their hair in a crew cut way (Summarium, 1997:8). Fr George insisted that they should lead a life of prayer and even fast on certain days more than those prescribed by the Church at the time. Besides, he wanted them to meditate about the last things (*Novissima*); and above all to imitate Christ who was to be 'the only object of their thoughts' (Montonati, 2003:32). The members were lay persons who were to lead a normal life with their families and at work (Bonnici, 1980:181).

Fr George did not mince words with the first members, but showed them that he expected a life of sacrifice from them. The Founder did not let anybody and anything to hinder him. The members of his Society were insulted in the streets. People used to tease them and to make signs in their direction as if to say that they were only good to go live in an asylum. The SDC centres and customs were subjected to great criticism. But some well-meaning persons defended him and his Society, emphasising his goodness, humility and meekness.

Fr George chose Eugenio Borg and began to give him a deeper spiritual and doctrinal formation. Every Sunday afternoon, they used to go for walks in the country and Fr George used to explain a number of Scriptural excerpts in depth and in detail to

Eugenio. Fr George used to spend hours with Eugenio reflecting on God's Word from the Bible. The Founder wanted Eugenio to be the foundation stone of the spiritual building he had in mind (Borg, 1962:613; Bonnici, 1980:128). The custom of going out together on Sunday afternoon is still practised to the present day; Fr George included it as one of the Rules of the Society. When the group developed into a Society, Eugenio Borg began to give religious talks to his colleagues at work during the midday break (Summarium, 1997:9), as well as to the other members of the Society. Everyone was amazed by Borg's simple but very profound and persuasive words, undoubtedly the fruit of Fr George's teaching.

When Fr George began to open various centres of the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society for the teaching of catechism to children and young people, Borg was the main collaborator of the Founder in this activity. When Fr George asked Borg to be the first Superior General of the Society, the latter accepted and was later confirmed by the male members of the Society. Borg fulfilled this mission with great zeal for many years and lived a truly exemplary life, always under the direction of the Founder. If in the beginning of the twentieth century the boys greatly lacked the knowledge of Christian doctrine, the girls had no better religious teaching. In fact, Fr George had in mind the girls as well. The idea of teaching girls and young women was almost inexistent at the time, and the *status* of women in society was very low (Montonati, 2003:76).

The opening of the first Female Section of the M.U.S.E.U.M. in the village of Paola on 10 January 1910 marked a historic date for the Society. Fr George personally approached G. Cutajar, a sixteen year old young lady; asked her if she would be willing to dedicate her life teaching Christian doctrine; and she consented. Soon after, twelve other young ladies joined her. Cutajar was very dedicated to teaching and enjoyed mostly teaching little children. The first time these catechists prepared the girls of their Parish for the sacrament of the First Holy Communion there were about ninety girls. The girls were all dressed in white long dresses and a blue sash. After the ceremony, G. Cutajar organized a small party at the M.U.S.E.U.M. centre. After the success of the female M.U.S.E.U.M. at Paola, other branches were opened in other towns and villages in Malta and G. Cutajar became the Superior General for the Female Section.

4.3.1 An Extraordinary Experience

Around 1910, when Fr George was at Marsa on his way to Paola to speak to G. Cutajar, he had a "stupendous vision" while praying the Liturgy of the Hours at the Marsa Cross

Road (Commission, 1965:15). This vision occurred two years after the opening of the Centres, and it influenced his whole life. Fr George saw a boy of about twelve years pulling a cart, with low wide wheels so that it would not overturn easily. On the cart there was a basket full of manure tied onto it with ropes. The boy turned towards him and with an authoritative voice, he ordered him, "Help me!" Fr George helped the boy without hesitation and when he put his hands on the cart he felt an extraordinary spiritual sweetness and could not remember where they went or what happened to the young boy (Commission, 1965:15; Summarium, 1997:42, 60).

Fr George thought deeply about this vision, in order to fully understand its purpose and possible interpretations. He explained that God helped him understand it this way. The cart and the basket full of manure represented the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society because the M.U.S.E.U.M Society members with their teaching and religious formation were doing away with religious ignorance as waste product, and deposit it in a waste disposal centre. The boy was Jesus Christ at the age of twelve when he disputed with the elders in the Temple. Jesus was leading the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society while the members, both men and women, were *pushing* with him, for it was impossible for one person alone to undertake this mission on his own (Commission, 1965:16; Bonnici, 1980:261). The Lord was asking him and his followers to help him with nurturing His field with sound doctrine and formation. Fr George used to relate this mystical vision very often (Commission, 1965:15-16).

The Founder realised that the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society was the work of God; it was God's will to carry on with his teaching. By this vision he understood that the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society was not his, but it belonged to Christ, who called Fr George to help Him. Fr George always related to his male and female members that "on that day" when he had this vision they were all pushing with him. For it is impossible for one person alone to carry out this work on his own. Fr George felt that Jesus Christ entrusted him to be his apostle. This mystical experience showed how God seemed to intervene in a tangible way to strengthen the faith and morale of the Founder (SDC, 2010:1). Fr George's teaching was always based on Scripture, the Catechism of the Church and a good way of life. Several young SDC members began to teach the Word of God to their fellow workers at their place of work, during the midday break.

The foundation for teaching the members of the Society was built on a great number of phrases pronounced by Jesus in the Gospel and translated into Maltese by Fr George,

together with texts from the Bible that could be understood by everyone. The characteristics of Fr George's teachings were: (i) the use of simple words, (ii) a number of examples from daily life and lives of saints, and (iii) the use of the Sacred Scripture (Informatio, 1997:29). Fr George used to choose a sentence or a phrase from the Scripture, explain it at length, and use very simple and formative catechetical answers; the members were to study them by heart (Summarium, 1997:79).

Fr George encouraged his members to challenge the lessons with their life-style in a demanding but rewarding pedagogy which instilled values and formed their character. Fr George wrote in Maltese because high class people read Italian and English. Besides Scripture, his writing was based on human experiences which he gained through the daily long hours hearing confession. He was convinced that a good religious foundation was to be based on two fundamental mysteries: the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation, which both featured frequently in his teaching and writing.

Fr George's model was Jesus Christ – poor, humble and suffering. When someone addressed him as the Founder of the Society, he used to reply that the Founder of the M.U.S.E.U.M. was the Apostle St Paul. Fr George used to refer to Christ as "Our Master," and very often repeated: "For what is highly esteemed in human eyes is loathsome in the sight of God" (Lk. 16:15). The three words which he tried to hammer and instil in each member were: 'diet, quiet, and merriment': moderate food, laughter and recreation keep man in good health and make him capable to work for the glory of God (Summarium, 1997:168). The female branches had the same aim and the same organization as those of the males.

4.3.2 The First Rules

Fr George wrote the first set of Rules for the Society in 1912, which he called *Constitutions*. In these rules he confirmed the name *Societas Papidum et Papidissarum* (the Pope's spiritual children); chose this name as a sign of the Society's loyalty and faithfulness towards the Pope as Head of the Roman Catholic Church (Montonati, 2003:36). The members helped by teaching catechism to the children; in fact, one of the main aims of the Society was to be fertile ground where the seed of faith could grow. Through good teaching and holiness these youths could later join the Society.

The rules included: (i) to help the priest; (ii) to prepare boys to become future members; (iii) to teach by word and example, the vanity of life, reciprocal love, and obedience to

the Pope; (iv) and self-denial (Bonnici, 1980:306-307). The rules of the Founder reveal the aim of the Society; his members had to live a perfect Christian life, that is, to take Christ crucified as a model and to follow him. To reach this aim one needs a spirit of sacrifice, sincere love towards one's neighbour and a good knowledge of Roman Catholic doctrine (Informatio, 1997:15).

In the beginning, Fr George called his co-workers *apostles* (Bonnici, 1981:60) because, like the first apostles, they too were going to spread the word of God outside Hamrun. The Founder was entrusting to them the Society. In order to safeguard the genuine teaching of the church, Fr George wanted to have a General Inspector (he was the first one) and a specific Inspector for each centre or section. These were always priests (Bonnici, 1981:75-106). Apart from the house in Hamrun, other centres known as *Oqsma* (branches) were established in other towns and villages. The first one to open after that of Hamrun was at Cospicua. It was opened on the initiative of the Dockyard worker Eugenio Borg, the first Superior general of his Society.

Fr George wanted to nominate a patron saint for the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society. This was done in a very unusual way. He gathered the members together and asked them to write the name of a saint of their choice on a piece of paper. After collecting these pieces of paper in his hat, he called a young boy who was passing by in the street, and asked him to pick one. The name drawn from the hat was that of St John the Baptist. The Founder of the Society thought this was providential, given the similarities between St John the Baptist and the members of the Society. Like St John the members were not priests but they spread the Word of God. They were considered to be the spiritual children of Fr George a priest, while St John the Baptist was the son of a priest of the Old Testament, Zachariah.

The M.U.S.E.U.M. Society was known also as *Istitut ta' San Gwann Battista* (Institute of St John the Baptist), at least until 1920 (Bonnici, 1980:310). At that time, nobody knew that St John the Baptist was an Essene, that is, the Jewish sect that used to live a celibate life in order to dedicate their time to study Scripture, lead a life of self-denial, cut off from the vanity of the world, just like the members of the M.U.S.E.U.M. (Sammut, 2001:43).

In the early twentieth century, to conceive the idea that laymen could teach theology was something unheard of, not to say scandalous! This is when Fr George entered the

scene. He was a man with vision, and capable of interpreting the signs of the times. Fr George set the example of Christian teaching, as Christ taught through Sacred Scripture: "Remember your leaders, who preached the word of God to you, and as you reflect on the outcome of their lives, take their faith as your model" (Heb. 13:7). Fr George lived the Gospel in the most authentic way.

Fr George and his members were dedicated to bring the Bible and theology to lay people and the working class; that is why he was accused of insanity. Together with his members they were called: dirty, proud, revolutionary, abusive and even schismatic, because they read and explained Scripture to one and all without distinction of class (Commission, 1965:20). Their teaching brought a deeper understanding of faith to people who simply went through the notions of devotions, often without knowing why or understanding what they were saying. Fr George was a pioneer in the field of catechetical instruction and in promoting the role of the laity in the apostolate, which the Second Vatican Council was to stress in a particular way.

Fr George's vision proved to be really prophetic because he anticipated the teachings of Vatican Council II especially in the documents *Lumen Gentium* on the nature of the Roman Catholic Church, chapters 4 and 5, and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* on the role of lay people and on the lay apostolate in the Catholic Church. Almost sixty years before the opening of Vatican Council II, Fr George felt the need to give Christian education to lay persons, by emphasizing the need and the importance of reading the Bible. The SDC members were the pioneers of Christian culture in the twentieth century.

Fr George felt that the population could not remain ignorant in religious matters; and wanted to fight ignorance with 'religious formation' and teaching. He felt the need to do something that would stem the prevalent mood of the times before it was too late and too much damage caused to the Roman Catholic faith, especially under a Protestant administration. Fr George wanted to teach the people so that they could be convinced of their beliefs. When he opened his first catechism centres, he did not intend his lay members merely to teach children, but also wanted them to increase their biblical and theological knowledge. This was considered as a revolutionary action since such knowledge was at the time restricted to priests. Hence, the first years were rather difficult.

In the beginning Fr George found great opposition. There was an aversion towards his Society primarily because of the first three rules imposed on male members: (i) not to wear a tie, (ii) no smoking and (iii) their peculiar haircut. The female members had to wear an austere long black, long-sleeved frock and coil their hair in a bun, and wear the old-fashioned faldetta (a stiff headdress of black silk which the wearer held to cover her body). Others considered the austerity of these rules as a sign of irresponsibility due to his illness prior to his Ordination. People living in the Three Cities (Vittoriosa, Cospicua and Senglea) thought that SDC members were sick people; and because of this, mothers were afraid to let their children attend such centres. Fr George was criticised for the religious education given by the SDC members. Certain parish priests suspected that this Society was going to create a schism in Malta (Summarium, 1997:8).

4.3.3 The Closing and Re-Opening of the Society Centres in 1909

During the episcopate of Archbishop P. Pace in 1909, two years after the foundation of the Society, the Archbishop's attention was centred on Fr George. The Founder was not spared from the scrutiny of the Church authorities as they came to know about his meetings, especially now that Malta was governed by Protestants. The teaching of catechism was a very serious matter; and Fr George did not even ask permission from the Church authorities. The priest and his followers were talking about God in simple terms, and even had the audacity to open the Bible, a book which priests and not the laity were qualified to read.

Rumours about the Society reached the Vicar-General, Monsignor S Grech. The Curia cast a suspicious eye on the new M.U.S.E.U.M. Society and in 1909, Archbishop P. Pace, through his Vicar General Monsignor S. Grech, ordered Fr George to close all the catechetical centres. This step was taken because the ecclesiastical authorities thought that the laymen trained by the Founder did not have a good standard of education. Fr George always insisted on permanent instruction for his members. Fr George quickly obeyed without demur, but as soon as he closed the centre at Hamrun some parish priests raised their voice in his support, because they felt that nothing but the teaching of sound doctrine was being carried out by the Society.

While the Church authorities were so cautious to appreciate Fr George, many people looked up to him as a saint. Fr George's profound spirituality, and his close union with God, imbued him with a special charisma to understand the spiritual needs of God's people. His vision was to educate the faithful with a deep love for God and neighbour,

and that the whole world would accept the gospel. Fr George was eager to teach and catechise, and to instruct the faithful in the way of truth and justice. He wrote many books and pamphlets to be able to give a solid foundation to his members and prepared spiritual material for them to teach.

After a few days, the Diocesan Curia's order was retracted, and the Society carried on with its mission (Bonnici, 1980:203-220). Archbishop P. Pace imposed certain conditions which Fr George and the members of the M.U.S.E.U.M. had to observe. One of the conditions was not to call the first members using names of the twelve apostles. Another condition was not to open new branches without the permission of the parish priest of the locality. Fr George had complete loyalty and obedience to the authorities of the Church, although initially he found a strong opposition from the local Church.

It also happened that at Cospicua Eugenio Borg was mistaken for another individual, also named Eugenio, who was teaching false doctrine (Bonnici, 1980: 192-202). Between 23 May and 20 June 1914 two local newspapers were continually attacking Fr George and his Society, and questioning the activities of the Society (Commission, 1965:20-21). But the Society continued to grow and spread, with the church keeping a watchful eye on the progress and activities of the Society. In 1916, the number of girls was larger than that of the boys (AAM, 1918-1919:303); there were twenty branches in Malta.

As already mentioned, in the beginning of the twentieth century, before Fr George opened his first centre, the Church in Malta was being threatened due to an anti-clerical wave that ran throughout Maltese society. The anti-clericals were trying to *enlighten* the Maltese workers with a new ideology of socialism. There was a real danger that their teachings would influence the population, because the Maltese, though outwardly observant of their Roman Catholic faith, lacked instruction. Fr George was producing the best remedy against the deceiving tendency which at the time was spreading throughout the Islands. A number of letters were published in local newspapers intending to humiliate Fr George. Though many lies were written about him, Fr George did not respond (Bonnici, 1980:265-273).

Some revolutionary teachings were being spread by Manuel Dimech. He attempted to eliminate from Malta and from the mind of the Maltese those beliefs, ideas and customs which according to him were antiquated and outdated at the time (Montebello & Galea,

2012:17). Dimech wrote that abused wives (or husbands) should separate; this was something unheard of at the time; he also said that men and women in the service of God are actually in the service of themselves (Montebello & Galea, 2012:233). Manuel Dimech had Socialist and revolutionary principles. He used to say that any literature which is capable of empowering the masses is loathed by the powers to be (Montebello & Galea, 2012:241).

Dimech began to teach various languages, opened a school and wrote various books. Dimech was the editor of a newspaper in Maltese *"Il-Bandiera tal-Maltin*" (The Flag of the Maltese); and formed a society made up of people who were inspired by his political and philosophical ideas. Dimech also formed a political movement '*The Society of the Enlightened"* (Bonnici, 1980:280; Summarium, 1997:78) whose members were called "*Dimechians*". This was a difficult time for the Church in Malta; the faith of the Maltese was being put to the test. That is why Fr George opted to teach the people rather than to let the faithful go by their devotions. Workers, especially those attending the teaching of Fr George became the main target for M. Dimech (Summarium, 1997:37).

While Fr George was sowing the Christian message to those who needed it most, the political movement of Manuel Dimech together with Manuel Camilleri, nicknamed 'Vjoli' were doing their utmost to ridicule his teaching. The latter had turned Protestant and was dragging others with him. Some of whom were: J. Mamo, S. Astarita, S. Agius, S. Pulis and G. Arpa (Galea, 2007:35-62). M. Camilleri declared that he was no longer a Catholic; and consequently was excommunicated on 17 November 1914 (AAM, 1911:88; Decree, 17/11/ 1914). The Archbishop had no other options. Dimech was inspired by patriotic ideals, but many of his ideas and writings lacked the Christian spirit, and were often strongly anti-Roman Catholic (Bonnici, 1980:280-281). Archbishop P. Pace in a pastoral letter condemned M. Dimech and his followers on 11 October 1911 (Bonnici, 1980:291). Dimech was exiled by the British colonial authorities and sent to North Africa where he died in 1921 (Bonnici, 1980:292).

Opposition was not only coming from the local church and newspapers but from various quarters, including certain individuals. One typical episode shows how Fr George reacted when he was on a boat crossing from Valletta to Sliema, and an anti-clerical man who could not bear the presence of a priest in front of him, purposely began shoving his foot in front of Fr George's face. Humble Fr George overcame this irritation by bending down and kissed his foot. This man's heart was shocked but rekindled after

so many years absent from the church; and asked pardon there and then, both from the priest and from God.

While in Malta the first M.U.S.E.U.M. centre was that of the boys, in Gozo the first M.U.S.E.U.M. centres were opened for girls. In September 1915, the first female section was entrusted to two young women, Paola Grech and Rachele Camilleri both from Nadur. Soon after, they opened a centre at Għajnsielrm and later another one at Xewkija (Bonnici, 1980:237-238). R. Camilleri opened other branches in Gozo and Fr George appointed her Diocesan Superior for Gozo, and remained in charge for sixty years, until her death on 27 June 1977, at the age of 87 (Bonnici, 1980:241). She consistently corresponded with Fr George who guided her with the administration of the female section in Gozo, and also gave her spiritual direction through correspondence.

Fr George, inspired by the biography of Blessed Mary of the Passion (Informatio, 1997:7; Summarium, 1997:93), began to nurture devotion towards the words of the Gospel according to St John: "*Verbum Dei caro factum est*" (The Word was made flesh) (Jn. 1:14) in 1917. These words remained impressed in his mind. Through these words, Fr George also showed his devotion to the Mystery of the Incarnation (Bonnici, 1980:273-280). On his initiative and that of his members, this phrase was printed on slips of paper and could be seen everywhere – in homes, shops, places of work, public buses and most of all on the chest of all the members of the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society. In time, this phrase became the emblem and badge of the SDC members. Fr George spread the devotion towards these words throughout the Maltese islands. The Founder wanted to create enthusiasm for Christmas, to commemorate the birth of Our Lord, and was an enthusiastic apostle of the Incarnation.

Fr George also manifested his devotion towards the Mystery of the Incarnation when he organized for the first time a sacred procession in honour of the Child Jesus, on Christmas Eve 1921. Fr George led his members in a procession by candlelight through the streets of Hamrun, carrying a statue of the infant Jesus, while the members and boys sang Christmas carols. Such processions spread to other towns and villages and nowadays they form part of the Maltese folklore. Fr George also encouraged adults to give children a crib with the infant Jesus as a Christmas present. His intention was to help the Maltese people increase their love towards Jesus Christ, the Son of God made Man (Bonnici, 1980:288); and he also wanted to show everybody how wrong Manuel

Dimech's ideas were, who a few years earlier stated that Jesus Christ was not made man and hence, Our Lady was not the Mother of God (Bonnici, 1980:288).

4.3.4 The Inquiry on the Society 1916-1917

Archbishop P. Pace passed away on 29 July 1914 and a new Archbishop, Maurus Caruana, was elected in 1915. The new Archbishop, who for many years lived away from the Island, knew little about Fr George or the Society. Archbishop Caruana was very worried about the rumours against the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society. Even the press was portraying the Society and its members in a very negative way. Archbishop Caruana asked Fr George to go to his palace because he wanted to have a clear picture of what this Society was doing.

The Archbishop purportedly asked Fr George with a *gentle* look: "Are you the head, the guide of this Society?" Fr George replied: 'Your grace, I am no head, no guide I am your servant, a simple priest who serves in your diocese." To these words the Archbishop reportedly became docile as a lamb (Montonati, 2003:52). After the meeting the Archbishop ordered an Ecclesiastical Commission to look into the activities of the Society on 3 March 1916 (AAM, 1918-1919:246). Archbishop Caruana wanted the Commission to examine in details the aims and methods of the Society, as well as the content of the teachings of its members, and to present a report on their findings and opinions (Bonnici, 1980: 36, 349; Montonati, 2003: 49). This was indeed a matter of life or death for the Society.

This inquiry lasted for a number of months. The first person to be questioned was Fr George who appeared six times before the Commission. During one of the sessions, a priest asked Fr George: "Teaching theology to unrefined lay persons?" (Bonnici, 1981:170). He replied: "Should we keep for ourselves what we have learnt at the Seminary?" Eugenio Borg and Giannina Cutajar were also required to testify (Bonnici, 1981:49, 51). Testimonies and opinions were also heard from parish priests who had branches of the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society within their parish. Fr George and his members declared on oath before the church authorities that they had always condemned the false teachings of M. Dimech and M. Camilleri (Bonnici, 1981:340, n.8).

After many deliberations, the Commission concluded that much good was being done through the teaching of catechism. In the final report to Archbishop M. Caruana, the members of the Commission of the Inquiry gave a favourable opinion of the

M.U.S.E.U.M. Society. They generally approved of its work and methods and the contents of the teachings of its members. However, they recommended an alteration of the name. The Society was to be called "The Congregation of Catechists Sons and Daughters of the Pope" (AAM, 1918-1919:319). Archbishop Caruana, however, had yet to be convinced before granting formal recognition to this new lay Society. Although Archbishop M. Caruana decided to tolerate the Society and approved it informally, he did not approve it in a formal, official way.

The Church still kept an eye on the Founder and the Society. One day a priest presented himself unannounced during one of Fr George's meetings, the latter was as usual surrounded by youths. The priest asked Fr George to choose one from the group and asked him to talk about any topic. Fr George called a boy who without hesitation in front of everybody explained the three duties that each one has towards God, towards his neighbour and himself. The boy ended his exposition by quoting the famous saying of St Benedict Joseph Labré (1748-1783): "To please God one should have three hearts in one: a heart of fire for God, a heart of flesh for his neighbour and a heart of bronze for himself" (Montonati, 2003:54). The priest congratulated Fr George and went away very enthusiastic with what he saw. From then on, the Archbishop of Malta had only words of praise for the Society.

4.3.5 The Official Canonical Approval of the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society in 1932

Archbishop M. Caruana had to be convinced before granting formal recognition to this new lay Society. Therefore, in 1931, he asked Mgr A. Bonnici, whom he held in very high esteem, to carry out another inspection about the aims and methods of the Society, the contents of the teachings of its members, and the activities of the Society in general, on the diocesan level as well as in the centres of the many parishes of the diocese. The Archbishop was still undecided whether to give it the formal official canonical approval or not.

In his written and verbal report, Mgr Bonnici spoke in a very favourable way about the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society and explained to the Archbishop that the aims of the Society, and the teachings and methods given by the members of this Society were completely in agreement with the doctrine of the Catholic Church (Montonati, 2003:43). Mgr Bonnici also explained that the SDC Society gives a deep spiritual formation and a good religious knowledge to its members, males and females, young and old; and they spend their life in work and prayer, in a spirit of penance and self-denial. He also told the

Archbishop about the great dedication and the numerous sacrifices of the members of this Society who were teaching catechism to children and adults in the various parishes of Malta (Bonnici, 1989:245). In fact, many priests and religious men and women owed their vocation to the centres of the Society when they were children and still young.

After the favourable report of Mgr Bonnici, the Archbishop asked Fr George to draft a set of rules for the governance of the Society (Bonnici, 1989:245). Fr George did as requested and the official formal canonical approval was issued on 12 April 1932. The Archbishop ordered that the name of the Society should be changed to "*Societas Doctrinæ Christianæ*" (Society of Christian Doctrine – SDC) (AAM, *Suppliche*, 1932:11, n.133). After twenty-five years of tribulation, the prayer of all was heard. This caused a great joy not only to its Founder but also to all the members of the Society, now the Society could work with full, official and canonical approval of the Roman Catholic Church (Bonnici, 1989:249, 251).

To celebrate this long awaited day, Fr George and his members held a Mass of thanksgiving. In his emotional speech, Archbishop M. Caruana addressed the Founder and his members: "You are my right hand!" (Bonnici, 1989:251). The *Te Deum* (Thanksgiving) was sung. Now that the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society was approved by the Church, the members became more conscious of their role in life, and the aims of their Society of which they were to be a witness. Their personal sanctification, the teaching of children and youths, and full solidarity with the church were the main aims of every member of the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society. The Archbishop now granted Fr George and his Society a free hand all over his diocese, trusting them and confiding in them unreservedly (SDC, 2010:1).

After the approval of the Society by the Church a new period of fertile activity was ushered. Fr George began to publish catechetical books in Maltese for his members to help them teach others become good Christians. These were written in simple language for everyone to understand and in view of a sound reflection on the main truths of faith (Informatio, 1997:49). Fr George continued with his intense pastoral work: celebrating Mass, preaching, hearing confessions, giving advice and comfort to many burdened out persons, and directing SDC members spiritually. Fr George was surely inspired by the words of Jesus: "Whoever wants to follow me is to deny himself daily, carry his cross and follow me" (Mt. 16:24). In fact, he wanted the members to repeat these words daily

as an act of resignation to God's will while holding a cross in their hand and kissing it when they say the word "daily"(AAM, 1918-1919:261).

With the outbreak of the Second World War the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society was adversely affected. When the bombs began to rain down, rocking and shaking the walls of countless houses, hundreds and thousands of Maltese had to leave their homes and find shelter in various villages or were even evacuated in the sister island of Gozo. Most of the SDC members together with their families had to move to other parishes. As a result, new SDC centres were opened in these new parishes. In fact, in Gozo the first centre for boys was opened in 1941 during the war. The ways of the Lord are truly mysterious, while the enemy was mercilessly bombing churches and holy shrines in Malta; the Word of God was being sown by SDC in new parishes. This was like a micro diaspora of the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society in the Maltese islands.

During the war, Fr George went to live in the village of Zebbug, in the south-west of Malta, with the Society's live-in community. Because of the danger of air-raids his activity and visits to the centres slowed down. When all civil and religious activities were suspended, Fr George went on in spite of all difficulties. Fr George never lost hope in God, and said that he who confides in God will never be abandoned by Him. However, he did not want to stop the regular weekly Wednesday meetings for the members, therefore, these meetings were held once a month, on a Sunday. In the meantime he did not remain idle; but spent more time writing, and later printing literature as soon as the war was over.

The Society continued to expand in the early fifties, and saw the birth of the Society of Christian Doctrine in Australia in 1952. Fr George sent a few members to Australia to start teaching catechism and open centres of the Society there. This was a milestone in the history of the Society. The first centre was officially opened in West Melbourne in 1956. The female section was established in Australia in 1962. When the Founder died in 1962, there were already six centres in Australia.

In 1952, Archbishop M. Gonzi requested Pope Pius XII to nominate Fr George as Monsignor or, as known at the time, a *Papal Secret Chamberlain*. Fr George was not glad about this nomination, never donned a Monsignor's vestment and never bothered to confirm his nomination. Hence, in accordance with Roman dispositions regarding those who fail to follow procedural instructions, Fr George ceased to be a Monsignor

with the death of Pope Pius XII in 1958. Therefore he was a Monsignor who ceased to be. Fr George again became a simple priest; after all, this was his wish (Bonnici, 1989:408-417).

4.4 An Outstanding Preacher

Fr George had one objective in life, to grow in the love of God. This is the richest virtue as it unites human beings to the will of God. As an outstanding preacher; he emphasized the evil of sin (Bonnici, 1989:107). His sermons were sometimes two or three hours long and did not follow rhetoric pattern. Fr George had a persuasive word and used to teach about the fundamental truth of the Roman Catholic faith, that is, the Holy Trinity and the mystery of the Incarnation, Our Lady, and the sacrament of reconciliation besides other spiritual issues. His lively faith, simple words and phrases were clear and incisive and induced his listeners to love God (Summarium, 1997:89). When he delivered his sermon, it was his personal conviction of what he was saying that enkindled his listeners.

Fr George delivered talks in plain, simple language that could be understood even by uneducated people, often narrating stories and experiences from his life and sometimes applying his sense of humour. The Founder had a certain charisma that emanated from him and he drew both adults and children towards his preaching. Fr George had "a sweet tooth," used to give children sweets which he blessed to save them from illness; and even in the hope of attracting them to Roman Catholic doctrine. In fact, the main publication of the SDC Society was given the title of *Xehda Ghasel* (Honeycomb). His way of presenting catecheses was much more powerful than that of other priests. Besides teaching in M.U.S.E.U.M. centres, he also gave talks in churches and in open-air squares in most towns and villages on Malta and Gozo.

These religious talks in open-air squares were organized by the Society and were called *Sajdiet*, that is, "catches of fish" (from the gospel image of the fishing-net). The idea and word were taken from the Gospels (Mt. 4:19; Mk. 1:17; Lk. 5:1-11; Jn. 21:1-14). Fr George was a man of God for every person, as he was aptly described (Bonnici, 1989:10). Through his talent for people and flair for words he was capable of striking a resonating cord in whoever listened to him. Fr George made his listeners aware not only of the rewards and kindness of God, but also of his justice and punishment. He was capable of transmitting spiritual life to persons from various walks of life: rich or poor,

intellectuals or not. People were attracted by his powerful message to reform themselves.

Fr George also taught and lived the virtue of humility, mortification, forgiveness, the will of God, the power of prayer, and detachment from material things. It was not a simple exposition of faith: he frequently succeeded to transform his concepts into prayer (Montonati, 2003:61). Fr George emphasized the thought on the presence of God. When he preached about meekness he quoted Matthew: "Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light" (Mt. 11:30). This was one of the virtues he stressed; he used to tell his listeners: "Do not dare to recite the 'Our Father' if you have not heartily forgiven those who have harmed you, because instead of forgiveness you will get a punishment" (Commission, 1965:33). Many people who heard him preach and came into contact with him changed their way of life and became good Christians (Bonnici, 1989:62-64). His sermons or open-air religious talks were held in various parishes and people from all walks of life used to flock in their hundreds to listen to Fr George. As a preacher, he was much sought after, and when the news ran through the town or village that he was on his way there, all would come to hear him speak.

Our Lady was always one of the topics of his sermons. She had a special place in the life of Fr George. He always said that one should never lose hope of saving his soul, because Our Lady is always ready to intervene for man with her Son, as once she did at the Wedding in Cana (Informatio, 1997:76). Fr George was convinced that the conversion of sinners and the perseverance of practising Christians come directly from God through Our Lady. The great devotion he had towards the Virgin Mary he wanted to instil not only in his members but in all his listeners. The beautiful prayers of praise in his book the *Museum Watch* are a proof of his love to the Blessed Virgin. For more than a hundred times daily, the SDC members say "Blessed be the Virgin Mary" after having said "Blessed be Jesus Christ." In the Rules of his Society, he wanted to make sure that the formation of his members be based on the Marian piety. When he referred to the Miraculous Medal, many times he used to relate the incident of an SDC member who was involved in a traffic accident, the steering wheel was pressed to his chest against the Miraculous Medal which was indented with the impact, while he was spared unscratched.

Fr George enjoyed a good sense of humour, and knew how to amuse people with his words; he would relate a comic episode, draw the moral from it and make them

conscious of their calling as Christians. His sterling sense of humour served him many times to win people on various occasions: when preaching in church, in the street, and in open-air squares. As he grew older he would jokingly say: "My father has died, the professor has died and I, with just one lung, am still alive" (Commission, 1965:11). As a preacher nobody was excluded from his attention. Fr George had the ability to adapt the perfection of the spiritual life to the housewife and workman, to rich and poor, from the highest to the lowest strata of society (SDC, 2010:1-2).

4.4.1 A Prolific Writer

Fr George was a remarkable writer who also taught through his writings and publications. His writings date back to the early years of the Society of Christian Doctrine. The Founder wrote on various aspects, but three virtues stood out in his lively sermons and in his books: humility, meekness and right intention. He continued writing for a wider circle of readers to the very last months of his life. Fr George devoted many hours to writing in order to provide pedagogical material for his members, texts for teaching the children, and used to stay until late night preparing his sermons and other spiritual material. His home aide, Nellie Bartolo testified that very often he used to burn a candle [literally, he lived in great poverty] (SDC, 2010:1).

Fr George wanted to disseminate theological knowledge among all citizens. He introduced a new style of writing, seen in his 1947-publication *Is-Sakrarju ta'l-Ispirtu ta' Kristu* (The Sanctuary of the Christ's Spirit). Fr George had a vision of a Christian life lived to its fullness and perfection by lay people actively engaged in the world and was convinced that the call to holiness was a universal call. He published thousands of handbills and leaflets to be distributed for free to the islanders; and also wrote more than one hundred and forty books and many pamphlets. These were the heritage he wanted to leave to his Society (Formosa, 1992: [32] 3), but he left his heritage also to the Maltese society and to the whole Church, now that he is a saint.

Fr George began to publish his manuscripts in 1909. His early writings were in paragraph form and on various themes: Holy Communion, Faith, the love of God and neighbour and the right intention. He started to publish *Il-Karti Manwali* (The Manual Papers) (Formosa, 1992: [32] 3-8) in 1945; and also produced many spiritual manuals, as well as documents, in order to impart his spirit to his followers. Fr George also wrote a great number of books on dogma, morals and spirituality in Maltese, the language of

the common people and published numerous booklets with prayers for private use of his members and for popular devotion.

All his books except two were written in Maltese. The sources of his teaching were the Sacred Scripture, the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and human experience. He felt the need for religious material to be provided in Maltese for the theological, moral and spiritual formation of the members. In order to be well trained, to be good catechists of children and youths they needed material in hand for their meetings. His writing reflected his profound thoughts, practical wisdom and great knowledge, which provided a solid foundation of wisdom among the Maltese at the time.

Religious books in Maltese were completely lacking at the time, salaries were low and people could not afford to buy books. Besides, literate Maltese preferred to read in English or Italian (Formosa, 1992: [32] 3-8). It is interesting to note that he, urged by humility, never wrote his name on his books. The only 'name' that appears on these books is 'M.U.S.E.U.M. Society'. Since his death the books published by the founder bear his name as the author (Bonnici, 1989: 258-371).

Among his books *Il-Pagna tax-Xahar* (The Monthly Page) was a book with a daily page to read or meditate on various important aspects how to lead a Christian life throughout the year; and at the same time every month presented a different theme and style. For example, in January: as if the Guardian Angel is speaking to the soul on various subjects; in June: as if Jesus is talking to the soul about the right intention; in December: a deep study about Christ, *Verbum Dei Caro* (Commission, 1965:24). This book is regarded as the best work of Fr George, although it is difficult to say which his most beautiful book is. Other great works are: *The Right Intention, the Sanctuary of the Christ's Spirit, A Letter about Meekness* and many others.

Like St Paul, Fr George was a preacher of the word and a writer of deep spirituality. Fr George influenced his listeners not by a series of theories or organised thoughts but by his lived experience. He explained the profound meaning of life, how human life is a preparation for the next life and how human beings are always expecting death. The spirituality of Fr George urges one to turn to Christ, to live open to the will of God and to journey on with perseverance. Humankind has to struggle to bring about a transformation of the self and of the world. St Augustine in the *Confessions*,

"Introduction" to Book X says that Conversion was not a triumphant ending but the beginning of a battle (Blaiklock, 1983:237).

Fr George's spirituality is deeply marked in his book *Gymnasium for the Spiritual Life* which he wrote in the 1930s. This work consists of a collection of instructions taken from various eminent writers on spiritual life. This book was specifically intended as a manual for lay spiritual directors; and Christ as the teacher is addressing the reader and suggesting ways of training for spiritual combat. It is made up of short instructions which the reader is asked to read daily and consider seriously. Fr George gives instructions how to wrestle with various temptations and in the introduction he compares the Christian to a soldier who has to train himself continuously in time of peace, so that when war breaks out he will be ready to defend himself and achieve victory (Preca:1930/1996:10). Fr George compares the Christian life to a sea-voyage fraught with perils and difficulties. The Christian is a voyager who is trying to make it to the harbour's safety. How can anyone steer a rowing boat without using oars? To reach the port of salvation one has to steer his vessel by means of two oars: silence and patience (Instruction 3).

Fr George instructs his reader what to take off before a spiritual wrestling contest, how one must strip oneself of everything that can afford the enemy a hold on him (Instruction 15). He affirms that victory is only possible when human thought is armed with faith (Instruction 13). Faith is the foundation on which the spiritual self has to be constructed. In time of struggle and temptation what one needs is prayer, which implies strong faith. Prayer is the only means for achieving victory (Instruction 16). Members are instructed that spiritual perfection consists in love, and in love there is no fear. When one loves God, who is love, God abides in him and him in God (Instruction 21). Like love, spirituality needs to be experienced rather than merely talked about or exalted in words. A true soldier of Christ is the one who follows and emulates the leader. Many Christians claim to be soldiers but in reality they are not. Their way of life contradicts their claim (Instruction 75).

In the *Gymnasium for the spiritual life* Fr George suggests the use of exercise as a means of combat when man has to face many circumstances in everyday life with various temptations (Instruction 85); while in *Il sacrario dello spirito di Cristo* (The Sanctuary of the Christ's Spirit), the exercise is intended to help the Christian become more Christ-like by nurturing and preserving the spirit of Christ in him (62-63). Fr

George always presented Christian life as a continuous struggle or a pilgrimage. *The Sanctuary of the Christ's Spirit* (Preca:1947/2009) is a step-by-step (92 steps) of a spiritual journey to do away with the old self and put on a new self, so that everyone can live a new life. With St Paul one can say: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Sanctuary 7).

Fr George regards human life simply as a journey from God and back to God. Like St Augustine he views the human being as a restless pilgrim, longing and seeking for the only resting place who is God (*Il-Vuci tal-Custodiu*, (The voice of the Custodian) (Preca:1932/2004:12-13). The book *Il-Kors Tal-Pellegrin Nisrani* (The Course of the Christian Pilgrim) is a textual pilgrimage in which the Christian pilgrim imagines Christ accompanying him/her on a journey here on earth. This pilgrimage transforms the Christian and makes him/her more Christ-like (Preca, 1944/1998). In this book he exhorts his members that this world is not our heaven or the reward for virtue, but it is the place of trial: a battleground. It is only by faith that the Christian is able to keep going on his/her spiritual journey. Faith is the only certainty and support.

The Great Book (Preca, 1925) is one of the earliest publications of the Founder. It consists of profound meditations on Christ Crucified. In this book at the top of every page is written: 'Turn your gaze on to your Divine Master." Through Jesus Christ, God made it possible for humankind to encounter him as person to person. *The Great Book* throws light on how a committed Christian and an apostle should mould their life. The Founder concluded the book by urging his members to be one with the best and greatest friend and brother, Jesus Christ crucified, in such a way that they will never move their eyes away from him throughout their pilgrimage on this planet.

Fr George used to say that the world was after publicity, and advertising can be good to promote commerce, but many times this is harmful to spiritual life. Today, humanity is living in a time of showing off: statistics, figures, big notices, photos, advertisements, lists of money, and concerts for charity. Religious communities often partake in such advertising campaigns. Fr George was never after such things, he was not after statistics that always look back but he always wanted to look forward. For him it was not the quantity but the quality. The fact that Fr George succeeded to teach theology in a very simple way to illiterate persons was in itself an academic miracle; at the same time he was promoting the Maltese language. Maltese became an official language together with English in 1934.

4.4.2 The Gift of Prophecy, a Visionary and a Healer

Fr George purportedly had supernatural gifts such as that of foreseeing. For example, a month before the First World War (1914-1918) Fr George foretold that a World War was imminent and that Malta and Gozo were to remain unharmed (Summarium, 1997:16-17, 73). G. Caruana testified that in 1940 when Italy entered the war, Fr George assured him that in the Second World War (1939-1945) Malta would not be spared, that numerous bombs will be dropped on the island and there will be many casualties (Summarium, 1997:213). He could tell introspection of hearts by feeling and telling if a person was chaste or needed to go to confession (Summarium, 1997:213).

Fr George was reportedly also a visionary: during the time of the Inquiry about the Society, one day after celebrating Mass he had a vision of a bearded Dominican who told him "Do not be afraid, the Lord will be with you" (Summarium, 1997:17). Soon after he went to a chapel in an orphanage in order to meditate about this vision, and as soon as he went into the chapel he realised that the altarpiece represented a painting of St Vincent Ferreri. Very often he used to relate this episode to his members for he believed that perhaps it was St Vincent Ferreri who appeared to him (Summarium, 1997:17).

G. Micallef in his testimony related that once Fr George had a vision where he saw Lucifer and his companions, and Lucifer exclaimed that they could not do anything against the SDC members because they carry an invincible badge "*Verbum Dei caro factum est*" (Summarium, 1997:38).

Fr George was reportedly also a healer. Pia Mifsud Bonnici, a 24 old young woman, was to be operated for cancer but before the operation her brother went to see Fr George who gave him a badge with the words *Verbum Dei caro factum est* and told him to place it on the ailing part of her body. As soon as Pia was wheeled into the operating theatre, the pain immediately left her and felt cured. The surgeon checked her again and the operation was not performed. This lady died later at the age of 64 (Summarium, 1997:17, 66, 85).

4.4.3 A Silent Organiser

Almost until the end of his life, Fr George continued to preach and teach in all towns and villages in Malta and Gozo. Many were delighted to hear his words and deeds, and

were enchanted by his simplicity, humility and meekness. The catechetical work in all the parishes is still the main direction of the Society of Christian Doctrine through their centres. The Society has also other establishments in Malta and elsewhere, which are witness to his charisma, that is, secondary schools, a trade school, bookshops, theological library and a printing press that specialises in and helps to promote religious publications.

The need of a Motherhouse (Headquarters) for the Society had long been felt. On the feast of the Assumption of Our Lady in 1954 (Marian Year) Fr George blessed the land on which the building was to take place. The foundation stone was laid on 2 October of the same year. Part of the building was ready and Fr George began to hold the general meetings inside it by June 1956. This part of the building was blessed on 17 June when the Founder said that this place ought to be "the forge where sin will be destroyed" (Commission, 1965:43). Fifty years had elapsed since the foundation of the Society, and Fr George confirmed that the SDC was the work of God in 1957. Today the Motherhouse is a beehive of activities. The foundation stone of the Chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal was laid on 23 February 1958, and was finished after the death of Fr George. It adjoins the Motherhouse.

Fr George wielded a silent army for Christ: common men and women well formed in their spiritual life. They are a beacon to others, due to their behaviour in everyday life, whether at home, at work or in society. Today the Society has ninety centres and eight hundred and fifty members. They are responsible for approximately 20,000 boys and girls in the Maltese islands, in Australia, Peru, Sudan, the United Kingdom, Kenya and Albania. The words which the Founder frequently addressed to the Society were: teach, teach, and teach, something of it will remain. These words still resound in the ears of his members and are lived by many faithful.

Fr George went to a public Notary, and made his Spiritual Testament as his heritage to his Society in 1958 (Commission, 1965:62). In his Testament he expressed his love for all the members of his Society. To his beloved children, boys and girls, in Malta, Gozo and all over the globe, he wished 'Peace and Blessing', in the name of God and the Virgin Mary. "Monsignor G. Preca", after his death would bequeath his wealth which did not consist of gold and silver and other perishable goods, but the sentiments of love and warning of a father. What he asked of them was, to be proud in observing the Rules of the Society; not to add or lessen anything to the Holy Rules as approved by the

Church. Should there be any accidental change, it has to be temporarily. This, he left to his heirs – members (Commission, 1965:62). In this way he remains alive not physically, but through the holiness of his Society. Fr George wanted to lead a holy life and to make others holy, both in his lifetime as well as after his death.

A new organisation was approved by Archbishop M. Gonzi in 1960 which comprises a group of ex-members and men most of whom are married. This is called the "Co-operators of the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society". They attend meetings once a week to hear and meditate upon the Word of God (Informatio, 1997:16).

4.4.4 Fr George's Death and Legacy

For fifty-five years, Fr George did his utmost so that the SDC Society would flourish. During the last few months of his life he began to experience serious health problems and was forced to retire indoors. His last few days, he spent very calmly and quietly in his room. He celebrated Mass at home, in his little chapel, which he called "My little cathedral" (Commission, 1965:49). The General Superior of the Society went to visit Fr George on the 24 July. The Founder blessed him and told him: "Through you I bless all the Society" (Commission, 1965:50, Summarium, 1997:86). The following day Fr George was reading the gospel in Italian, and when the sister who was looking after him, asked if he was tired, he answered: "No, no, I am delighted with the Gospel of Christ" (Commission, 1965:50).

In the morning on the 26 July, Fr George received Holy Communion, after profound silence for about ten minutes, all of a sudden Fr George began to say: "*Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus*" (Glory be to God on high and peace on earth to men of good will) after some time he began to thank God: *"Te Deum laudamus*." (Thank you, we praise you oh God). Later, those around him heard him say while sobbing emotionally "God, forgive me!" His last effort was: he lifted up his head, looked at the image of St Michael as if to defend him during the last battle; then he turned his eyes to the image of Our Lady of Sorrows and lastly kissed the *Verbum Dei* (Commission, 1965:53-54).

In the meantime everybody in Malta was inquiring about Fr George's health. All SDC members would have liked to be near him, but that was not possible. Members from every centre met in their respective parish Church to pray in front of the Blessed Sacrament. At the Seminary ninety-seven priests were in the course of their retreat and

between seven and eight in the evening they were praying for Fr George in front of the Blessed Sacrament, when news arrived that Fr George was nearing his lasts moments (Commission, 1965:98). With the setting of the sun Fr George closed his eyes and rested in peace.

It was exactly during this hour, at nineteen forty-five, that the Fr George went to meet the Risen Lord on 26 July 1962 at the age of eighty-two years, five months and fourteen days. When the sad news were broadcasted that Fr George died the whole population of both islands were in great mourning, especially the members of the society. The media and all the newspapers gave great prominence to the event. Condolences were extended by members from Australia, Brazil and other countries. Banners were lowered at half mast. The following day, was a day of mourning throughout the Maltese islands.

Fr Georg's funeral took place on the 28 July 1962. His wish was to have a very simple funeral, but thousands and thousands of Maltese thronged the streets of Hamrun, to pay their last respect to Fr George (Summarium, 1997:19). Among the sea of people, many were stammering: "A Saint is dead; he is already praying for us". His funeral was more like a feast (Summarium, 1997:169). A *de Requie* Mass was celebrated at Hamrun parish church after which Bishop E. Galea delivered a speech illustrating the dedicated and saintly life of Fr George.

The cortege left the parish church of St Caetan, Hamrun to the church of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal at *Blata l-Bajda*. A special permission was accorded from the Ministry of Health that Fr George could be buried in the crypt of the church, near the Society's Motherhouse. It was on the scale of a state funeral, the Archbishop, the Governor, the Prime Minister, Church dignitaries and various prominent personalities took part in the funeral. Fr George's funeral was a monument of his work. The Church of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal soon became a venue for constant pilgrimages.

After his death many persons had remarkable stories to relate about him, and to proclaim his sanctity. Some people spoke of cures at a word or a glance, others of the mysterious power which was transmitted from him to others at the touch of a hand, leaving them strangely calm and peaceful. Many looked at him as a miraculous healer. Fr George was canonised only a few years after his death. The two miracles attributed to Fr George were: the healing of a man who suffered from a detached retina and an infant who developed liver complications a few days after birth.

4.5 Miracles Attributed to Fr George Preca

The first miracle accredited to Fr George occurred on 3 February 1964 with the unexplainable healing of Mr Charles Zammit Endrich, who suffered from a detached retina and was on the verge of going completely blind. The consultant dealing with his case, Dr Vincent Tabone (later President of the Republic of Malta) was preparing to carry out the operation on the retina of the left eye. Mrs Zammit Endrich, wife of Charles, in her prayers was asking God through the intercession of Fr George to mercifully save her husband's eyesight. A friend, member of the Society (SDC) happened to be visiting Charles and encouraged him to have faith in the power of prayer through the intercession of Fr George. This friend placed a relic of Fr George (a shoe lace) underneath Charles' pillow while they continued to pray together for healing. The following day, Dr Tabone checked the condition of Charles' retina, and he could hardly believe what had happened and certainly could not explain it, he found Charles reading! The retina was healed.

In his testimony Dr V. Tabone declared that he could not explain this recovery, which was quite rapid, having occurred in the brief interim between his last visit and the complete cure. Dr Tabone prolonged his examination and ended by saying: "For me, a believing doctor, this cure is acceptable as a miracle. I could also add that the reputation of sanctity of the servant of God, Fr George Preca is known by everybody in Malta. I in all my long years of experience could confirm that I have never come across a case of spontaneous recovery under similar conditions in the professional field" (Congregatio Di Causis Sanctorum 1999a: 10-11.)

The second miracle accredited to Fr George happened around two months after he was declared Blessed in May 2001. The case was that of an infant who developed liver complications a few days after his birth. The child was examined at St Luke's Hospital in Malta and eventually transferred to London's King College Hospital, for further treatment. Doctors decided that the child could only survive if given a liver transplant; this happened on 14 July. Although a date for the transplant was established, it was later discovered that the donor was not a compatible match.

At this point the child's family turned to God through prayer, through the intercession of Fr George. A glove used during the exhumation of the priest a few months earlier was placed upon the infant's body. The child's liver started to function normally on 20

July and within another four days doctors decided that the baby no longer required a liver transplant. The Ecclesiastical Tribunal heard thirty-eight Maltese witnesses including two medical experts, Dr A. Caruana Galizia and Dr S. Attard Montalto, and Professor Anil Dhawan from King's College Hospital, who confirmed that there was no scientific explanation for the sudden improvement in the child's health (Maltese Culture Movement, 2012:2-4).

Eric Catania, the baby who inexplicably recovered from liver failure in 2001 received his first Holy Communion from Pope Benedict XVI during Fr George's canonisation in Rome on 3 June, 2007. As he received his first Holy Communion he received also a reassuring pat from the Pope. Eric was present in St Peter's Square for that memorable occasion together with his parents and younger sister. Today Eric is thirteen years old and enjoys the best of health.

4.6 Summing-up

Fr George was one of the popular Maltese priests of the twentieth century; many believe that he brought a revolution in Malta's Church by redefining the status and role of the laity. During his lifetime Fr George was revered as a saint by most of the Maltese, now he is proclaimed as a Saint by the Universal Church. Quite a number of Maltese (the author included) regard themselves fortunate that Saint George Preca was someone who walked about the streets with us five decades ago. We spoke to him and received his blessings personally; we listened to his teaching on several occasions. St George Preca blessed our rosary-beads and urged us to pray, especially to recite the Holy Rosary. The life of St George Preca is a monument that cannot rot or be destroyed by time.

Saint George Preca was an instrument in the hands of God for the revitalisation of the faith of the Maltese islands, which according to tradition was first transmitted to its inhabitants by Saint Paul, the great apostle of the Gentiles two thousand years ago. A new parish church has been recently built in a new residential area called *Swatar* which became an Autonomous Pastoral Zone. *Swatar* was declared a parish by Archbishop P. Cremona; by a decree on 8 November 2008. The parish church is dedicated to the first Maltese canonized saint: *Saint George Preca*. The liturgical feast of St George Preca is held in Malta on 9 May.

This study shows how St George Preca was ahead of time fifty years before Vatican Council II. He also proposed the five Luminous Mysteries of the Holy Rosary.

Furthermore, St Preca played a very important role in safeguarding the Catholic faith during the British administration – thanks to the sound catechetical formation given by Fr George; his great efforts to found the Society of Christian Doctrine; and the amount of religious and spiritual literature he provided in Maltese. His perseverance in following the mission he wanted to accomplish, together with his exemplary life is reflected in the living monument of the Society of Christian Doctrine – a witness to the holiness of Fr George Preca, which led to his canonisation.

CHAPTER 5

MGR DE PIRO AND ST G. PRECA: AN EVALUATION OF THEIR LIFE AND WORK

5. Evaluations of Mgr De Piro and Fr George

In this chapter an evaluation of the life and work of Mgr De Piro and St George Preca will help to show how in spite of all the difficulties encountered by both Founders, they never gave up their ideal. Although the local Church Authorities and the Roman Catholic Church in Rome could not understand their aims, they had the courage to carry on with their work through their great faith and prayer. A comparison of the characteristics of Mgr De Piro and Fr George will be elicited towards the end of the chapter. Hence, we will be able to decide whether their contributions were instrumental or not in order to subdue Protestantism and to safeguard the Roman Catholic faith during the British rule.

5.1 Evaluation of the Life and Work of Mgr De Piro

To evaluate the work and life of Mgr De Piro is not easy. When one considers the amount of responsibilities which he assumed – in spite of his delicate health – and yet was capable to accomplish all his duties almost to perfection, one comes to the conclusion that he was a chosen man of God. According to accounts Mgr De Piro had an extraordinary personality; but was a very unassuming man. He was rich and noble, but a very humble person. His nobility was reflected in his character.

In Chapter 3, we tried to show briefly the various stages of Mgr De Piro's life which reflected the good upbringing he received at home, both as a child and as a teenager. His parents were a strong example of both human and moral virtues (Bonnici, 1988:5-10); hence, this played an important part in the formation of their son's character. During difficult times, he always turned to God and said *Fiat voluntas tua* (Thy will be done), this he inherited from his mother.

Mgr De Piro was able to dialogue from an early age; in fact, when he was only fourteen and felt the first inclinations to the priesthood he discussed the subject with his father. He was a man of great faith; before taking an important decision, he used to reflect deeply and write down the *pros* and *cons* in order to make the right decision (DPA, 2001:1). He did this before deciding to go for the priesthood, and before refusing the

offer to join the *Accademia dei nobili* (Ecclesiastic Diplomatic Corps) (DPA, 1988:2-3). When Mgr De Piro was studying in Rome he used to write regularly to his mother (DPA, 1989:1-2), this was another facet of his character: a very dutiful person.

Although the beginning of his priestly mission was ushered with health problems; he never gave up his ideal. After his convalescence in Switzerland, and his return to Malta as a newly ordained priest, Mgr De Piro had to make yet another choice. He could live like his brother, Fr Sante, as a priest in his family palace, surrounded with all the comfort of a noble family, or he could face the challenge of founding a Missionary Society. Mgr De Piro again opted in favour of the poor, this time, for those lacking the good news.

One of the main aims of Mgr De Piro was catechetical evangelisation to Maltese children and youths. The teaching of catechism was taught by the catechists of the Society. Mgr De Piro managed to organise catechism classes that catered for boys of various ages; and paid from his own pocket for premises where the children could learn catechism (DP, 1988-1992:1082). The Founder and the members of his Society prepared boys for their First Holy Communion and Confirmation. Mgr De Piro felt great responsibility that the word of God was to be addressed in the best possible way to all the faithful.

The village of Birkirkara was densely populated and catechism lessons were shared between MSSP and SDC catechists. One section of the teaching of catechism for boys was held at the Oratory, one of the centres of the MSSP Society; the other section was under the care of the members of the Society of Christian Doctrine – M.U.S.E.U.M. (DPA, 1997:87-88). Mgr De Piro knew that the teaching of catechism was a must due to the fact that the influence of Protestantism was greatly felt. Mgr De Piro made it a point to teach catechism and form committed catechists in his Society as lay brothers.

One of the attributes to Mgr De Piro was that he acted as a father to the orphans and the poor. Mgr De Piro had a soft spot for the underprivileged, and used his wealth to help many people in need. A case in point is when he was director of the various institutes for poor and orphaned children – he was a true father-figure, not only to all the children and grown-ups, but also to those who looked after them as well. His father-figure was enhanced by his great care for the education and formation of these girls and boys as a

result of his balanced formation: loving but firm. Mgr De Piro gave all children under his care a holistic attention, both physically and spiritually (Bonnici, 1988:264).

Mgr De Piro helped several religious congregations in more ways than one. He helped them not only in their spiritual needs, but also financially and otherwise. When the economic situation of Malta was rather bad and there were no social services, many Maltese went through great hardships; Mgr De Piro was continuously forking out money for various Institutes (DP, 1987:7). In his capacity as director of ecclesiastical charitable institutes he never put any limit as to how many boys or girls there had to be in a particular home. He used to organise several activities to raise funds for those poor unfortunate children (DP, 1988-1992: 983).

His gratitude made him recognise and appreciate whatever was done to him personally (DP, 1988-1992:1056). Mgr De Piro enjoyed a limitless incentive and creativity. What helped him live his limitless incentive and creativity were his zeal, devoted dedication, responsibility, determination, courage, perseverance and consistency as already presented (DP, 1988-1992:799).

Mgr De Piro was a true leader by nature. On 9 June 1919 Bishop A. Portelli, Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Malta, declared Mgr De Piro a leader of the Maltese (Mallia, 1982:201). He worked in unity with others and delegated responsibilities. When he was director of St Joseph's Home, both in Malta and Gozo, he delegated the various administrative responsibilities of the Institute (Bonnici, 1988:234-235). Although director, he respected the roles of others; and gave a free hand to those responsible for the running of the place. Mgr De Piro had the ability to relate well with the employees of the entities under his care and seek the help of others (DPA, 1987:240). With regards to the ecclesiastical charitable institutes under his care, the director sought the cooperation of the Government ministries in order to get special financial concessions (DPA, 1988:12-15, 23).

The noble character of Mgr De Piro could be easily attested when instead of accepting to pursue his studies at the Ecclesiastical Academy, he left behind him a career full of prosperity and prestige and opted to go and help the poor boys in the orphanage of St Joseph's Home (DPA, 1988:1). Mgr De Piro was not after worldly honours, he preferred to carry out pastoral work; and at the back of his mind he had the foundation of the Missionary Society (DPA, 1988:6). The 'Missions' had been his dream since he

was very young (Bonnici, 1988:338). This idea gradually developed and he prayed over it.

Mgr De Piro was greatly devoted to his priestly vocation and to the ministry of evangelization. When he presented his project of a Missionary Society under the patronage of Saint Paul to the local Archbishop P. Pace, this was not an easy request. Like all Founders, he was faced with many difficulties. When he approached the local church authorities they discouraged him, saying that Maltese priests were very reluctant to leave their country (Bonnici, 1988:65). Later, there was a long period of written communication between Mgr De Piro and the Vatican; this was due to the fact that he was misunderstood. The Ecclesiastical Authorities in Rome thought that the Society was to be for the Maltese emigrants only and not for the *ad gentes* (to other people) (Bonnici, 1988:126-133).

Among those who were familiar with his thought were Cardinal La Fontaine (Bonnici, 1988:77) and Cardinal Van Rossum (Bonnici, 1988:118-119) of the Propagation of the Faith. Mgr De Piro was a man of great perseverance; and never took no for an answer. He had at heart the spiritual welfare of those Maltese who had to leave their country in search of a decent job to earn their living. Mgr De Piro was all the time thinking about the great harvest and the few labourers that work in the field of the Lord.

Soon after the Founder opened 'The little house of St Paul' a number of prospective members for his future Society, for whom he provided free education, took advantage of his generosity. However, they did not honour their promise and opted for something else. Some candidates who had joined the Society wanted only to benefit from it without any intention of becoming members (Bonnici, 1988:120). When his mother tried to draw his attention to it he replied that at least he was a great help to them. Mgr De Piro never held any grudge against any of these students, but kept praying for them. He had great faith in Divine Providence that the Lord would call other youths to join the Missionary Society of St Paul.

When Mgr De Piro was appointed Rector of the Major Seminary, he took great care of the seminarians, he provided for all their needs in a paternal way. During his office as Rector he made it a point that the seminarians were not only receiving a very good spiritual formation; but he also insisted to improve certain conditions in the Seminary which were beneficial both to students and employees (DPA, 2003:17). He did this in

his capacity as Rector when he presented the annual report to the Archbishop for the scholastic year 1919-1920 (DPA, 2003:14).

Mgr De Piro was also a member of the Commission for the Formation of Young Priests. In the years following the First World War, Malta was going through a time of transition and after leaving the Seminary newly ordained priests were encountering difficulties in their pastoral work. To help these young priests Archbishop M. Caruana set up a Commission that was made up of several experienced presbyters. Mgr De Piro was the first on the list of the members of the Commission (DPA, 2001:19).

On all accounts Mgr De Piro was a model and love for Christ; he dedicated his life for the service of other people. His heroic practice of virtues was the outcome of his saintly life: an example for both lay and religious persons. This came to be acknowledged by numerous persons from all walks of life and various ages. The people who came in contact with Mgr De Piro had nothing but words of praise for him

Mgr De Piro was a very meticulous person. This was remarked by his auditor in the way he kept his ledgers and files, they were always up to date (DPA, 2001:29-30). Mgr De Piro set a good example to all those who worked with him. When he was carrying out the duties as Secretary to the Archbishop M. Caruana, he was usually quick in answering all correspondence. In his role as Secretary, Mgr De Piro seized the opportunity to contact the Maltese who emigrated to other countries and the priests who were working with them (1989:26, 39, 44-45).

When Mgr De Piro started to publish the "St Paul Almanac of the Institute of the Missions" he focussed on the topic of living of the Christian life. He tried to keep the Maltese inhabitants *au courant* (up to date) of what the Maltese emigrants were benefitting from [missionary] Maltese Fathers, religious priests and nuns. The Founder was determined to evangelize Maltese migrants (Almanac, 1930:266-267). It was necessary for these emigrants to have Maltese missionaries to help them in their spiritual needs, before the new non-Christian environment would influence them without even realising it. In the Almanac Mgr De Piro presented also his deep theological and spiritual conviction.

In order to emphasize the great need of missionaries, Mgr De Piro in his article "Malta and God's call to the Missions" (Almanac, 1930:288) quoted the words of Christ: "Go

therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Mt. 28:19). In this command of the Lord, he wanted to show quite clearly who the sender of the evangelizers is (Almanac, 1930:288). He always made it a point to explain that the missionaries are working for God. In fact, Jesus is the Master of the missions. Mgr De Piro presented Jesus Christ as "The lord of the vast estate of the missions …" (Almanac, 1928:199).

A memorable day for Mgr De Piro was when the first missionary catechist of the Society of St Paul, Brother Joseph Caruana, one of the two members who joined the Society in 1910, went to Abyssinia to evangelise the *ad gentes* (to other people) country in June 1927. Mgr De Piro provided continuous support to the first missionary (Bonnici, 1988:353). Br Caruana wrote to the Founder and explained that it was not enough to baptise the pagans; they were extremely poor and needed money to help them. Once again Mgr De Piro turned to his mother; and with her help and that of a few benefactors a laboratory for the Ethiopia Missions was set up (Bonnici, 1988:355). This project was run by a group of pious women and it proved to be of great help in sending gifts and necessary items to Ethiopia (Almanac, 1928:195; 1930:274).

Mgr De Piro was according to some accounts a man of prayer. He prayed in church, at home, with the children and even when walking in the street, he always carried a rosary beads in his hand. At the time of his convalescence, in Switzerland, his best companion was prayer (DPA, 1988:3). After insisting on the importance of prayer with the members of his Society, he drew the missionaries' attention towards a personal good life. He was constantly reminding them of St Paul's words: "To God we are the fragrance of Christ ... " (2 Cor. 2:15). The Founder was all the time emphasising that while spreading the good news missionaries had to be always discreet in their apostolate.

In his article: *Joseph De Piro: A Friend of Paul's Heart*, Fr Tony Sciberras presents four reasons for the great love Mgr De Piro had for the poor and evangelization: (i) in spite of the many different services to civil authorities and to the Church, both local and universal – such as Secretary to Archbishop M. Caruana, seminary rector, sitting on various committees both civil and ecclesiastical – his love for the poor and for evangelization was always given first preference; (ii) while attending his activities, he never stopped practising his love for the poor and evangelization; (iii) while taking part in other activities, he managed to dedicate himself to the needs of the poor and of evangelization as in the *Sette Giugno Riots*. He sought that justice be done to Maltese

workers who were living in great poverty. Mgr De Piro evangelized through his preaching; (iv) while practising his love for the poor, at the same time he lived [his love] for evangelization (Sciberras, 2010:1-2).

In the archives at the Motherhouse one finds Mgr De Piro's sermons. No matter what the occasion or theme of his preaching, Christ was always the centre of his message. Many a time he opened his sermon quoting the words of St Paul. A favourite and frequent question was "who can separate us from Christ?" (Rom. 8:35). Mgr De Piro used to stress that Christ is our faith, and we should never depart from Him; Christ came into the world to save us sinners, and he always included himself as the first one (1 Tim. 1:15).

In his sermons Mgr De Piro, like Fr George, frequently referred to the Incarnation of the Lord. Throughout his life Mgr De Piro was greatly impressed by the passion and death of Christ, for us sinners; these mysteries influenced him since his early youth (DPA, 2001:1, 4). He wanted to transmit to his congregation that the Eucharist was the continuation of the Incarnation – the sacrament instituted by Jesus and through which Christ becomes one with us (DPA, 1987:77, 92-96, 114-116, 251). From the contents of his sermons, he seemed to adapt to the kind of congregation he was addressing (DPA, 1987:3vols).

Mgr De Piro was a fervent preacher of the word of God, every Sunday he delivered a homily; he was sought after by many people who found in him the gifts of a spiritual director. Mgr De Piro was very often asked to give courses of spiritual exercises during Lent and Advent, which used to be very well attended. He also gave a day or a week's retreat to Religious Orders and to Superiors of Religious Congregations. When one reads Mgr De Piro's sermons one catches a glimpse of the deep spirituality which animated his entire life and commitments. When preaching about Christian life, Mgr De Piro used to unfold the great value of the Christian life. Like Fr George, he often mentioned the four last things: death (DPA, 1987:4, 70,121, 129), judgement, hell, heaven (DPA, 1987:110, 125, 132).

Mgr De Piro was a man who brought peace. In 1922, the parishioners of the village of Gudja were divided in two groups, one group supported the main village feast, while the other favoured the secondary one (DPA, 2001:1). This conflict had been going on for years, until the Gudja parish priest gave up and closed the church. After about a month,

as a temporary solution, the Archbishop asked Mgr De Piro to fill this vacancy (Bonnici, 1988:301). He was quick to obey and in no time he succeeded in getting peace among the parishioners, and peace reigned again at Gudja village.

The Founder's humility was admired by one and all. His clothes carried no distinctive mark; he talked to every person he met; he ate the same food as the orphans, and used public transport to travel from one place to the other. He travelled by horse-driven cab or route bus with other people. His generosity knew no bounds, very often he found himself penniless and would beg someone to give him enough money for a bus or train fare to go back home (Bonnici, 1988: 193). De Piro always wanted to keep a low profile. When he went to the institute he never wore Monsignor's clothes.

Beside his pastoral work in various parishes; he served as an Effective Member of the General Committee of the XXIV International Eucharistic Congress (1913). When he was appointed Dean of the Metropolitan Chapter (DPA, 2001:25) he was responsible to lead delegations to the Archbishop rather frequently, as these were the consultative bodies with the Archbishop, due to the relations between Church and State at the time of crisis.

Mgr De Piro always contributed towards his country. He represented the Archbishop on the Committee of Peace Feasts after the First World War. When the War was over the Maltese Government wanted to organise some festivities to celebrate peace (DPA, 2001:28). Every time his Superiors assigned new work to him he always obliged. Although he was heavily committed with all the amount of work he had to accomplish, he always found time to attend meetings which often were time consuming.

When he was a member of the National Assembly (1919-1921) he fought for the right of the Roman Catholic Church to be represented in the Assembly, hence, he revealed himself to be a man in touch with the times. Mgr De Piro played a very important role in the *Sette Giugno Riots* (1919). As a true patriot he was involved to calm down the angry mob. During those sad events, he was close to the injured in the midst of firing. Mgr De Piro was a proof of the power of non-violence. To help the widows of the victims and those injured in the riots, a Commission was set up for a National cause and he was nominated cashier (Bonnici, 1988:297). Mgr De Piro was a great benefactor to Maltese society. He was not only an asset to the local church but also to his country.

Mgr De Piro was chosen as a member of the governing board of the Malta War Memorial Hospital for children in 1922 (DPA, 2001:37). He also contributed to his country as member of the Tourism Committee in 1927, to promote cultural tours of the island (DPA, 2001:45-56). Mgr De Piro was appointed as the Archbishop's representative on the Committee of Zammit Clapp Hospital in 1930 and 1931 (DPA, 2001:18). He played a vital role as Mediator between the Roman Catholic Church and the Prime Minister, Lord Strickland, between 1930 and 1932. When he took part in the Senate of the third Maltese Parliament (Schiavone, 1992:134), his interventions were very positive contributions to the social life of the Maltese.

The missionary dream of Mgr De Piro was realised after many years. In spite of all the difficulties he had to overcome, as Founder of the Missionary Society of St Paul, the result was very rewarding. It was through his deep faith, prayers, humility, hard work, patience, and perseverance that he managed to lay the foundation of the Society. Like St Paul, he wanted to sow the seed of this Missionary Society which flourished after his death. It was through his initiative, and unlimited generosity that he managed to buy the land where the Motherhouse was built.

One can describe Mgr De Piro as a wealthy man who lived in poverty. He taught his members how to avoid what was unnecessary, to take care of what they had and to ask their superior for what was needed (DP, 1992:13). Mgr De Piro used to give not only his money, but even his clothes and his own bed. He would sleep on the floor on a few sheets, only wearing the bare minimum, because the mattress and the other clothes were given for charity. The Founder never showed off his charity (DP, 1992:13). He gave his time, energy, health, rest, and even his own food.

Although Mgr De Piro was brought up in one of the most beautiful palaces in Malta, he adapted himself to several other completely different environments. He was able to live in the ecclesiastical charitable institutes (DPA, 1987:243, 247, 253, 256); in the small and very poor houses of the Society, (DPA, 1987:68, 294), and in the unfinished Motherhouse (DPA, 1987:74). In every Home and Institute under his care he adapted himself to those who were in charge, to the children and to the various circumstances that cropped up from time to time.

When one tries to evaluate the life of Mgr De Piro one discovers that he lived his life to the full. The Society he founded on the example of St Paul still bears fruit, not only in

Malta but also in other countries and vocations are on the increase especially in foreign countries. The evangelization first to Maltese emigrants and then to natives in various countries is still reaching its goal. Mgr De Piro was a true apostle and missionary.

His evangelization was carried out through his painting, preaching, writing and the teaching of catechism. He was nourished by the Eucharist. The union he felt with Jesus in the Eucharist, he yearned to share it with others in a very tangible way. The Founder wanted his members to realise that the gist of all their apostolate must be that of love and unity among them. In his spiritual testament he urged all members of the Society of St Paul to keep alive among them mutual love in Christ, and encouraged them to observe the words of their father St Paul, that is: true love edifies. Way back in 1905, in a written description of his project to Fr E. Vassallo, Mgr De Piro wrote: "Our Password must be: 'I will follow you wherever you go'" ((DPA, 1988:6 n5).

Mgr de Piro was a warm-hearted person, and his example impressed others. He was a very methodical person and left a wealth of sermons, documents, various writings, and a great amount of correspondence. The archives at the Motherhouse of the Missionary Society of St Paul were a great help for the author to carry out this research. Mgr De Piro, as a true Christian who practised the theological and cardinal virtues, overcame all trials and difficulties that accompanied him throughout his life. He will always be remembered for his exemplary life and for the great amount of good he accomplished during his relatively short life.

5.2 Evaluation of the Life and Work of St George Preca

Fr George's ministry reflected the economic and social realities of his time. As a person Fr George was a mystic; he had a special and direct relationship with God, in whom he believed. According to all accounts Fr George was a man of great faith. He never showed any sign of superiority; on the contrary he was very humble, shy, obedient, and enjoyed a sense of humour. Being a mystic does not mean that he isolated himself from the world; on the contrary he knew exactly the pulse of the society around him.

Fr George was not only a mystic but also a capable communicator and a great organiser. Many a time, communication and organisation go hand in hand. Besides being a good preacher and a remarkable writer, Fr George also brought together unity amongst groups of persons who shared common ideals (Chircop, 1965:80-81). He made use of his communicative capability in order to give a sound religious education to the people.

Fr George's aim was to train religious and philanthropic activists in a concrete way among the majority of the population, especially among the working class (Schembri, 1965:88-89).

Fr George was a religious figure who left a mark. He was a true visionary and his vision of the laity was as stunning as it was original. This was more than a novelty: lay people, Dockyard workers delving into Scripture and theology (Commission, 1965:18). Fr George wanted to teach the average laymen, and later women: the word of God as it sounds in the Scripture. Fr George had a vision and he lived by it (Bonnici, 1980:154). It was a vision of a Christian life lived to its fullness and perfection by lay people actively engaged in the world. He redefined the status and the role of a lay person in the Church and expected SDC members to teach others wherever they could meet them (Commission, 1965:71).

Fr George was a true revolutionary in the biblical sense of the word (Informatio, 1997:10). Who would dream in 1910 to ask permission from the local Archbishop to open a house for the teaching of Christian Doctrine in order to teach children and uneducated youths in the suburb of Hamrun, when Sacred Scripture and theology in Malta were the monopoly of the clergy? It was through the foresight of Fr George that such a request was made. As a young priest he could visualise the great danger that the new generation of illiterate Maltese were going to face. Fr George wanted to find a good remedy for those who were in dire need to be prepared against those who wanted to challenge their faith.

Fr George was confident that his trained catechists were going to fulfil their mission because the Bible is full of examples of lay people doing ministry. In the Old Testament God chose the shepherd David to kill the Giant Goliath who was the terror of the people. And how did David succeed? – With a small stone. In the New Testament what kind of people did Jesus choose to build his Church? Jesus did not choose priests, doctors of the Law, and heads of the Synagogue or other learned persons. Jesus chose twelve fishermen who had a rather weak and fearful character; and he chose them to spread the Christian faith throughout the world. Faith: so noble, divine, and with its very healthy morals. The apostles were no theologians.

The reason why Fr George wanted to found the Society was: to help the clergy with the teaching of catechism; to train from an early age prospective members for the same

Society and to cultivate the teaching in order to create a healthy generation (Preca, 1909:7-10). Why did Fr George regard the study of theology as so important for his members? Fr George attempted to make sure that those who take the responsibility to teach truth and justice were well trained in theology. How could catechists defend their faith if they did not know the dogma of faith? The Ten Commandments, the Seven Sacraments and a basic theology were a must for SDC members. This helped members to deliver lessons and even sermons.

Embarking on such an enterprise shows the firm character, strong will, and profound faith Fr George had in God. Another possible source of inspiration to Fr George was St Paul's letter to Timothy (2 Tim. 2:2). The favourable reports received from various parish priests regarding the teaching of catechism by SDC members was a source of encouragement to keep up the good work. Fr S. Chircop, parish priest from Paola, wrote that the catechists were imparting very good teaching to the parish children; the children accompanied by their catechists went regularly to confession, to receive Holy Communion and to hear the word of God (Chircop, 1912:364).

What type of spiritual education did Fr George impart to his members? Fr George emphasized that their faith should make them one with the Pope by teaching dogmas and Roman Church truths, with a special warning to keep an eye from deceivers of truth: Satan and demons. From a moral point of view, they should be trained from a very early age to be patient when things go wrong; not to be lured by money and to look at Jesus crucified as their Master. It was important that every member should live up to his teaching (Preca, 1916:206-218).

Fr George prepared the catechists to teach the children by insisting that the lesson was to be presented in a very clear way, by using very simple words so that all present would understand. Fr George wanted them to ask questions; and to tell authentic facts and give true examples. The intention of the catechist who delivered the sermon should be first and foremost to give glory to God, and to remind the children that life is very short (Preca, 1916:206-218).

During a seminar in honour of Fr George in 2007, the Malta Labour Party leader, Dr Alfred Sant, compared Fr George to Manuel Dimech – a hero of the labour movement. Both Fr George and Manuel Dimech were devoted to the working class and were pioneers in Maltese language and education in general (Sant, 2010:17-24). Dr Sant said

that there was a parallelism between Fr George and M. Dimech, between the religious trend of Fr George and the political trend of M. Dimech. Both looked for the majority of men and youths who were eager to learn. Both believed strongly in the power of the written word and speeches as the organising machine.

It is inconceivable to think that Fr George did not know the work and methods used by M. Dimech, who was twenty years his senior. When Dimech was excommunicated in 1911, Fr George had already been ordained for five years. Fr George must have been very conscious of the schismatic work of M. Dimech. He must have realised Dimech's tactics. Therefore, it is doubtful that Fr George used the same method for recruiting members for his Society; it is obvious that they were on different wavelengths. Their aims were diametrically opposite. While Fr George was fighting to save the Roman Catholic faith of the uneducated (Commission, 1965:20), Dimech was trying to undermine the faith of the Maltese (Commission, 1965:20).

In the publication of the book *Dun Gorg* (Fr George) by the Commission of the Society of the M.U.S.E.U.M. (1965), the presentation of the life of Fr George shows a startling contrast between Dimech and Fr George: the foundation of the Society was not a bed of roses (Commission, 1965:20). One would expect that the devil would play his part through the anticlerical words of M. Dimech. The devil was doing his utmost to stop the Society from flourishing. Fr George visualised that the faith of the Maltese was at stake. He felt that the pulse of Malta was throbbing very slowly (Commission, 1965:20). It was at this time that M. Dimech came out of prison and wanted to form a movement called "*Society of the Enlightenment*" to shine all over the Maltese islands (Bonnici, 1980:265-299).

Fr George quietly, but with all his strength, realised that Malta needed someone to *Enlighten* her; while M. Dimech was indoctrinating his disciples with revolutionary and anticlerical ideas, Fr George began to enlighten his members as children of the Pope with the teaching of the gospel, the letters of St Paul, the Roman Catholic Catechism and to teach everybody; especially workers. Thus, Fr George was injecting the counter-poison for the revolutionary teaching which had appeared in Malta (Commission, 1965:20). The emphasis of teaching as *light* for the behaviour and action was the pivot of the two initiatives of M. Dimech and Fr George.

Fr George lived the theological virtues in a heroic way (Summarium, 1997:10-11). For him faith was the true norm of life – a lighthouse to show the path that leads to God and the sure vehicle to reach it (Informatio, 1997:71). He practised his faith with great zeal, which he instilled in others. Fr George used to say that faith is everything, and people seemed to be very indifferent towards their faith. Fr George brought forward faith through the teaching of catechism (Informatio, 1997:72). His instrument of spreading faith was the Society of Christian Doctrine which followed his teaching. Fr George's great hope was to experience the eternal good of enjoying God in heaven; he used to say that death will be the beginning of a new life. His unlimited hope in God convinced him to say that humanity serves a God who is so great and so good that God will repay with great generosity, when humanity serves Him (Informatio, 1997:80). In fact, when he was asked to close his centres, and then reopened them for Fr George it seemed as if nothing had happened (Commission, 1965:19).

According to Fr George, charity was the queen of virtues (Commission, 1965:25). Charity is the virtue that immediately unites the soul to God; charity has the prerogative of extending its duration in eternity (Informatio, 1997:82). According to accounts he loved God above everything throughout his life. His love for his neighbour was supernatural. Fr George loved everybody not in a sentimental way but because it is the command of God. He showed his love to everyone without preference, even to his spiritual children (Informatio, 1997:89). Fr George lived heroically the cardinal virtues (Summarium, 1997:55, 72) as well as his charismatic gifts such as: prophesy, healing, introspection and visions (Summarium, 1997:72) and various other virtues, such as, humility and chastity.

The characteristics of the spirituality of Fr George grew with him since childhood, he was chosen by God to teach the faithful. The basis of his spirituality was his faith in God, and the doctrine of the Incarnation was the corner stone of his spirituality. He was a priest with an ardent and strong spirituality (Informatio, 1997:18). When preaching, he lamented that for certain people God had no importance whatsoever. Another characteristic of his spirituality was his great love for God and his delight in the person of Jesus Christ. God was the centre of his life. What he wrote about the love of God in *Il-Ktieb il-Kbir* (the Great Book) applied to him personally. In this manuscript, one reads how Fr George wanted to imitate Christ by loving until it hurts. This book consists of profound meditations on Christ Crucified (Commission, 1965:84).

Christ crucified was the source of all teaching. He wrote *Il-Ktieb il-Kbir* (The Great Book) – the encyclopaedia which included all the teaching humanity needs to know about Christ. This book throws light on how a committed Christian and apostle should mould his/her life. Christ was his ideal. Fr George regarded Christ as a friend, "that twelve year old boy who ordered him to push the cart with him" (Commission, 1965:90). He always told his members that they should relate to Jesus as a friend and a brother: "Let us be one with our greatest and best friend and our dearest brother Christ Jesus crucified, in such a way, that we will never move our eyes away from him throughout this pilgrimage of ours: this is the Manual of our true rest and guide" (Preca, 1915:53).

When it comes to his writing, it is difficult to select his best written work. In his book *The Sanctuary of the Spirit of Christ*, his practical wisdom is presented in a very simple way, it leads humanity to know love, and imitate Christ. In this book, the phrase "Spirit of Christ" is synonymous with 'the heart of Jesus', and occurs one hundred and fifty times. Fr George ends this book with the sentence: "Devout Christian, seek where ever you will, you will only find rest in doing God's will" (Preca, 1992:103).

Fr George's spiritual maturity can be seen in the way he preached the whole Gospel; when one scrutinizes his sermons and writing one discovers how he tried to subdue the old self and how it was through God's strength that he could have the upper hand. The spirit of Fr George is found in all he said and wrote (Commission, 1965:82). The Founder always believed in God's love. His honest intention and his constant union with God showed his stable character. His obedience to the Holy Spirit always helped him discern the will of God. Fr George's continuous dialogue with God, made him always look ahead in one direction – only God (Informatio, 1997:4-9).

Fr George's writing was concise, to the point, very clear and attractive, very informative and easy to follow. His style reflected his character. In later years his books were a form of escape, a relief of his greatest desire in life, to make a great exposition about God and His attributes and Jesus Christ, whom God sent in the world – *Verbum Dei Caro Factum Est* (The Word was made flesh). Fr George left as inheritance a wealth of spiritual writing. He accumulated a *corpus* of books, pamphlets, articles and letters (Formosa, 1992 [32]:3-8). Besides a saintly person he was also a *Doctor Laicorum*, (Formosa, 1992 [32] 8), a teacher of the laity.

Fr George wanted to instil in his listeners and readers that Jesus Christ should be the only precious object in life for every individual. F. Saliba (1965:66) wrote that 'one hour' lesson on God from Fr George was enough to fill you with reverence for God. Fr George was a man of God. He studied deeply and observed well God's law; worked hard to master it, and to teach its beauty and goodness to others. It is because of his great faith that he worked so hard and made great sacrifices to spread the word of God (Saliba, 1965:66).

Fr George believed in the power of prayer (Commission, 1965:33). Prayer had a pre-eminent place in his life, especially when he was about to take upon himself heavy tasks or important decisions. One can say that his life was a constant conversation with God (Informatio, 1997:75). He also wanted his members to have fixed and specific moments of prayer during the day, dedicated to converse with Christ the Saviour (Informatio, 1997:76). This was the idea behind the *Arlogg Museumin* (Museum Watch), which is a chain of prayers, said every quarter of an hour throughout a whole week, when the member can visualise the beauty of Christ as the cherished object of every Christian, and much more of every SDC member.

Fr George used to say that when he was about five years old, Our Lady, through St Michael the Archangel, gave him inspiration for the *Museum Watch* (Summarium, 1997:207) (see page 67). He interpreted that the golden watch was symbolic and meant the *Watch of Prayer*, and that the beautiful young officer was St Michael the Archangel (Summarium, 1997:5, 29, 45, 59, 78). The *Museum Watch* is the way the SDC members can remember God all day. During a general meeting the Founder told his members: "Even my surname should remind you of prayer – Preca is like *prega*, meaning PRAY" (Commission, 1965:34.)

The Founder lived in poverty (Summarium, 1997:50, 83). At home, in his small room, he only had the bare necessities. In this small room, Fr George spent the greater part of his life, praying, writing and hearing confessions. He only kept enough money to live and the rest he gave away, especially to the female centres to pay their rent (Bonnici, 1980:244). When he could spare a few shillings (Euros), he would go to the printer in order to provide material for his members. Fr George did not even have electricity in his house, and if it were not for a member of the SDC Society who installed it for him, he would have never bothered to have it installed (Commission, 1965:39; Informatio,

1997:53). He was detached from vanity and from all worldly riches. Fr George did not accept any presents, not even from his members (Summarium, 1997:97). He called money "thorns". Through his preaching and writing he exalted the virtue of poverty. When his members asked if he needed anything, he only asked for a few pence for the tram-fare.

Fr George lived the virtue of meekness to the full (Commission, 1965:32-33). Many people spread calumnies about him, said that he was mad; others wrote articles in newspapers and tried to eradicate the Society of Christian Doctrine (Bonnici, 1980:265-269). Fr George was not only attacked by the press; but also certain people tried to mock him in various ways. Children who called him "Fr George BUM" he translated the word BUM as "*Bontà, Umiltà* and *Manswetudini*" (Goodness, humility and meekness). One day when I was still a teenager, Fr George happened to be on the same public transport; a well-dressed lady before getting off the bus with a loud voice, so that everyone could hear her, sarcastically exclaimed: "*Cé Dun George che ci benedica*" (there is Fr George who blesses us). He did not defend himself or retaliate, but he excused them, pitied and prayed for them. When someone insulted him he kept silence (Summarium, 1997:80), once he said that he won more by keeping silent than by talking (Saliba, 1965:67). Fr George was not after any honours. He was happy if he was left in peace and treated with contempt. As a sign of gratitude, the Roman Catholic Church in Malta, who had a great admiration towards him, nominated him Monsignor in October 1952; but he never exercised such a role (Commission, 1965:39-40).

Fr Gorge was singled out because of his humility (Summarium, 1997:50, 65). People were drawn to him because he really practised this virtue. One could detect his humility through the way he walked, with his eyes lowered down; and the way he acted. Fr George knew that in order to aim high, one must have very deep foundations. If he was not strong and steady, he would not be able to edify others spirituality. He always liked to keep a low profile (Commission, 1965:31-32). His humility stood out when he used to kiss the feet of any gentleman passing by (Summarium, 1997:211).

The Jesuit Fr L. Preziosi (1965:73) referred to Fr George as *plasmatore di anime*, "a moulder of souls," a person who gives spiritual formation. The truth of this attribute was the experience of countless persons, especially the members of the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society, who were spirituality transformed. *Plasmatore di anime* was the correct attribute to Fr George due to his "mastery" of the spirit of the Gospel. He was able to

transmit his own spirituality to others. If one looks at the skill of giving spiritual formation to the members of the Society, one will soon come to the same conclusion. Joseph Camilleri, a SDC member, in his article about *Dun Gorg – Plasmatore di anime,* explained that Fr George was an excellent "moulder of souls" because he believed that the gospel can be lived by every individual and under all circumstances; he was aware of the needs of his listeners; he was able to bring out the hidden talents of people and lead them to achieve great things as well as to bring a sense of security in times of insecurity and live an authentic spiritual life (Camilleri, 1998 [38]:5).

According to Fr F. Ebejer (Commission, 1965:73), the title of *Plasmatore di anime* is one of the best concise panegyrics about Fr George (Camilleri, 1998 [38]:5). He could mould and transform even persons with very difficult characters, such as the first unruly group of youths he took under his care. A typical example was G. Lanzon, who was a follower of M. Dimech and later became a zealous Superior after joining the SDC Society (Bonnici, 1980:282). The Founder moulded his members spiritually and transformed them into great apostles of Christ. Individuals with a mediocre education were transformed into efficient teachers (Commission, 1965:18). Fr George wanted his members to learn in order to teach others, above all, to become saints and to make others saints as well. He constructed a spirituality which was appropriate and relevant for contemporary people.

Monsignor P.P. Saydon (Commission, 1965:76-77) described Fr George as an evangelical preacher. He wrote that when the Founder preached to the SDC members, as well as in churches, he never used any verbose words in Latin or phrases to impress his congregation. Fr George never studied whole sentences by heart which many a time were not understood by his listeners. Fr George delivered his sermons in a very simple way so that every one could follow and understand what he was saying. He thought that scripture and his personal experience were enough. His words corresponded to the way he lived, he preached what he practised. His sincerity and his delivery touched his listeners (Chircop, 1965:80). His word was a living word with faith, what he felt deep down within him.

Fr George had a great devotion towards Our Lady. Fr G. Zarb (1965:78), parish priest of the church '*Our Lady of Graces'* at the village of Zabbar, wrote that when he invited Fr George to preach in his parish, his parishioners were deeply touched with his sermons and he made a great impact on them. On one special occasion, during the

homily of the crowning of the titular painting of *Our Lady of Graces* on 27 August 1951 (the author was present), Fr George kindled the hearts of the congregation by referring to Our Lady as the "Treasurer of all Graces" (Zarb, 1965:78). He urged all present to recite the rosary, and to be devoted to the scapular and the miraculous medal. Fr George considered Our Lady as the most merciful Mother (Zarb, 1965:79). To him she was the Queen to whom he constantly prayed and under whose protection he placed every activity including his Society.

Above all, Fr George made Christ his ideal. A favourite sentence of the Founder was: "Indeed, anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Rom. 8:9). His ideal to be full of the Spirit of Christ was that he could fill his SDC members with the same spirit in order that they will be able to transmit it to others. According to Fr G. Zammit (1965:90), Fr George practised and taught three main benefits of being filled with the Spirit of Christ: (i) to be bonded with the will of God; (ii) to deny the pleasures the world loves; and (iii) love of neighbour which he used to call "God's photo". Christ was everything to Fr George. Christ was the powerful motor of his soul which used to strengthen his weak body. It was Christ who permitted Fr George's word to be accepted by his listeners, who were touched by it, brought tears to their eyes and made their hearts throb with love towards Jesus.

The Founder was greatly dedicated to the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society. He never stopped teaching, although advanced in age and tired he never missed the Wednesday meeting and always delivered his lesson. In his last years, in order to attend these meetings he had to be helped by a member or two; he used to tell them that he felt much better in their company than at home (Commission, 1965:49). Fr George would talk to them for a whole hour, he never felt like coming to a close, not because he wanted to show off or had anything special to say, but because he was intoxicated when talking about God. Every time he mentioned the name of God or Jesus Christ his face flared up (Commission, 1965:49). After an hour he used to look at the clock and say: "This hour we spend together flies … we do not have enough time to speak about God" (Commission, 1965:48.) Teaching was his special vocation; it was his major delight, his recreation.

Christ was everything for Fr George. No one could doubt that between Fr George and Christ there were many contacts, intimate and continual (Commission, 1965:90). This contact with Christ could be seen all the time, especially when celebrating the Eucharist

– he used to shed tears of joy when pronouncing certain words and phrases during Mass. It was Fr George's wish to spread the Spirit of Christ everywhere that made him introduce the special devotion towards *Verbum Dei Caro …* (The Word was made flesh). Fr G. Zammit related that before leaving for Brazil, Fr George told him: "Always preach Jesus Christ and spread the devotion of the *Verbum Dei*" (Commission, 1965:91). That is why the Founder wanted the badge to be worn by all members, as the emblem of the Society. This phrase is also written on top of the altar in the Chapel of the Miraculous Medal, and is venerated in many houses, shops and several other places.

The first twenty-five years of the Society of Christian Doctrine were very challenging for Fr George; they were years of formation and hard work. The only thing he had to sustain him was prayer and the generosity of his members. He could feel the pulse of the religiosity of the majority of the Maltese people. Fr George knew that in Malta, religion was rarely internalised and individualised. He was aware that the Roman Catholic faith in Malta needed to re-equip itself for the twentieth century. His Maltese catechetical schools therefore were nothing short of revolutionary.

What was Fr George's aim? What was he proposing to these youths so that he enchanted them to follow him? He wanted them to remain single and not to join any religious order, so that they would be witness at work, at home and among society. Fr George wanted them to remain in the world without belonging to the world (Commission, 1965:61). They dreamt of a beautiful future without knowing how they were going to attain it. Fr George inspired them to a new vocation, a new way of living a perfect life as lay persons. This new evangelical way is the best modern way how to follow Christ and become an apostle. It is the most modern means to change the world. H. Ganado (1974:340), who was the President of the Catholic Action, referred to the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society and SDC members as one of the miracles of our time. Ganado said that these members have the deepest roots in the ground and their thoughts high towards heaven (Ganado, 1974:340).

This was the new way of life which Fr George created for these youths and the church blessed it. He wished to reach the high ideal of St Benedict, St Dominic and St Ignatius without ordering the youths to enter into a convent (Commission, 1965:61). Fr George created a team of lay catechists to teach the gospel to the working class, most of whom were illiterate at the time. His group of members, most of them manual workers, quickly spread all over the Maltese islands, and despite opposition from within the Roman

Catholic Church, Fr George's gentle manners but strong character made sure his mission was accomplished. Fr George presented his members with Christ and his Church. Even today these SDC members want to win the world for Christ (Commission, 1965:61). These are soldiers of Christ without uniform or honours, but they achieve great victories. They are Christ's army.

The Society of Christian Doctrine reflects the spirit of God which was present in Fr George. How it is possible to entice youths to this Society in today's world, when the world offers such great pleasures? Those who join the Society should have a strong character; live a religious life without enjoying the advantages of such a life. At work and at home they have to lead a perfect life – a bit difficult, and above all with perseverance (Commission, 1965:61). All this reflects Fr George's strength and capability This shows the greatness of Fr George who was frail, but a giant of faith (Commission, 1965:61). Every year male and female youths, in the prime of life, full of generous enthusiasm, take an oath that they model their life on that of Fr George.

For fifty-five years, Father George spent his life in the concealed mission which God gave him. He was an itinerant preacher throughout the Maltese islands. Fr George was an expert of humanity: always ready to teach, console, talk and bring happiness, bless, give hope and heal. He listened and gave special attention to every person he met. People used to seek Fr George not only in their spiritual needs, but also in their physical ailments (Summarium, 1997:17, 42-43, 57, 66, 85). He gave them good and practical advice, and helped them as if he were a doctor, a chemist and a lawyer: all in one person. Fr George was truly a holy pastor of the people of God, he entrusted the precious treasure of the teaching of catechism in the hands of the members of the Society of Christian Doctrine. St George is one of the greatest benefactors of the Maltese islands and a powerful intercessor.

Fr George claimed to be in communication with saints, angels, God and the Virgin Mary, and he felt the devil as a tormenting physical presence. Fr A. Bonnici (1980:39-40), the biographer of Fr George, in response to a call for direct information on the saint's life, received hundreds of letters written in the manner of sworn statements. Most of them included the personal details of other witnesses who could corroborate the events reported in the letters. They described, among other things, phenomena of a mystical nature including miraculous healings, prophetic abilities, visions and even bi-locations (Summarium, 1997:215).

Fr George will always be remembered as a tireless preacher, a prolific writer and a special confessor for endless hours; not to mention his love for the poor. Fr George was scared of sin, in his talks he used to harp: "My children do not commit sin. Sin brings a curse and provokes the fierce justice of God on the individual" (Commission, 1965:48). His mission was to teach the people by his example, with his word and his writing. Penitents used to come from all over the island. He could assess the disposition of the penitent and accordingly show the way to follow. Fr George used to work without rest even when he was in advanced age (Commission, 1965:48).

The good reputation that Fr George was a saint depended on the great number of people who came to see him while he was still alive; and when he died the masses of people who were present at his funeral, together with the countless number of Maltese and foreigners, both in Malta and abroad, who treasure his image as an intercessory agent. Devotees still seek out Fr George's remains or any relic that has been in contact with the saint's body for its capacity to enable a miracle, as in the case of the eye and the shoelace, and the glove and the liver.

Fr George passed away but remained with us, not only from a religious aspect but also as a collective memory. Fr George was not a common priest in the history of Malta. He was a priest who left his spirit behind him. He is still living in the Society he founded. Fr George was a great realist. The tree which he has planted, like the seed sown by supposedly St Paul in A.D. 60, is still growing and is even opening its branches outside the Mediterranean shores. The SDC Society, like the small seed that sprouted, grew and spread, never thought that the branches of this plant were to reach Australia and elsewhere. Who would dare give up his job, his family, and his country to go far away in a foreign country to diffuse the spirit of Fr George?

Many SDC members felt inclined to go and spread the word of God, but they were not able to take a decision. It was Fr George himself, who like Christ sent them far away. He chose the first five members to go to Australia (Commission, 1965:40), a week later wished them goodbye, blessed their cross, chose one of them as superior and sent them in the name of the Lord in the new field which Divine Providence opened for them. In Melbourne, the work of the Society had already started. G. Abela, another member, joined them in Melbourne on 27 June 1952 (Commission, 1965:41); later he became a priest and delegate of the General Superior in Australia. Before he left Malta Fr George

blessed him and while patting him on the shoulder told him: "My son, go to Australia and teach the people; people commit sins because they lack teaching" (Commission, 1965:41.)

The ideal Fr George left to his spiritual children is present throughout Malta. All centres welcome thousands of children who come to hear the word of God. SDC members follow their Founder's example; he was always immersed in his pastoral work. Besides the catechetical work in the parishes through its centres in Malta and Gozo, the SDC members have other activities: Catechetical formation among adults and the spiritual formation of parents whose children attend classes for Sacramental formation.

To keep Fr George's spirit alive, every year many of the SDC centres organize a week-long catechetical course on a particular theme; every number of years, a two-week catechetical formation programme is also held in a number of centres; monthly meetings earmarked for youths are also regularly held in many centres; and a monthly meeting for those interested in the spirituality taught by Fr George is held at the Motherhouse. The Society of Christian Doctrine performs other works in Malta and elsewhere, which are relevant to its charisma: secondary colleges, a trade school, bookshops, theological library, and a printing press which specialises in and helps promote religious publications. This is the living monument of Fr George.

Fr George can be evaluated as a saint fashioned in the model of Vatican Council II; and was canonised so soon, thanks to the reformation of the Roman Catholic Church's protocols and procedures. He is also a saint of Maltese modernity, seen as a pioneer of Malta's development as well as a symbol of a unified nation state. Oliver Friggieri, a prominent professor of the Maltese language and a renowned local author, wrote a tribute in flowery prose for one of the local newspapers when Fr George was declared saint:

> The acknowledgement by the Catholic Church of Fr George Preca as a saint is also a compliment to Malta and its Catholic tradition … This occasion is both religious and cultural because it shows how in the garden of the Maltese there grow beautiful flowers full of beautiful perfume that will, in time become recognised. This recognition can help us grow, not only as a church but also as a nation (Friggieri, 2007:10).

Malta's first proclaimed saint, St George Preca, was a typical Maltese person. He was a man of humble origins, already fighting for his life as a sickly child, undaunted by opposition, and firm in his beliefs. After his death, Malta's leading political parties described him as a role model, *'man of the people*', and *'apostle of the workers'*. As a

modern saint, he represented a form of Christianity in modernity, as a Maltese saint he represented the heroic aspirations of a Christian nation. The sanctity of Fr George served to unite the Maltese people. St George's canonisation was a special occasion of unity for all the Maltese, nation and religion were seen to be in perfect harmony.

With the death of Fr George Malta lost a great benefactor. After his death the hidden good that he performed during his lifetime came to light. The monument in memory of Fr George is not made of bronze and marble, but is made of living persons who follow the ideal of their Founder, and as lay individuals dedicate their life to the teaching of Christian Doctrine.

In 1957, Fr George suggested the recitation of five "Mysteries of Light" for the private saying of the Rosary (Vatican, 2007:3). The five "Mysteries of Light" printed on 22 August 1956 were: (1) After the baptism of Christ in the Jordan, he was taken into the desert; (2) Christ proved that he was true God by means of his word and miracles; (3) Christ teaching the eight beatitudes on the Mount; (4) The Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor; and (5) The Last Supper of Christ with the Apostles (Camilleri, 2011:83). One can easily notice the similarity between the "Mysteries of Light" written by Fr George and those presented by Pope John Paul II in 2002.

Fr George died less than three months prior to the opening of Vatican Council II. The Society was a novelty at the time; it was years ahead of the innovations of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Hence, Fr George was a great predecessor of the Council particularly in the apostolate of the laity and their formation of the Bible. The Second Vatican Council called for all Christians: laity, clergy and religious alike for solid mature formation (*Lumen Gentium*: 4). In the cause of his canonisation, the Vatican described this Maltese priest, as one who understood that God could even work through lay persons in the history of salvation.

Malta is privileged to have had in the beginning of the twentieth century a pioneer of lay persons totally dedicated to the pastoral teaching of catechism. Fr George's catechism – for the preparation of the first Holy Communion and for the sacrament of Confirmation, as well as for adults in their workplace – shows the fundamental importance of catechesis in order to maintain the Maltese identity as believers and to combat Protestantism. Like St Paul, Fr George was a great apostle of the word of God.

The year 2012 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Fr George's death. A symposium was held with the theme: "The world still needs the witness of saints". Several positive points about Fr George were elicited: he lived by the principle that every person is potentially holy; one can easily reach God through prayer, which means talking to Jesus is talking to a friend; he believed that the best gift you can give someone is sound instruction. He did the ordinary in an extraordinary way. Fr George encouraged a spiritual life not for the elite, but for those whose spirit is humble and meek.

5.2.1 Fr George's Oratorio

The script of Fr George's Oratorio was written by Oliver Friggieri and the music was composed by Charles Camilleri, in 2001. The Oratorio is a prayer in three parts: (i) *The early choice,* (ii) *The burden of the call,* and (iii) *The everlasting news.*

In *the early call* Fr George speaks with God and narrates his vision. The Founder opens the centres of Christian Doctrine, although he is a sick person. He sighs, and in spite of his poor health he is ready to do God's will. The call to follow HIS will was confirmed when a youth appeared to him near a cross in the middle of a road, and asked him to give a helping hand in pushing a cart forward. Fr George interpreted this as a confirmation that his Society should help carry the load, which he could not do on his own; the youth was the Lord himself.

Therefore, Fr George asks the Lord what is required of him, as he is ready to spread the word of God to all. The Lord calls Fr George and commands him to proclaim and bear witness through his faith. Fr George promises the Lord to proclaim Him to everyone in the Maltese islands: in schools, homes, streets and squares, in work places as well as in hospitals. Centres are opened and the Word is spread throughout the Maltese islands.

In *the burden of the call* Fr George is ordered to close down the SDC centres to which he promptly obeys. Together with his members they pray and wait. The trial begins due to Scripture being read and taught by the laity. Fr George prays to the Lord, saying that he drinks this chalice; and will accompany Jesus to the place of His crucifixion. The members join his prayer and ask God to enlighten them. Fr George prophesies that the storm will soon be over and calm will reign again. "Fair weather will deliver our boat to port, for there to stay and last, for no one ever to sink" (Friggieri, 2001:10.) The strong winds calmed down and the sun of the new day rose.

With *the everlasting news* Fr George is allowed to reopen SDC centres and his Society is firmly established. With the reopening of the centres, the Holy Word echoed and lightened the darkness of past years. The voice of the Lord emerges victorious. Fr George's mission is carried out. Children happily fill the centres and crowds follow to hear the word he delivers in the squares. The crowds pray with him and lay their woes and sorrows at his feet, that he may heal them with his hands. Fr George asserts that whatever happens is God's will. God continually sustains the universe. The Lord is everything for everyone, everywhere. And in the name of the Son of God made Man, Fr George sends his members to proclaim God inside their homes and then to go forth to the ends of the earth.

Even though it was just the beginning of the century, Fr George realised that modern times needed a well-instructed Christian laity. He followed the instruction which St Paul passed on to Timothy (2 Tim. 2:2) and strived for the formation of the laity so as to prepare them well in order that they would be able to carry out catechetical work among the people. Fr George became a great apostle through his exemplary life, preaching, and numerous writings. He deeply believed that he had a divine calling to teach the people of God. The two foundations on which he built his Society were the meditation on the Last Things (*Novissima*), and the Imitation of Christ, which he practised in his daily life. Fr George delved deeply into the motives, pushing individuals to act.

5.3 A Comparison of the Characteristics of Mgr G. De Piro and St G. Preca

In the course of this research we discovered that there are many similarities and common aspects between Mgr De Piro and St G. Preca.

Both Mgr De Piro and St George believed that the greatest gift God gives to any person is to be born in a good Christian family.

To prepare himself for the priesthood Mgr De Piro dedicated more time to reading good books and he was struck in a special way by the life of St Alphonse M. de Liguori, Fr George while still a student at the lyceum was also greatly struck by the book "Preparation for Death" by Alphonse M. de Liguori.

From a very early age both Mgr De Piro and Fr George looked at Jesus Christ, poor, humble and suffering as their model. They both had a special devotion towards Holy Mary and St Joseph. Holy Mary was the most powerful; the most beautiful soul, and no

one so great after the Holy Trinity. It was to St Joseph that Fr George prayed when the doctor diagnosed that he only had a few months to live. Mgr De Piro was so confident that St Joseph would hear his prayers, that he took the responsibility as director of two institutes named after the saint.

Mgr De Piro soon after celebrating his first Solemn Mass in Malta returned to Rome to pursue his theological studies; he developed tuberculosis and had to go to Switzerland for his treatment. He remained there for eighteen months before returning to Malta to start his pastoral work. His stay at Davos was a time of prayer, reflection and searching God's will. When Fr George was on the threshold of his Ordination, he was on the brink of death, and was only given a few months to live, as one of his lungs had already stopped functioning and dried up. When he fell ill again soon after his Ordination, he spent time alone in his room praying, reflecting, and it was here, where he received inspiration from God to choose and teach some young people to give religious formation to others.

They were both promoters of Christian education and culture in Malta. The formation helped individuals both spiritually and intellectually. They had a profound spirituality and a close union with God. Mgr De Piro as well as Fr George wanted to form a congregation of priests and catechists under the patronage of St Paul. They exhorted the members of their Society to imitate St Paul in his generosity; and to preach the devotion to St Paul.

The Founders of both Societies stated in their Rules that the aim of their Society was to help people who were in need of evangelical workers – to evangelize. They both wanted to walk in the footsteps of St Paul and urged their members to look at St Paul as the ideal of their missionary work. Their missionary mandate reflects the Lord's command to his apostles "Go therefore and make disciples … teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:19-20).

In the beginning both Founders met many difficulties and were greatly disheartened and the Church Authorities could not understand their aims, although the Archbishops and priests were convinced of their saintly intentions. Mgr De Piro was misunderstood by the Roman Catholic Church in Rome and disheartened by the local Church. Fr George initially found strong opposition from the local Church as well as from the local press.

They both accepted everything from the hands of God; and had great faith in Divine providence.

As the Maltese islands were evangelized by the Apostle Paul, their aim was to share with others the gift of faith. In order to achieve their goal they felt the need to found a Missionary Society of Priests and Catechists. Both looked beyond the horizons of this little island home by sending members of their Society to various countries to evangelize people in other nations.

Both Societies had their origin in very humble, poor and small premises. The Missionary Society of St Paul had its beginning in no. 5, St Roch Street, Mdina and that of the Society of Christian Doctrine in no. 6 Fra Diegu Street, Hamrun. These were two very small houses without any furniture or other necessary needs.

They were both fond of little children and tried to help them in more ways than one. Mgr De Piro in his role as director of six ecclesiastical charitable institutes was a father-figure, as well as a teacher of catechism to children in parishes. Fr George wanted to give a good formation to children by teaching catechism to those who were to receive the sacraments of Holy Communion and Confirmation.

Both Mgr De Piro and Fr George worked hard to help the working class and their children. Catechism lessons in Birkirkara were given jointly by SDC members and catechists of the MSSP. Those at the Oratory were under the care of the MSSP, while those at St Paul's Church in Birkirkara were under the care of the SDC.

Mgr De Piro as well as Fr George paid from their own money the rent of the premises of their Societies. In this respect they were also benefactors not only of their members, but also of their country. They organised catechism classes since the very first years of their Societies.

Mgr De Piro and Fr George were men of great faith. The former even when things did not turn out as he wished, would say '*Fiat*', and the latter used to tell his members that faith is everything. Both lived up to their faith. They emphasized the need of the Roman Catholic faith to be well taught and organised on the Maltese islands. Mgr De Piro and Fr George wanted to do away with religious ignorance.

Mgr De Piro, like Fr George was a man of prayer. They were continually united with God. Mgr De Piro's union with God the Father was expressed at the age of fourteen and confirmed when he decided to become a priest. Fr George used to spend nights praying and urged everyone to pray. Their life was cradled in prayer.

Both Founders lived a life of poverty. Their money was spent on the needs of others. Their charity knew no bounds. They were always ready to give what they possessed and kept only the bare minimum, wanted to instil the virtue of poverty in their members and both lived the virtue of poverty in a very tangible way.

Mgr De Piro like Fr George was not after honours. The former did his utmost not to accept the title of Monsignor and only consented as an act of obedience to the Archbishop; while the latter did not even acknowledge this honour. Mgr De Piro did not accept to go to the *Accademia Ecclesiastica* (Ecclesiastic Diplomatic Corps) because he preferred to keep a low profile.

Mgr De Piro as well as Fr George saw the aim of their Society to perfect its members in the love of God and neighbour. They wanted to instruct lay people, the working class and the very poor. Their teaching brought a deeper understanding of Roman Catholic faith to the people who simply went through the notions of devotions without knowing why.

They were both prolific writers. Mgr De Piro left more than three hundred sermons and many articles. Fr George wrote more than one hundred and forty books, besides many pamphlets and articles. They tried to reach every section of the Maltese society even by means of their writing.

Mgr De Piro in his sermons referred very frequently to the Incarnation of Our Lord. He used to emphasize the love of God and the humility of Jesus. Fr George not only preached about it but also made the *Verbum Dei Caro* (the Word was made flesh) the distinctive badge of all his members. He also introduced the evening procession with baby Jesus on Christmas Eve. Both Founders wanted to make the faithful appreciate the presence of God among them, through the mystery of the Incarnation.

Mgr De Piro was a fervent preacher and Fr George was greatly sought after for his sermons. Both communicated and evangelized through their preaching. They wanted to bring their congregation closer to God. Both preachers made several references to the

Pauline letters. They delivered their sermons in very simple language so that everyone could understand their message. They expounded the word of God with many references from the Sacred Scripture. These biblical references were delivered at a time when Sacred Scripture was not widely diffused among the faithful as today.

Their great love for the Eucharist was not only to celebrate Mass, but also to explain and encourage their listeners to appreciate the immense love of God for humanity. They explained how those who love Jesus and want to be one with him were to receive and be united with him through Holy Communion. The Eucharist was the burning love of divine love; the food that gives life to the soul.

Mgr De Piro and Fr George were true models of the Christian priesthood; they were more than full-time priests. Both dedicated their life to the service of other people, tried to give spiritual direction to the faithful from all levels of society and were always ready to help anyone at any time of the day or night.

Both priests used to spend long hours hearing confessions. They were great healers of souls; and served as an instrument in God's hands. They were a godsend at a time when different ideas about Roman Catholic faith were being aired in Malta.

According to accounts, both Founders made a great impact on others because they preached what they practised. They led an exemplary life. Their charismatic force and personality formed and left a silent army for Christ. They taught people to be convinced of their beliefs. Members of both Societies are carrying their missionary work not only in Malta but also in in other countries. They both recommended the same tools for their missionaries – the evangelical words as food for the soul and care for the body: that is, holistic care of every individual.

They were both great benefactors to the Maltese society, and giants of Roman Catholic Malta. They wanted to give themselves entirely to God; to lead a perfect life and not to fear death. Mgr De Piro and Fr George started their mission in very humble and modest circumstances and through divine providence, their hard work and their perseverance left two monuments: the Motherhouse of the Missionary Society of St Paul and the church of St Agatha in Rabat, Malta; and the Central Home and the Chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal at *Blata -l'Bajda* for the SDC Society.

Mgr De Piro and Fr George declared that St Paul was the founder of their Society. They looked at St Paul as the model of every missionary. Like St Paul, they left a legacy of a Society of missionaries.

Mgr De Piro and Fr George celebrated the feast of the conversion of St Paul on a grand scale.

They were men of determination, courage, worked very hard to pave a way for the future and, although weak in physique, were very strong in character and performed great things. They saw the need to strengthen the Roman Catholic faith under the current threat of Protestantism, and to prepare children and adults for the twentieth century.

Mgr De Piro and Fr George were a proof of their real love for God and for their country. Both dedicated their time and energy to their ministries and through their teaching and preaching led souls to understand and live the principles of theology in everyday life.

Mgr De Piro and Fr George were in favour of the use of the Maltese language. This was a great asset to present theology in a simple way to the local population.

Mgr De Piro as well as Fr George lived in an exemplary way the Theological and Cardinal virtues.

Mgr De Piro and Fr George were menaced by a destructive campaign of anticlericalism orchestrated by the forces of evil.

Mgr De Piro and Fr George were great benefactors to Malta and the Maltese. This tiny island of Malta has produced great men, men who are a great honour to the Roman Catholic Church.

They delivered the word of God using very simple words which could be understood by everybody, and made a great impact on their listeners.

Both Founders had a great devotion towards Our Lady: Mgr De Piro died exactly after leading the Procession of Our Lady of Sorrows, and Fr George turned his last glance to the image of Our Lady of Sorrows on his deathbed just before he passed away.

After evaluating the life and contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr George one discovers that they were two extraordinary persons. They had an immense thirst for knowledge and teaching. They went through huge sacrifices in order to subdue Protestantism and to safeguard the Roman Catholic faith. They did not shy away from the Maltese language. Their contributions in terms of sermons, preaching and writings show that Fr George gave the Maltese theology yet to be fathomed and discovered; and Mgr De Piro was an inspiration to many. To Malta and to the Roman Catholic Church, they gave two Societies whose members are so dedicated and dynamic, not only in their homeland but also in the four corners of the world. Both Founders left the world much better than they found it.

During this study, we discovered how Mgr De Piro and Fr George fulfilled their ultimate potential by recognising and cultivating the need for social justice. The study of their personalities, characteristics and abilities enabled us to appreciate their mental health. They had a clear perception of reality and realism in areas such as religion and politics, which permitted them to help mostly illiterate people. They were simple and natural; they demonstrated creativity and originality, and above all they practised a high degree of trust in the Lord and in their Society.

This evaluation about the life and work of Mgr De Piro and Fr George attests that their contributions were instrumental in subduing Protestantism and safeguarding the Roman Catholic faith during the British administration.

CHAPTER 6

THE CULT OF ST PAUL: MGR G. DE PIRO, ST G. PRECA AND OTHER MANIFESTATIONS

6. The Cult of St Paul

This chapter presents how Mgr De Piro and St George Preca were imbued with the cult of St Paul; how they taught, preached and referred to the writings of St Paul. The Apostle of the Gentiles was the model on which Mgr De Piro and Fr George wanted to form the prospective members of their societies, that is, the Missionary Society of St Paul and the Society of Christian Doctrine. It shows how the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr George proved to be an asset to the Maltese during the twentieth century; if their contributions were valid or not; and if the Roman Catholic faith and the cult of St Paul played an important part or not as a result of their contributions.

Other manifestations are about the centenary celebration of St Paul's shipwreck. It elicits the strong faith of the Maltese during the Second World War when Malta was still a British colony; and how the local church helped and cooperated with the British rulers. The Santa Maria convoy saved Malta during its darkest hours on 15 August 1942. What role did the faith of the Maltese play during the Second World War? Were their prayers answered? It includes a brief glance of the cult of St Paul during the Pauline year 2008-2009. This will help the reader to assess the cult of St Paul in Malta in the beginning of the third Millennium. Towards the end of the chapter we will also mention the Oratorio presented early 2013 to show how the cult of St Paul partook in the celebrations during the year of Faith.

6.1 Monsignor G. De Piro and the Cult of St Paul

Due to the fact that Mgr De Piro had a special devotion towards St Paul (DP, 1987:76), he wanted the members of his Society to celebrate the feasts of the Apostle especially his conversion, in the chapel of the Motherhouse (DP, 1987:76), and even in the other houses of the Society. In the Constitutions of the Society, Mgr De Piro encouraged members to pray to St Paul for the spiritual needs of the Society. In the Original Constitution, Mgr De Piro exhorted the members of his Society to imitate St Paul in his generosity and absolute obedience to God's call to follow Him in his humility and love

for others (DPA, 2003: (3) 69). When he talked to the members, he often referred to the Saint because he wanted to instil in them the Apostle's zeal (DP, 1987:279).

Mgr De Piro was very familiar with the Epistles of St Paul. Out of 468 biblical references in his sermons, 73 of them were from the Pauline letters (DPA, 1987, vol. 1:23; vol. 2:25; vol. 3:25). He urged the Society members to familiarise themselves with the writings of St Paul and to memorise his letters. Mgr De Piro's sermons refer to 10 out of the 13 letters of St Paul. He made use of Pauline literature in different contexts, for example, he quotes 21 times Romans chapter 8 on the love of God, shown to mankind through his Son Jesus. Mgr De Piro used quotations, such as Romans 8:35, not only in his sermons about the Sacred Heart of Jesus (DPA, 1987:148-151), but also in wider contexts on Sunday homilies and martyrs' feast days. In this way he showed that the martyr could offer his life precisely because he experienced God's love first. When celebrating the feast of St Calcedonius Mgr De Piro opened his sermon with the words of St Paul (Rom. 8:35): "Who can separate us from the love of Christ?" (DPA, 1987:42-44).

Mgr De Piro was also capable to find the exact quotation for the right circumstance, such as: quoting Romans 2:11 "For there is no partiality with God." He used this verse and presented it to Mother Superiors so that they could exercise it in their ministry with the community members (DPA, 1987:112, 291). Hence, he could adapt Pauline texts so well because he was well versed in them.

In his sermons Mgr De Piro, unlike Fr George, did not insist too much upon fire and hell and God's punishment for sinners. Whenever he referred to sin, rather than referring to punishment, Mgr De Piro explained who the human being is "… he in whom God himself dwells …"and "… he who, through the resurrection, is transformed into God himself" Mgr De Piro emphasised more Romans 6:22: "But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life." These words were delivered in two sermons about the aim of the human being (DPA, 1987:327, 329).

It was this "God-love for humanity" that enabled Mgr De Piro to love humanity to such an extent. God's unity with humanity and humanity's with God meant so much to him. In fact, God's incarnation was another recurring theme; where he mentioned Philippians 2:7-8: "… but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in

the likeness of men" (DPA, 1987:404-405). Here he saw God's initiative to become one with humanity. When he preached about the Eucharist, he could not refrain from explaining this reality. Mgr De Piro referred to Galatians many times when speaking about the Eucharist (DPA, 1987:77) "it is no longer I, but Christ living in me" (Gal. 2:20).

The Founder always urged his members to practise reciprocal love; and from the letter of Paul to the Church at Colossians 3:14, he used to emphasize "Beyond all these things *put on* love, which is the perfect bond of unity" (DPA, 1987:409-410). From Romans 8:9 Mgr De Piro used to explain to his congregation that the reason why Jesus entered into time and space was to demonstrate God's love (DPA, 1987:10-12); and for Paul to lead a Christian life is to be loved by God and love God, and not to observe the rules and regulations of the law. When referring to Romans 10:18 to prospective missionaries, Mgr De Piro added that they ought to walk and live secure and confident in God's love, knowing with deep certainty that in everything God works for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. In his sermon to a newly ordained priest, Mgr De Piro said: "But I say, surely they have never heard, have they? Indeed they have; 'Their voice has gone out into all the earth and their words to the end of the world'" (DPA, 1987:64-72).

Mgr De Piro was so full of love for God and neighbour that he wanted to imbue his members with Romans 8:38-39: "For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nothing already in existence and nothing still to come, nor any power, nor the heights nor the depths, nor any created thing whatever, will be able to come between us and the love of God, known to us in Christ Jesus our Lord" (DPA, 1987:155-157). He always quoted St Paul to emphasize that love is above all practical. It is not a theory or an abstract idea but lived out and real. The Founder constantly urged his members that love should be sincere and shown in true devotion and affection for each other

Mgr De Piro wanted his members to ensure that love was the motivation for all their actions. When St Paul penned his 'Hymn to Love' he encapsulated the beauty and glory of love. Many times, when referring to 1 Cor. 13:4 Mgr De Piro repeated: "Love is patient; love is kind *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant" (DPA, 1987:241, 257). The Apostle shows the order of importance in spiritual gifts. Love is *agape* – the supreme love is God's love for humanity. St Paul ends this passage by

saying that out of the three theological virtues the greatest is love. In this hymn love is revealed like a person. Jesus was for the living embodiment of love. Today we are living in an age where we see shelf after shelf of books about love, and media devoted to help and suggest ways to be happy. However, for Mgr De Piro, the cult of St Paul was to follow Christ and obey his law of love, and that would make one happy.

Mgr De Piro used to tell his listeners that what counts more than anything else is faith working through love and serving one another in love. When he preached about love and forgiveness he quoted Ephesians 5:2: "and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma" (DPA, 1987:405). No wonder the Founder urged the members of the Missionary Society of St Paul to study in depth St Paul's Letters, in order to appreciate the greatest gift of all – love. When expounding the parable of the Prodigal Son, Mgr De Piro referred to Timothy 1:15 "and Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and among whom I am foremost of *all*" (DPA, 1987:372). He gave them the example of St Paul who viewed the entire gospel as a living and tangible witness of God pouring out his love.

Mgr De Piro even quoted St Paul words in his last testament:

> I recommend to all the members of the Society of St Paul without any distinction, be they superiors or subjects, to engage to the full their holy eagerness in maintaining among themselves mutual love in Christ, being convinced that nothing may procure more the glory of God, one's spiritual good and that of the neighbour than the conservation of the same, according to the words of our father St Paul, 'But love builds up' (NAV R723/90, ff. 3524-3525).

6.2 Fr George Preca and the Cult of St Paul

St Paul's teachings and writings had a deep impact on Fr George and Mgr De Piro. In order to understand better how Fr George was saturated with the Apostle's teaching and spirit, and how eager he was to enrich others with this great treasure, we will present the gist of three of his books in honour of St Paul.

Sanctus Paulus Magister (*Our Master St Paul*)

Fr George's three main books on St Paul are *Sanctus Paulus Magister* (Our Master St Paul), *Tliet Xhur Xitwin ma' Pawlu* (Three wintry months with Paul) and *Luminariu Ta' L-Appostlu San Pawl* (Illumination of the Apostle St Paul). From the very beginning, Fr George confessed that the Founder of the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society was St Paul. Fr George presented a very special programme in honour of the saint in 1946. The feast of the

conversion of St Paul on 25 January is a special day for the Society of Christian Doctrine to venerate their Founder, as a model to be imitated by everyone, above all by catechists.

The feast was an opportunity to teach the examples given by the great master of Christ's Church; to instil the right spirit among the members. They were to encourage one another to imitate the virtues of St Paul, especially his zeal to save souls by word and example. They would not be deceived in imitating him, because he always imitated Jesus Christ and his love, he did not spare his health or his life to teach the Gospel. They were to exhort one another, to enrich themselves with the wisdom of his letters and, as true servants of God, to fulfil their mission according to the teaching of this great Apostle – who commanded Bishop Timothy to teach all faithful what he heard from him so that they would be able to teach others (Preca, 1946:8).

Fr George explained that if his members were faithful, they would enjoy peace of heart and would merit the crown of justice, which the Divine Judge Jesus Christ would give to all those who taught God's word. Their Founder St Paul has already received his crown of justice from His hands, for all his work and love. Now that he was crowned in heaven, he was watching over them and was strongly protecting them, especially while they were exercising their mission. Therefore, they should turn to him with great hope and to ask to guard and help them in their teaching for the salvation of souls.

Twenty members were asked to mention an action from the life of St Paul, each one chose a different episode, starting from Saul's presence and his approval of the stoning of St Stephen (Acts 7:58); his conversion on his way to Damascus (Acts 9:4-7); his baptism by Ananias (Acts 9: 17-19); Paul near the bed of Publius' father and healing him (Acts 28:8); Paul standing by the fire and bitten by the viper (Acts 28:3); and other instances. Members were told that it was always God who called those who were assigned to this mission. Christ told his apostles: "You did not choose me, no, I chose you; and I commissioned you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last" (Jn. 15:16) (Preca, 1946:15).

In the afternoon session, the Superior urged his members to open their ears, mind and heart to welcome the teaching which the Apostle St Paul has left them, to feel that he was present among them and was talking to them. The first hour was dedicated to short questions and answers regarding the context of Paul's teachings (Preca, 1946:17).

Later, a second session of questions and answers was held for thirty minutes. This time the questions were about examples taken from the life of St Paul. (Preca, 1946:35). Twenty-five questions were asked and answered by twenty-five different members.

This presentation in honour of the feast of the Conversion of St Paul is a witness of how Fr George declared St Paul as the Founder of the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society; and how he tried to imbue all the members with the teaching and spirit of St Paul. Since 1946, the feast of the Conversion of St Paul, *Sancte Paulus Magister* was celebrated likewise (Museum Calendar, 1946, vol. XIII).

In *Sanctus Paulus Magister* Fr George considered St Paul as the Founder of his Society when he refers to the Saint as *Our Master St Paul* (Preca, 1946). Fr George's re-evangelization was following in the footsteps of St Paul. Fr George gave Christianity in Malta a new leash of prosperity.

***Tliet Xhur Xitwin ma' San Pawl* (*Three Wintry Months with St Paul*)**

This book shows how the members of the Society of Christian Doctrine are always rehearsing the life and virtues of St Paul. First of all, it helps them to keep spiritually fit and second, enables them to give to others what they have received. This was exactly the aim and wish of Fr George who was inspired by God to set up the M.U.S.E.U.M. Society in order to safeguard the Roman Catholic faith, at a time when the Maltese were in dire need of a good, saintly and capable spiritual leader.

The Apostle Paul's impact on the Maltese, as described in the *Acts of the Apostles* chapter 28:1-11, has come down from generation to generation and his teachings continue to be a stronghold for the Roman Catholic Church in Malta. To honour the cult of St Paul, during these three months (December, January and February) the SDC members kneel down in front of an image of their Founder, the Apostle St Paul, for a quarter of an hour and meditate his teachings. Members should be prepared and disposed to imitate him, as he imitated the only Teacher of humanity, the Lord Jesus Christ (Preca, 1915:1).

The scene of the apostle's shipwreck is then read. During this quarter of an hour, every doctrinal exposition has to be read twice by the local Superior; then all those present have to repeat it together. After, the Superior reads a practical extract on the same

doctrine followed by a short pause for reflection … and then presents an episode from the life of St Paul. (Preca, 1915:2).

A new doctrinal exposition is chosen every day. For the 1st December, Fr George wrote that for Paul not one single created intellect can understand God or the things of God. In fact in Romans he wrote: "Not recognising God's saving justice they have tried to establish their own, instead of submitting to the saving justice of God" (Rom. 10:3)

Other doctrinal expositions: 2nd December
St Paul teaches that a person can lose his state of grace. In fact in his first letter to the Corinthians he wrote: "I punish my body and bring it under control, to avoid any risk that, having acted as herald for others, I myself may be disqualified" (1Cor. 9:27).

3rd December
St Paul teaches that not every professed Christian belongs to Christ. In fact in Romans 8: 9 he wrote: "Indeed, anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him."

In this book Fr George presents ninety-one exercises (Preca, 1915:4-66) to train his members as catechists so to deliver the word of God not only to children but also to everyone they come in contact with.

***Luminariu ta l-Appostlu San Paul* (*Illumination of the Apostle St Paul*)**
This is another small book written by Fr George for the internal use of the members of the SDC Society. This work called *Luminariu ta l-Appostlu San Paul* is made up of two hundred and seven versicles taken from the letters of St Paul, called *Lumen Mundi* (Light of the World). His teaching, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is like the sun shining in the whole world which expels its darkness (Preca, 1920:3).

St Paul himself writes that he had the role of a preacher, an apostle, and teacher in faith and in truth (1 Tim. 2:7). His teaching is true light, because he makes God and Jesus Christ known and leads humanity to eternal life; it unveils Satan's deceit, and the world and human nature are wounded with original sin; it shows the horror of sin that one should keep away from, and it shows the beauty of peace and saintliness that one should look for and treasure with great diligence (Preca, 1920:3).

St Paul's teaching is true light, because he indicates the way to salvation by giving the Rule of Faith and Morals in the teaching of the Church, the strength of truth. His teaching directs the soul to accept the unfathomed depth of God's science and wisdom. St Paul's teaching enlightens the distinction between the spiritual and the physical in every human being. This is why all the Fathers of the Church, doctors and teachers of the Roman Catholic Church taught from Paul's (Preca, 1920:3-4).

Fr George continues to write: "But how can one gain from the teaching, when it is not accompanied by reflection?" (Preca, 1920:4). In this *Luminariu* (Illumination), one finds the teaching from the letters of St Paul, word for word, divided into "Themes" and "Reflections". Every theme is read twice, and reflections are drawn from it. The Church honours the Apostle Paul when referring to him as a Preacher of truth, teacher of the people, a great apostle, and *Vas electionis* (an instrument). Now St Paul reigns for ever with his Divine Master, and he intercedes for us so that God will grant us the grace to faithfully practise what he himself did and taught (Preca, 1920:4).

The M.U.S.E.U.M. Society, in acknowledging St Paul as its Founder (2 Tim. 2:2), has in a special way availed itself of this *Luminariu* (Lumination). In fact, it is prescribed that every Sunday throughout the year, with the exception of the first and fifth Sunday, after sunset, SDC members have to exercise for half an hour the *Liminariu*, [members only]; and for a quarter of an hour on the first Tuesday and second Friday of the month (Preca, 1920:3-4).

***Oratorio Pawlu ta' Malta* (*Paul of Malta*)**

Writing about the Pauline cult, one cannot omit the famous *Oratorio* "*Pawlu ta' Malta*" (Paul of Malta) written by a Maltese academic, Prof. O. Friggieri, and music composed by the Maltese Prof. C. Camilleri. In order to appreciate the beauty and sublime message of this *Oratorio* one needs to remember the political situation of Malta at the time (1984). The *Oratorio* is the account of the shipwreck of St Paul as found in the *Acts of the Apostles*, rewritten with the feelings of Prof. O. Friggieri, with his fresh personal emotion, as a Maltese Christian living at the time. This was a turbulent period in local political history, when the country was divided in politics and religion. One could say that the islanders were on the verge of a violent confrontation. It was a time of anxiety between Church and State.

In his *Oratorio* the writer is sending a religious and national message. Friggieri tries to explain the sense of anxiety which he himself experiences about the mystery of life, the everyday experience, the very suffering of livelihood. The Oratorio is a prayer and the poet invites others to pray with him. He builds a religious meaning of life – until it reaches a climax and ends. The *Oratorio* concludes with a final prayer of the Maltese people to St Paul when he was leaving the island, imploring him to come again and unite the Maltese:

This *Oratorio* was performed several times in Malta. This performance attracted large crowds and by 2001 it was presented nineteen times, in various churches. Both words and music touched the hearts of those present, in fact, the audience could be seen with tears in their eyes. This *Oratorio* was later released as a CD, and a copy was sent to the Vatican Radio when it was aired around the 10 February in the year 2000.

The intervention of St Paul in times of national crisis has always saved Malta and the Maltese population. The bond between St Paul and the Maltese national conscience is very strong. Pauline Malta is a spiritual destination to which every Maltese should travel. Paul has protected the Maltese not only against the Muslims and the French, but also against the mighty Axis during the Second World War. To show in a tangible way how faith and the cult of St Paul saved the Maltese people during World War II, I will present a few instances from my personal experience.

6.3 The Faith of the Maltese and the Cult of St Paul during World War II.

6.3.1 First Air Raid and Life under Duress

On that fateful day, on Tuesday 11 June 1940 at 6.55 a.m., the wailing of the sirens announced the first air raid, the first enemy action (Vella, 1985:249). A good number of the population were attending Mass including (this author), in various churches throughout the Island. The war for the Maltese marked the beginning of a long, harrowing experience.

Underground shelters were dug out, and people used to take refuge in them every time the sirens announced an air raid warning. As the months went by, the number of air raids increased. Between January and May 1942, the average amount of air raid alerts was over 240 per month, hence, most of the time many people were living underground (Vella, 1985:249). In spite of all the upheavals, the faith of the Maltese did not dwindle.

On the contrary, their faith in God and Holy Mary was the chief weapon to fight their enemies.

People used to pray during the raids; catechism lessons were taught in shelters. A ceremony reminiscent of the early Christians was held in a huge improvised shelter in Valletta, on 8 September 1940: Malta's National Day. About thirty-six children dressed in white and carrying candles, received their First Holy Communion in the rock-shelter beneath the bastions guarding the entrance to the capital city. The tunnel was temporarily transformed into a chapel illuminated by countless candles, and the children sang hymns together with about two hundred shelterers. Canon Joseph Delia, who throughout the war looked after the spiritual needs of those who sought refuge in this shelter, delivered a sermon for the occasion. Later in the day a modest party was held as a treat to the children, and brought to an end a happy day (Vella, 1985:17).

On the occasion of the Candlemas ceremony in 1941, the British Governor, General Sir William Dobbie, after thanking the Archbishop and the parish priests as his predecessor the previous year, he added:

> We are not only fighting for the survival of the British Empire … we are fighting for the great spiritual heritage that has been handed down to us and which we hold so dear. Let the people understand this. Help them to realise that we are fighting for the right to worship God according to our conscience and to enjoy religious freedom. (Mizzi, 2005: 62).

The local Bishops did their utmost to help and encourage the people in more ways than one. They also put at the disposal of the Service authorities small churches and chapels for members of Armed Forces. The Maltese were continuously urged to pray. Besides reciting the Holy Rosary, crusades of prayers to Our Lady of Victories for Malta and England were held throughout the Maltese Islands (Vella, 1985:79).

On 8 May 1941, the feast of Our Lady of Pompeii, Fr M. Azzopardi, (the school's spiritual director) conducted a service in the school chapel and urged everyone to pray devoutly. Five days later, the school-bell rang at 2.15 p.m. as a sign of an air-raid warning. The children rushed down to the underground shelter. However, the caretaker, who was responsible to ring the bell, told the Father that he was unable to ring the bell because the Police did not warn about the raid. It is still a mystery as to who rang the bell. At that very moment a terrifying explosion rocked the building, and a thick cloud of dust shrouded the building. One of the bombs, landed exactly on the Tabernacle, containing four hundred consecrated Hosts, destroyed the chapel and the stairs which

the children had used a few minutes before (Vella, 1985:35-36).This was one of the much miraculous deliverance from the thousands of bombs that peppered Malta during the Second World War. The mystery about this incident remains.

Fr Harry Born, a Maltese army chaplain spoke in glowing terms about the gunners. He witnessed the faith of the Maltese when an air raid occurred whilst he was celebrating Mass at a Battery in Sliema. With his steel helmet on, he continued celebrating the Mass while splinters were falling all around. "As the guns blazed away he could hear the shrill voice of Bombardier Ellul, a gunner from Birkirkara, exhorting his crew: 'Keep firing lads, God is with us" (Vella, 1985:109-110). On another occasion, Fr Raymond Formosa was celebrating Mass on a gun position during an air raid and the Commanding Officer spontaneously covered the Hosts in the paten with his steel helmet (Vella, 1985:110).

1942 ushered in a year of deaths, devastation and hunger; it was the worst period of all in the siege of Malta (Mizzi & Vella, 2001:1596-1778). On 19 January, several houses in Mosta were destroyed through enemy action and a number of residents lost their life. Captain Lieutenant sent a letter to the secretary of the Archbishop confirming this incident and included the following message:

> All these officers have reported the valuable assistance rendered by priests during rescue work. Within a few minutes of the explosion of the bombs a priest arrived and acted as an interpreter. This enabled parties to be organised quickly from soldiers and civilians who helped to extricate persons trapped in the fallen masonry. Other priests were quick on the scene and were a good example to everybody present, although the raid was still in progress (Mizzi, 2005:76),

This was not an isolated case. Another case reported later the same year, described how Father Vincent Saliba from Birkirkara, climbed the wall of a damaged house and saved the life of two persons … while inside the building there was still an unexploded bomb (Mizzi, 2005:76, fn. 3).

Parish priests tried to look after their faithful in various ways, for example during the blitz of March 1942 they advertised in one of the local papers: "*The parish priests of Valletta wish to inform their parishioners that during the next few weeks a course of spiritual exercises will be held in the larger shelters of Valletta. On Monday, March 2, Fr Buhagiar OC will preach in the Yellow Garage shelter at 7 p.m.*" (Mizzi & Vella, 2001:1537)

On the feast of the Annunciation, 25 March 1942, a heavy-calibre bomb fell near the bronze statue of Christ the King, the statue commemorating the International Eucharistic Congress held in Malta in 1913. The explosion brought down part of the roof of the Railway Tunnel shelter injuring people, but the statue remained untouched, while the bomb dug a large crater within a few centimetres of the statue. The Governor, Lord Gort, when addressing the nation referred to the untouched statue of Christ the King in spite of the bombs dropping so near; hence, our faith in God and Christ the King, surely this time of darkness will soon be over (Mizzi, 2005:85).

Several Churches were blitzed and others were totally destroyed. Very often there were locals either praying or attending a liturgical service when there was an alert of an air raid, and they hardly had time to go to an air raid shelter. The closest thing to a miracle was the incident of the Mosta church, when on 9 April 1942; a stick of bombs fell around the church. "At about 4.40 pm one of the bombs went though the dome, bounced twice off the wall, rolled the whole length of the church and finally came to rest without exploding." (Vella, 1985: 111) It was Maundy Thursday and there were about three hundred persons in the church and nobody was injured; only the dome was damaged (Vella, 1985:111).

The situation in Malta was getting from bad to worse. On the 8 April 1942, the Archbishop of Malta, Dom Maurus Caruana and the Bishop of Gozo, Monsignor Michael Gonzi, issued a joint pastoral letter after the Easter weekend, which was read in the churches on April 12. The title of this letter was: "*New and greater sacrifices"* Both bishops appealed for calm, peace, love of order and respect to the authorities; and explained how the authorities had against their wishes, to ask from us a decrease in the ration entitlement of bread which would start from May 5 (Mizzi & Vella, 2001:1753). This was another blow to the islanders, now that other items of food were unavailable, and the pinch of hunger was greatly felt.

To honour the brave people of Malta, King George VI created a civilian gallantry reward. The King created this new mark of honour for men and women in all walks of civilian life (Mizzi & Vella, 2001:1776). This cross was to be awarded "for acts of the greatest heroism or of the most conspicuous courage in circumstances of extreme danger." (Mizzi & Vella, 2001:1776.) The George Cross was awarded to the Island Fortress of Malta on 15 April 1942 as a sign of heroism and devotion of the Maltese. In his address the Governor's reply included "that by God's help Malta will not weaken

but will endure until victory is won" (Mizzi & Vella, 2001:1776). The Governor acknowledged the faith of the Maltese.

The faith of the locals was shown once again when squadron leader 'Laddie' Lucas' aircraft caught fire and landed the Spitfire wheels up, in a small cornfield in the southwest of the Island. There were three old women working in the field, and one of them went over to him. She stared in his face as he climbed out of his cockpit and tears rolled down her cheeks. She laid her hand first on the wing of the aircraft and then on his arm. She made the sign of the cross devoutly across her chest, and a kind smile spread over her aging face. Lucas remarked: "For a moment, in a blessed Malta field, the Roman and the Anglican Churches were as one" (Vella, 1985:135).

Although worn out by prolonged bombing and under-nourishment, faith sustained the Maltese, and they managed to live under duress and under the daily trials of war. *Lehen is-Sewwa*, the official organ of the Malta Catholic Action, maintained regular publication. The contributors' articles helped to boost the morale of the people and to inspire confidence in God for a final victory.

Social life in Malta was centred on the parish church, and one of the most important events was the town or village *festa* (feast), the highlight of which was the solemn procession where the statue of the Patron Saint was carried shoulder high around the main streets. These had to be curtailed during the war. A procession with a Holy Relic was held in Valletta on Monday, 4 August 1941, on the feast of *St Dominic*. A similar procession took place in Sliema on Sunday, 23 August 1942, on the occasion of the feast of *Our Lady Star of the Sea* (Vella, 1985:150).

6.3.2 The Santa Maria Convoy

As time went by, food became very scarce. Ration portions were getting smaller and smaller. The local situation became desperate, convoys were sent to Malta escorted by several warships, but most of the ships sunk on the way. Sometimes after arriving safely to Malta they were bombed and sunk in the harbour, while the people were on the point of starvation. It was at this time that one of the members of the SDC offered to bring Fr George a bread-loaf or two a week so that he could be relieved from hunger. Fr George replied: "My son, I thank you for your offer. But do not forget that the war with all its inconveniences was sent by God as a punishment for people and I form part of the people and I have to suffer with them" (Commission, 1965:37). But the Maltese never

gave up their faith in God, prayers were intensified; and as the feast of the Assumption was approaching so was their great hope in the Lord, who was watching over them all the time and was constantly protecting them.

"The deteriorating situation persisted, since the June 1942 convoys failed to replenish the Island's needs" (Vella, 1985:163.). On the night of 10 August 1942, fourteen fast vessels, including the American tanker *Ohio* manned by a British crew, entered the Mediterranean under a heavy escort by warships. In order to protect this convoy a dramatic battle took place in the Sicilian Straits. Out of the fourteen vessels only three managed to survive. When on the 13 August afternoon, the three survivors appeared on the horizon, people danced and sang in the streets; "Some felt like swimming towards the horizon to assist the limping ships into the Grand Harbour" (Vella, 1985:165).

People crammed every vantage point around the Grand Harbour area, they cheered and cried for joy, and as the battle-scared vessels slid between the arms of the breakwater the onlookers waved their handkerchiefs to express their unbound joy and used them to wipe away their tears. The Maltese once again thanked the Lord and Our Lady for this great favour and prayed for those who lost their life on the way.

The following day, on 14 August, another ship arrived and was given another great welcome. On the feast of the Assumption (15 August), early in the morning the *Ohio*, carrying vital fuel, oil and kerosene, without which Malta could not survive, was lying crippled and smouldering some miles off Malta. After a few attempts and on the verge of sinking, *Ohio* managed to enter the Grand Harbour. It is believed that it was through the intercession of Our Lady, her love, and through the great faith and yearning prayers of the Maltese that the crippled *Ohio* entered the Grand Harbour. The convoy of Santa Maria finally reached the beleaguered island. Malta was saved! God through Holy Mary once again saved Malta!!! This was a tangible way to show how prayer and faith are the only means for achieving victory.

To the present day, the "Convoy of Santa Maria" is commemorated on the 15 August. At noon the Siege Bell Monument[1] at the entrance of the Grand Harbour rings for joy in remembrance of this saving event, while a service is carried on a boat in the middle of the harbour, and flower wreaths are set afloat in remembrance of those courageous persons who lost their life to save Malta and its people. This Bell is also rung on the 8 September, the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady, to commemorate the lifting up of the

Great Siege of 1565, the Victory of the Knights and the Maltese over the Turks and the end of the bombardments of World War II on Malta.

6.3.3 The 8 September 1943

To mark the end of the Great Siege of 1565, the 8 September is the titular feast of the Parish of the city of Senglea. The 8 September 1943 was a very special celebration for the parishioners of the city of Senglea. The titular statue of *Il-Bambina* (Little Holy Mary) was on the way back to its church from where it had been in safe-keeping after a tremendous and devastating aerial attack in January 1941. Many Sengleans, "including those who had sought refuge outside the city, welcomed her back and congregated in fulfilment of vows for the deliverance from the onslaught that had threatened their life for three years" (Vella, 1985:192).

While the procession with the statue of Our Lady reached the devastated city, destroyers berthed in the Grand Harbour "coned their searchlights on to the statue of *Il-Bambina*, whilst a loudspeaker from one of the naval ships blared out the joyous news of Italy's surrender" (Vella, 1985:192). There was double rejoicing. God through Our Lady and St Paul once again saved Malta and the Maltese. The faith of the people, their prayers and their solidarity were once again rewarded. The good news were confirmed at the same time with a letter sent from the Dockyard Admiral Superintendent to Archpriest Brincat who read it to the congregation as soon as the procession entered the church (Mizzi, 2005:110). This is the letter of confirmation sent by the Deputy Secretary: *The Admiral Superintendent would like you to know that the Italian Armed Forces have surrendered unconditionally today and he feels that it is a great tribute to Malta that it has taken place on the occasion of the feast of Our Lady of Victories* (Mizzi, 2005:110).

The Church in Malta cooperated greatly with the Allies. The bishops worked hand in hand with the Military Authorities and contributed greatly to keep the best relations between the British and the Maltese. It became common knowledge that it was the wise guidance of the Ecclesiastical Authorities, together with the continuous prayers to God and to Holy Mary that gave the strength and the courage to the inhabitants to keep on resisting till the end, even when they suffered the pangs of hunger. The British and the Allies owe their victory in the Mediterranean to the Church in Malta and Gozo (Bezzina, 2002:199)

The *Te Deum* (Thanksgiving) was sung in all the Roman Catholic Churches throughout Malta and the Sister Island of Gozo. After a lapse of three years, the Good Friday processions were again held in most towns and villages on 7 April 1944. The Maltese could now look ahead to better times.

6.3.4 Faith, Hope and Charity – The 3 Gladiators

When war broke out in 1939, the whole fleet of airplanes Malta could boast of were only three Gladiators nicknamed: *Faith, Hope* and *Charity*. During the fierce fighting *Hope* and *Charity* were destroyed, but *Faith* survived. During an air raid, when housed in a pen at Hal Far airfield, *Faith* was bombed with disastrous results. Later it was recovered from the wreckage of the pen. In September 1943, the restored aircraft *Faith* was publicly presented to the people of Malta by Vice-Marshal Sir Keith to the Chief Justice of Malta, Sir George Borg (Poolman, 2009:159-161).

K. Poolman wrote: "this wreck had been the weapon of victory" (Poolman, 2009: 160). Here, Poolman was referring to the *metal* of the Gladiator, but for the Maltese it meant much more than that. The weapon of victory for the Maltese was their faith in God, who heard their prayers during those terrible years. Fr George referred to faith as 'the cause of every victory' and 'the most efficacious weapon' (KM1, 1961:20). Many Maltese are very proud not only to treasure this war relic, but they are by far more proud of living this virtue in their daily life.

In September 2005 Malta celebrated a fly past of the famous Hurricane and Spitfire over the Memorial of the Royal Air Force, just outside the gates of Valletta. The artist Brian (Hugo) Goodall who painted the three gladiators, *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity* flying over the blitzed church of St Publius, came to draw the story he heard way back in 1950. During his stay in Malta, he tried to gather information by talking to people who remembered those dark days of 1941, when the church of St Publius received a direct hit that destroyed a large part of the building. At the end of his stay he remarked that the people of Malta still kept their faith in the Roman Catholic Church and its teaching. He wrote how an elderly lady told him that it was as if an Angel tried to help the Maltese, every day they prayed, and every day there was hope. (Goodall, 2005:2). Hope is born of faith.

Auberges, palaces, theatres, hotels, hospitals, institutes and colleges, private dwellings, convents and churches were totally destroyed, but not the Faith of the Maltese. Honours

and awards were given to service and civilian who distinguished themselves during the war, but the greatest honours and awards of the survivors go to their Roman Catholic Faith and cult of St Paul. It is said that Malta was the most heavily bombarded places in the theatre of war, over 16,000 thousand tons of bombs were dropped on the island which is only twenty-seven by fourteen kilometres. The cult of St Paul played a very important role during the blitz. All the treasures, liturgical artefacts in silver and gold belonging to churches were put in very safe places due to enemy action, but not the relic of the supposed arm of St Paul housed in the church of St Paul's shipwreck in Valletta. This relic was always exposed on one of the altars of the church, for the veneration of the faithful, in the hope to spare the island from complete destruction. This is one of the most precious treasures of this church (Ciarlo`, 1993:60).

Lord Tedder, Marshal of the Royal Air Force at the end of the war commented:

> The story of Malta from 1940 to 1944 is one of the great dramas of history … undying honour is due to the Maltese themselves, men, women and children, who never lost faith in the darkest hours of blitz and starvation (Mizzi, 2002:vi).

In December 1943, President Roosevelt was given a formal welcome when he came to Malta and he was impressed by the courage of the Maltese. At the end of his speech he presented a little token, a scroll, a citation to the Maltese nation:

> In the name of the People of the United States of America I salute the Island of Malta, its people and defenders, who, in the cause of freedom and justice and decency throughout the world, have rendered valorous service far above and beyond the call of duty.
>
> Under repeated fire from the skies, Malta stood alone but unafraid in the center of the sea, one tiny bright flame in the darkness – a beacon of hope for the clearer days which have come. Malta's bright story of human fortitude and courage will be read by posterity with wonder and with gratitude through the ages.
>
> What was done in this Island maintains the highest traditions of gallant men and women who from the beginning of time have lived and died to preserve civilisation for all mankind (Vella, 1985:198).

This writing is now commemorated on a marble plaque on the façade of the President's Palace in Valletta. Yes, Malta was blitzed but not beaten. Yes, the seed of Faith, said to be sown by St Paul saved Malta, saved Europe, saved Christianity in Europe. In the thirties, Fr George wrote; "the victory that conquers the world is our faith (Preca, 1930s:16).

6.4 The 1960 Centenary Celebrations of St Paul's Shipwreck

The 1960 centenary celebrations of St Paul's shipwreck were held on a grand scale throughout Malta and Gozo. The Papal Legate Cardinal Aloisius Joseph Muench led the Pontifical Mission of those who were to take part in the celebrations. Among the distinguished visitors: four Cardinals and forty-one Archbishops, Bishops and Abbots were welcomed on the island. The CHAIN-RELIC of St Paul, a remnant of the supposedly iron-chain that held Paul as a prisoner in Rome, was brought to Malta by the Papal Mission, from the Basilica of St Paul's Outside the Walls, Rome. This relic was a reminder of the shipwreck and the time the Apostle Paul spent in Malta as a chained prisoner of Christ (Souvenir programme, 1960:26).

On 31 January, 1960, the solemn opening of the Pauline Celebrations started with a procession from St Paul's Cathedral, Mdina, to St Paul's shrine, Saqqajja Square Rabat, where an altar was set up for the occasion. A light was kept burning in front of this shrine throughout the whole year. On this day Pope John XXIII sent a message for the occasion:

> His Holiness the Pope, while accepting the homage of love, fidelity and loyalty of his beloved children, wishes abundant fruit from these celebrations for the growth in Christian life and implores from God abundant graces through the intercession of the glorious Apostle of the Gentiles … Cardinal Tardini (Souvenir programme, 1960:1).

The participation of the Knights of Malta began with a Pontifical High Mass in St John's Co-Cathedral, built by the Order, after the glorious Siege of 1565. In the afternoon a pilgrimage of the Sovereign Military Order of the Knights of Malta left St Paul's Cathedral to the Grotto of St Paul at Rabat, where a votive, silver Perpetual Lamp in the shape of a galleon, was offered by the Order – a very affectionate gesture. This lamp was lit for the first time in the presence of the Papal Legate, and is constantly kept burning in the Grotto (Hedley, 1960:11).

To commemorate this centenary, SDC members celebrated a special day in honour of St Paul, on 29 May 1960. In the morning, members took part in a pilgrimage from St Paul's Cathedral, Mdina, to St Paul's Parish Church, Rabat, stopping for a short time in front of St Paul's shrine at Saqqajja Square. Bishop E. Galea celebrated High Mass at St Paul's Church, and during the homily he referred to the nearby Grotto of St Paul. In the afternoon sentences from the letters of St Paul were read. Also, talks were delivered by Mgr C. Bonnici and Fr George. The Founder started his address by quoting 2 Timothy 2:1-2, which was the cornerstone of the Society, and urged each member to love and

imitate St Paul, especially in his love for Christ. The day came to a close with Sacramental Benediction (Balzan, 2010:56).

The 24th of July saw the closing of the Centenary Celebrations with a solemn procession from St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta to St Publius Square, Floriana. This was conducted by the Papal delegate and the participation of the visiting Cardinals and Bishops. Present also were the Roman Catholic Movements and other Constituted Bodies of Malta with their own banners. It was at that moment when Malta reached her finest spiritual hour. The Holy Father broadcasted a radio-message to the Maltese people.

All those present in St Publius Square, were elated when they heard the voice of Pope John XXIII. The title of his beautiful message was "*Stay Firmly With God"*. Among many issues, the Pope expressed that in Malta everything still speaks of St Paul (Hedley, 1960:2). He said that St Paul is still looking after the Maltese as their spiritual father *par excellence*. We live to please God, which is the greatest and highest aim in life; the Pope told the immense crowd. At the end of the broadcast the Pope implored:

> Oh, Paul of Tarsus, instrument designed for all nations, who in your journeys without rest on this earth, preached unceasingly Christ crucified, and won the world for Him; to the Maltese you are a father and a teacher; you helped them in every trial, you made them more powerful in every struggle; you sustained them by your wisdom and example. May through your intercession these most noble islands remain, for ever your heritage! (Hedley, 1960:3)

Finally His Holiness imparted his blessings. The celebrations were concluded with solemn *Te Deum* (Thanksgiving) and Benediction imparted by Cardinal Muench.

6.5 Pauline Year 2008-2009 in Malta

In line with the proposition of Pope Benedict's Pauline year 2008-2009 in Malta, many cultural activities and initiatives took place. These included lectures about St Paul and his writing, concerts, dramatic representations, posters and exhibitions connected with the Pauline heritage as the Apostle of the Gentiles. These initiatives were organised and coordinated by the Pauline Committee set up by the Curia. Other activities were organised by parishes dedicated to St Paul, religious associations, schools and others.

During the course of the year, many educational and theological initiatives on the teaching of St Paul were held on a diocesan and parish levels. Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi, President of the Pontifical Commission for Culture, as well as Maltese scholars

gave lectures to priests. Pilgrimages were organised to shrines and churches dedicated to St Paul, both in the Maltese islands and in other countries. Cultural initiatives were offered to the general public; concerts were presented in honour of St Paul. Lectures were given about archaeological sites where supposedly St Paul visited during his stay on Malta in A.D. 60, including one by the archaeologist Professor Giorgio Filippi who has been excavating around the tomb of St Paul in Rome (Cremona, 2008-2009:5).

An exhibition called *Salve Pater Paule* (Hail Father Paul) was organised. This included about ninety exhibits of paintings, graphics and sculpture dating from early fifteenth century down to the present time. These exhibits came from churches in Malta, Religious Orders, church museums and private collections; they show the deep faith and love of those who commissioned them and the artists who executed them. The venue of this exhibition was Wignacourt Museum of St Paul's Collegiate Church Rabat, Malta, which has a great connection with the cult of St Paul in Malta.

Three Papal Visits

The three papal visits to Malta have in recent years re-enforced the significance of the island as a Pauline destination and a place of pilgrimage. The appellation of "father" so dear to the Maltese has been greatly emphasized by three recent Popes in their messages to the people of the Maltese islands. In 1960, Pope John XXIII at the closing ceremony of the solemn celebrations just mentioned *supra* and it was recalled recently by Mgr Ph. Calleja: "Everything on your island still recalls St Paul. St Paul has remained to this very day your Father who begot you in the Faith" (Calleja, 2010:12-13).

Pope John Paul II, the first Pope to visit Malta in 1990 and on 9 May 2001, described Fr George as "Malta's second father of faith, after St Paul" (2001:40) and referred to the Maltese as "true to your Father in Faith, the Apostle Paul". On the canonisation of Fr George, on Sunday 3 June 2007 at St Peter's Square in Rome, Pope Benedict XVI began his address by calling Fr George "A friend of Jesus" and concluded his brief speech as follows: "St George Preca is the first canonised son of your sweet land. He is your second father in faith after St Paul." (2007:93).

The faith of the Maltese supposedly brought by St Paul was seem by the warm welcome given to Pope Benedict XVI when he came to Malta on 17 April 2010. The Pope visited Malta to pray at the place where St Paul is supposed to have stayed for some time, the holy place associated with the birth of Christianity in Malta. The Pope expressed the

great joy of his spiritual visit, on the 1950 Anniversary of St Paul in Malta. Pope Benedict invited the Maltese not only to remember the coming of St Paul to the island, but also to renew their faith, to make it relevant to their life, and to practise it as true spiritual children of the Apostle. Before leaving the island the Pope told the Maltese that they should be proud of their Christian vocation; to cherish their religious and cultural heritage; to look to the future with hope, and to be worthy children of St Paul.

The cult of St Paul is still very much alive: there is a connection between the congregation of the martyrdom of St Paul in the church of Shipwreck in Valletta, which was set up on 21 June 1924 and the congregation of *Tre Fontane* (three fountains)– outside Rome. This congregation was formed because of the relic of the column found in the above mentioned church in Valletta and was known as the 'Solidarity of the Column'. In 1925, this confraternity joined the *Sodalita`Primaria* of *Tre Fontane*, (Primary Solidarity of the three Fountains). In 2001 the relic of the column was taken out in procession during Pope John Paul's visit in Malta (Cassar, 2011: 54-58).

The sanctuary of *Tre Fontane* is the last place, or rather the last footsteps which St Paul threaded on this planet, the last of a long chain of places he visited and evangelized, as the Apostle of the Gentiles. From this place of his martyrdom, the Apostle Paul left this world to receive the crown of justice and went to meet his Creator whom he had greatly defended and evangelized throughout his life. The sanctuary of *Tre Fontane* is another shrine of Pauline cult which is frequently visited by Maltese and Gozitan priests, as well as lay persons.

The cult of St Paul is always felt in the hearts and present in the minds of many Maltese. St Paul shaped the identity of Malta. This is seen in churches, chapels, shrines, and monuments with layers of paintings, decorations and artwork representing the Malta passages in Acts. The Pauline celebrations held in 1960 and 2010 celebrations share the unique Maltese trait of cooperation between Civil Society, Church and State, which have forged a Maltese identity.

In order to celebrate St Paul in the year of Faith, a grand concert of sacred music was held on 9 February 2013. To commemorate St Paul's shipwreck an Oratorio *Sacro* (Holy Oratorio), *L'Apostolo delle Genti* (The Apostle of all people) was performed under the baton of Mgr Marco Frisina at St Paul's Parish Church, Rabat, Malta. The Oratorio portrays scenes from St Paul's life. Besides the usual scenes depicting the

various stages of the Apostle's life; one listens how Paul tries to live his life in unity with Christ and is ready to give his life to what he believes in. The Oratorio ends with a march which resembles the footsteps of the Apostle towards his meeting with Christ. The march ends in a triumphal tune in a song of joy: "*What can separate us from the love of Christ? No persecution … no sword … not even death!"* (Frisina: 2013:11).

In the weekly paper, *Lehen Is-Sewwa* (The Voice of Catholic Action), Fr C. Buttigieg chose the title "Malta saved Paul, Paul saved Malta" (Butigieg, 2013:14) as preparation to the yearly celebrations for the feast of the shipwreck of St Paul. Fr Buttigieg wrote that St Luke, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, played the part of a journalist *par excellence* in the narrative of the shipwreck. In fact, the 'we sections/narratives' reflect that Luke was an authentic eye-witness. Fr Buttigieg ended his article by writing that after Malta had saved Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles wanted to save Malta by giving her the good news of the Risen Christ.

The pulse of the cult of St Paul is still beating in the hearts of the majority of the Maltese, living away from their homeland. The Ambassador for Malta in Istanbul celebrated the feast of the Shipwreck of St Paul on 10 February 2013 at the Franciscan Catholic Church of St Anthony of Padua, Istanbul. The ambassador, Reuben Gauci accompanied by his family attended Mass celebrated by the Catholic Bishop of Istanbul, Mgr L. Pelatre (2013:62). Mass was also attended by Maltese citizens and Maltese descent living in Turkey. After Mass, R. Gauci invited the Mayor, Ahmet Misbah Demircan to open an exhibition on the veneration of St Paul in Malta. The Consul General of Malta said that St Paul was born in the city of Tarsus, which today forms part of the Turkish Republic (2013:62).

This chapter showed how the cult of St Paul, the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr George, and the dogma of faith are instilled in the mind and heart of many Maltese people. The seed of Christianity supposedly brought by the Apostle Paul in A.D. 60 shows the role faith played in the life of the Maltese. This chapter has shown that the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr George, and the dogma of faith did bear a great amount of fruit, as confirmed recently during the three papal visits.

Note

1. The Siege Bell Monument is dedicated to the 7,000 persons (martyrs) who lost their life for the ideal of democracy. This Monument was inaugurated by her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, on 29 May, 1992.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this study we attempted to show how the Roman Catholic faith and the cult of St Paul survived and have been very strong for so long in Malta, even during the British colonial administration. Malta: the faithful daughter of the father, the Apostle of the Gentiles, is proud of its history, courage and heroism of its people. The continuity of the Christian tradition throughout Malta's chequered history is the link to St Paul. The whole nation maintains a sense of tradition. At the centre of tradition or rather its point of origin is the story of St Paul who is supposed to have brought Christianity to Malta. Is Malta still proud of its Roman Catholic faith and the cult of St Paul today? In the beginning of the third millennium one may ask: "Are Mgr De Piro's and Fr George's contributions still valid and applicable today?"

With the passage of time and since Malta gained its Independence (1964), Malta made giant strides economically and a good number of the population became affluent. Malta has changed a great deal since the early decades of the twentieth century but the constants are still there. Today, the majority of the Maltese enjoy a good level of education, very good standard of living; having all they need and much more, but seem to be bored with life at an early age. Why are they not happy like those who were poor but embraced the Christian values? Nowadays, many people are neither happy nor satisfied. Both Founders taught that material wealth is not the means to achieve true happiness. Material wealth can provide comfort but not peace of heart.

The media, other modern means of communication, the influx of tourism and foreign settlers of other non-Christian religions are leaving a mark on the Maltese way of life on the island. Today, Malta has made an enormous progress in many ways. How about the faith of the Maltese today? The new generation looks at the Roman Catholic faith through a different lens. Today many people are trying to do away with faith, claiming that "truth" has to be scientifically proven. How does this new generation look at the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr George? Are they still accepted by the present generation? Progress and new technologies are luring the minds of both children and adults, leaving a void in one's inner being. The contributions of these two Founders showed how great things can be achieved through faith, love, sacrifice and perseverance.

Therefore, we have to ask: what kind of directional meaning their contributions have for the present generation? Mgr De Piro and Fr George taught that it is through faith and prayer that human beings build a happy relationship with their Creator and achieve eternal happiness. This means that it is necessary to take the basic direction of their teaching in order to realise the depth of their contributions. We explained *supra* the impact and effects of their contributions to safeguard the Roman Catholic faith. Mgr De Piro and Fr George gave a new presentation in a new situation. For example; Christian literature available only in Latin and Italian was translated into Maltese and explained in a very simple way. Both Founders tried to present the Roman Catholic faith through the cult of St Paul and tradition, as a river from its source. Was it not possible? Did it not happen? Results speak for themselves.

What is the present situation in Malta? Is it possible to practise the Roman Catholic faith today, *vis-à-vis* (in relation to) the contributions of De Piro and Fr George? The influences of the media; and the contact with people of various beliefs are presenting a threat to the Roman Catholic faith. For a number of Maltese youths Jesus Christ is no longer a defined truth but is becoming a starting point for dialogue. Relativism is becoming the trend of the day. Endless relativity in the sense that everybody can and will believe as he/she prefers is not possible in the concept of the Church. Such trends do not conform to the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr George.

Today a great number of people never read the Bible and seldom go to church. There are those who look for alternatives and new directions. Others look at the Bible as a book of the past, speaking from a different time and world. Today for many people Jesus was merely an obscure teacher of two thousand years ago. Some Maltese may ask: "To what extent should even a Maltese cling to his/her Roman Catholic faith today? The catechetical formation given by both Mgr de Piro and Fr George presented the Bible as a source of direction, ideas and experiences. The contributions of De Piro and Fr George can serve as a bridge to help see today's situation more clearly.

How can this bridge help Maltese people today? If they follow the contributions of both Founders they find that they give a basic framework of what Roman Catholic faith essentially is – a church *on the way*. A church that *lives* with the gift and work entrusted to it by Jesus and insofar as it *moves* on Jesus' way of obedience, love and suffering. These are the hallmarks of the way of Jesus that corresponds to his history to lead humanity towards love. The Church is founded on the history and the message of Jesus

and tradition. Tradition is something like water for a fish, which makes its life possible. According to the constitution of divine revelation of Vatican II, tradition "progresses" and "grows" in the church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Dei Verbum 2.8).

Today the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr George are still valid and applicable if Christ and his truth is the *way* humankind takes for its life. Therefore, it is clear that only through people being *on the way* can Christ become real in their life and society. Maltese history and other events in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries proved that the contributions of both Founders safeguarded the Roman Catholic faith in the Maltese islands.

Fr George practised patience and hoped in faith, and went beyond monotonous repetition of dry catechism statements, and drew the wealth of tradition on the cult of St Paul – the cult of the Roman Catholic Church. His *inner* attitude was *expressed* externally – this was Fr George's corporal-spiritual being. Fr George's use of the Maltese language was clearly and solely motivated by the need of bringing his vision of Christian life to the people in an effective way. In the Maltese islands the cult of St Paul is offered to God through sacred signs and inward dispositions. Praise, thanksgiving, petitions, salvation are acknowledged by God's supreme power. Although cult in the strict sense is due to God alone and always includes adoration; the Maltese people do not adore St Paul, the saint is only venerated and they pray to him as an intercessor.

In a nutshell, what did Mgr De Piro and Fr George teach? They taught the dogma of faith. They taught the virtues of hope, love of God and neighbour; the right way to lead a good Christian life. Besides other important themes they emphasized the teaching of St Paul and the social teaching of the church. If St Paul were to write a letter to the Maltese today, would he still call them "my children"? Or would it be perhaps a reminder to that wonderful event when he was among them and planted the tree of the cross?

St Paul would probably say: "You celebrated in 2008-2009 my two thousandth birthday, as well as 1950 years since I was in Malta, and for that I thank you. I also appreciate that you remember me throughout the year" Would St Paul recommend building families on love, respect, patience and prayers; forgiveness and not separation? Would he tell the Maltese that those who pray together stay together? Would St Paul remind

them that divorce is also adultery (Rom. 7:1-3)? Would he tell them that divorce does not solve any problems but will create greater problems?

In the last two chapters of Acts, Luke's narrative gives a sort of synthesis of all he wrote earlier about God's plan of salvation. From the textual sense of the voyage, we can also draw some soteriological significance. The spiritual significance of the storm is the fear of physical and material loss when one does not take heed of the word of God. On board the vessel all humanity is represented: Jews, Greeks, Romans, Christians and Paul, the agent of salvation. All those who are on their voyage with Paul will be saved (Acts 27:24).

The effects of the supposed seed of faith sown by St Paul throw light on the significance of the biblical text. The shipwreck of St Paul on Malta is a re-working of the leitmotif in Luke – Acts. It brings humanity to the last act in the plan of salvation. The seed of the Word is heard in the conscience of the Maltese, salvation is conditional: it depends on hearing the word of God and following it. The voyage of salvation (humanity's spiritual journey) like the shipwreck of St Paul can end with the loss of all material wealth, but saving one's eternal life. The Maltese recognized the relationship between God and humanity, and built an entire culture around it. Every phase of Maltese history provides some form of connection between faith and public life; a relationship of trust and a chain of continuity. Malta's national heritage and religious tendencies are attested in the presentation of this study: Mgr G. De Piro and St George Preca, together with their contributions, were a veritable light on the Maltese islands.

Among the countries that help the missions, one reads in the Annals of the Missions that Malta, a small island, helps as much as the greatest among the largest countries. It is quite remarkable the courage of many Maltese who lead a missionary life in near and far countries, and overcome many obstacles and perform excellent work in the missionary field. Mgr De Piro's and Fr George's legacy is seen in the number of members of the Society of Christian Doctrine and the Missionary Society of St Paul who are evangelizing in Albania, Australia, Cuba, Kenya, Peru, Philippines, Poland and the United Kingdom.

It is the strong faith of the Maltese, together with the dedication of these two personalities that has saved not only the Roman Catholic faith in Malta but also the cult of St Paul, so dear to the Maltese. Mgr De Piro and Fr George are excellent examples

for all Christians who adhere to the Roman Catholic faith. It is through such faith that human beings will be able to overcome all trials and difficulties in this vale of tears. Despite the lapse of time and the thousand and one hurdles throughout the ages; devotion towards St Paul, the father of the Maltese Christian community has never waned (Bonnici, 1975:81).

Today, a number of Maltese claim that the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr George are no longer valid and applicable. If one had to do away with the faith of St Paul and its traditions, Malta would be like a ship tossed on a ruffled sea, without a pole-star and a compass. It would be mantled with darkness and the fountains of human happiness would get dry. St Paul brought the Christian faith to the Maltese and helped successive Maltese generations to conduct their lives in the sprit of faith.

In spite of all the difficult times that Christianity underwent throughout the ages, Malta is still a Roman Catholic country. The Roman Catholic faith was always very strong in Malta in time of peace and much more in time of war. The Cross of Redemption and the Maltese Cross were always part and parcel of the Maltese identity. They never lost their authentic and lasting meaning: they are the signs of love and reconciliation, and this is the true vocation of the Maltese who embrace the Christian message.

At the dawn of the third millennium, the great majority of the Maltese are still deeply religious people, though lately less so. The Roman Catholic Church is still one of the most important, powerful and trusted institutions in the life of the Maltese people. This is partly due to the contributions of Fr George and Mgr De Piro and their respective societies – the Society of Christian Doctrine and the Missionary Society of St Paul. These Societies are still giving religious formation to the faithful in Malta and Gozo. Both islands benefit from intense catechetical instruction to children and youths in the SDC centres and the Oratories run by the MSSP.

In the MSSP Oratory catechetical formation and liturgical teaching form the principal mission not only to young boys, girls and youths, but also to adults from all parts of the island. It is the place where listening to the word of God is part of the personal experience of the community. MSSP regards this Oratory as a school for evangelization of adults and this was also the vision of Mgr De Piro.

In today's hectic world, one needs more than ever time for prayer and reflection. The world values productivity over inner life, and regards time spent in prayer as wasted. But, it is in prayer that one gains the strength and wisdom to live a Christian life, it is in prayer that one comes in touch with reality. We are well aware of the great storms that threaten and try to eradicate the roots of Christianity in Malta. However, we hope that the faith of the Maltese will be the bridge that will save Christianity. Like the bridge that saved Paul and all the shipwrecked from the tempest on the shores of Malta in A.D. 60.The shores of Malta served as the natural bridge to diffuse Christianity.

In today's secular world, according to Pope Benedict XVI: "the Maltese know how to find in the Christian vision the answer to the new challenges" (Pope's audience, 2010.) On April 2010, when Pope Benedict XVI concelebrated Mass with hundreds of Maltese priests in the presence of thousands of local inhabitants, he felt the great fervour of those present. When back in Rome the Pope told his audience: "It was for me a motive of joy and also of consolation, to feel the particular warmth of that people, which gives the feeling of a great family, united by the faith and Christian vision of life" (Pope, 2010:168).

Through thick and thin the cult of St Paul has been the distinctive characteristic of Malta and the Maltese. The greatest legacy that St Paul left to the Maltese is the gift of faith, because faith leads to hope, and hope leads to love, and love leads to God. The Pauline tradition rests on the edifice of the universal Church founded by Jesus Christ of which Paul is one of the pillars. It is not possible to separate the story of the Church and Dogma history with Malta and the Maltese.

After this research we conclude that one of the world's oldest Christian countries is the Maltese archipelago. Its story begins in the book of the *Acts of the Apostles*. The faith that St Paul supposedly brought to the Maltese was welcomed and embraced by a number of its inhabitants. In the beginning, one supposes there was just a nucleus of converts, which in time, through tradition, teaching, learning, experience and miracles became the faith of the whole population of the Maltese islands. A few decades back the Pope used to call Malta *Cattolicissima* (cent per cent Catholic). The serpent in the Garden of Eden brought death for humanity, the viper that bit Paul on Malta brought immortality to all those who embrace faith. Humanity is given life instead of death.

Today human beings are constantly bombarded by the media with images and ideas which undermine faith and morality. One is being lured by so many attractive things and adverts, not to say certain camouflaged laws; that were criminal acts and now lawful, such as abortion. Certain laws instead of defending moral principles try to destroy and weaken the faith. This is the reason why the contributions of Mgr de Piro and Fr George are still important today.

We are well aware how in modern times various dangers against Faith assail these Islands. But, the faithful are convinced that the work of the Holy Spirit in the universal Church is not a *part-time job*. The Roman Catholic Church has been through various difficult times, but there is always the hidden Hand of God. As proved in this study, the faith supposedly sown by St Paul is the same faith that is still preached today in Malta. The words preached by Jesus Christ, through the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr George were leading the Maltese onto the highway of holiness. Thanks to their Societies the word of God is still leading Maltese and *ad gentes* (to other people) on the road of conversion.

Maltese history developed along lines which are constantly religious. The oldest temples in Malta, which are now scientifically considered to be the oldest free standing stone buildings in the world, are places of religious cult. One of the earliest links with religion indicates that faith and culture were inseparable from the very start in Malta. Since the 'Baptism of Malta' this identification developed into what Malta is today. Faith has made Maltese national identity eminently religious. It survived the test of time simply because so many generations were totally faithful to the historical pact between culture and faith. The problem today is that culture is threatening faith.

Throughout the ages the people of Malta regarded the Roman Catholic Church as their main, if not only, source of inspiration. The population of Malta, so small in number and so fragile, managed to survive simply because they found leaders within the Roman Catholic Church and in the community. Mgr De Piro and Fr George were two of them. Nationhood is the result of the presence of the Roman Catholic Church in the public sphere. Malta was shaped according to the trends adopted by the Roman Catholic faith. It was the Roman Catholic faith which helped tiny Malta to survive. Faith has forged the identity of Malta and the Maltese.

In this study we tried to investigate how in a tangible way the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr George safeguarded the Roman Catholic faith in Malta from Protestantism and Freemasonry, during the British colonial rule. As explained, it was through their contributions that the Roman Catholic faith survived and was always the saving grace of the Maltese. The Roman Catholic faith not only saved Malta during the Second World War as attested by the few examples stated earlier; but also saved the British Empire at the time, as well as Europe.

In this research the author tried to depict the golden thread of the Roman Catholic faith and the cult of St Paul weaved through the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr George. Their contributions proved to be a great asset not only to Church Dogma history in the Maltese islands, but also in the several countries where the missionaries of both Founders are found. Like the parable of the mustard seed, the seed of faith supposedly sown by St Paul in tiny Malta has spread through the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr George, and is still being spread to the four corners of the world.

Throughout this research we have reflected and discovered how the contribution of both Founders, the real meaning and great value of the Roman Catholic faith were explained in a very simple way for everyone to understand, and that the call to holiness is a universal call. The author's view is that the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr George were the main factors that influenced greatly the lives of the Maltese during the British colonial administration. Their contributions were vital at a time when new ideas were trying to undermine the faith and morality of the local population. The religious and political powers of the Roman Catholic Church were the means to safeguard the Roman Catholic faith. The Roman Catholic Church needed to equip herself in order to defend the infiltration of Protestantism and Freemasonry in Maltese society.

We discovered how Mgr De Piro and Fr George were able to read the signs of the times. They trained catechists to teach the word of God to the majority of the local inhabitants in the Maltese language. They tried to give a good catechetical formation not only to children and youths, but to everyone. The Protestants wanted to avail themselves of the ignorance and poverty of the Maltese population – very fertile ground to disseminate Protestantism. The Roman Catholic faith and the cult of St Paul became one of the most important elements of the DNA of this island nation.

Just as Mgr De Piro and Fr George invested in a sound knowledge of the faith based on deep convictions and solidarity, the Maltese today should follow their teaching to be able to prove themselves against the onslaught and attacks of those who want to rob Malta of its most precious treasure, its birthright, its faith. The contributions of both Founders are the most appropriate and valuable treasures of Christian life for contemporary Maltese. Many postmodern Maltese are experiencing life as if they have lost their sense of direction; but if they follow the teachings and examples of Mgr De Piro and Fr George, they can build a Christian life which would be more meaningful and relevant to their Maltese identity.

To corroborate 'Maltese identity', an English lady, Sue Brown came and settled in Malta in 2004. Since then, she wrote a book with the title "*Small Island, Great Riches*", which she published in 2010. Although the book is about a Maltese tenor and teacher, she was struck with an essential Maltese identity that remains in Malta today; in spite of the fact that since prehistoric time was always dominated by great powers until 1964, when Malta gained its Independence. In the introduction of the book S. Brown (2010 :xvii) wrote: "Above all, Malta is 'The Sacred Island." After mentioning the prehistoric temples as the oldest man-made stone structures in the world she wrote: "Five thousand years on from these early places of worship, the Church is still central to Maltese life" (Brown, 2010:xvii).

Mgr De Piro and Fr George taught us that the Christian is a pilgrim who is coming forth from God his Creator on a journey that leads him back to God as the ultimate end of his being. Christians are people on a pilgrimage, a people in quest both of home and of identity. This pilgrimage is full of uncertainties and difficulties. Hence, the Christian is in constant need to be on the alert and to keep constantly on the way to conversion. Amid all the uncertainties of life's journey, the certainty of death as the end of the pilgrimage attains an enormous importance for the Christian. Fr George frequently refers to the Christian as a pilgrim and Christian life as pilgrimage; his great concern was a practical one: how to help people build a Christian self and live a Christian life. Mgr De Piro and Fr George had a profound understanding of the meaning of life; humanity's existence is theological – existence is a preparation for a life of a higher order, a life as a continual expectation of death.

The truth is that the human person is always searching, questioning, trying to find an answer to his/her great queries, especially about the sense and value of life. The human

being is always in search of truth and will not give up his quest for truth very easily. Deep down one wants to discover what life is all about: one's inner feeling. One feels the need to explore the inner world; the divine force within – God as the integral core of one's being and purpose of life. The human being wants to reach beyond himself/herself. Many people are still discovering that the answers about the human person and the value of life can only be found in God, their Creator; hence, the validity and applicability of the contributions of Mgr De Piro and Fr George today.

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De Piro documents

(Where possible the order of these documents is chronological) Date in bold stands for Date of file when it was transcribed.

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Il-familja tieghu
= Original documents or copies mainly related to the De Piro family. **Date 2001.**

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Fl-ewwel snin ta' hajtu u personalia.
= Original documents or copies related to the life of the Mgr De Piro from his birth to the moment when he decided his vocation. **Date 2003.**

Joseph De Piro: Royal Malta Militia.
= Documents related to the three years and five months the Mgr De Piro spent as ä military man". Date 23/02/1896 (discharged letter).

Joseph De Piro: Royal University of Malta.
= Copies of documents and originals of notebooks of De Piro as a University student. Date B.A. 1894-1896; Law 1897-98.

De Piro; sketches, drawings and paintings.
= These are original sketches and a painting of Joseph De Piro as a young boy and until he started studying for the priesthood. Age 10-20.

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Vokazzjoni.
= Two discernment exercises: one related to his choice of vocation and the other one in order to decide whether to go to the "Accademia Ecclesiastica", Rome, or St Joseph's Home, Malta. **Date 2001.**

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Capranica.
= Documents related to the years Joseph De Piro spent at the Capranica College, Rome (1898-1902). **Date 2001.**

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Sacerdozju.
= Material related to his ordination and first solemn High Mass, Confessions, permits and the mass registers. Date 1902.

Il-Qaddej ta' Alla, Guzeppi De Piro: Korrispondenza, I*: Ittri lill-familjari.*
= Letters exchanged between mother and son and between Joseph and his brother Guido, when the Joseph Be Piro was in Rome for his Studies (1898-1902). **Date 1989**.

Il-Qaddej ta' Alla, Guzeppi De Piro: Korrispondenza, II*: Ittri mill-familjari.*
= Letters which Joseph received from his mother, Brothers, sisters and his brother in law, Paolo, when he was in Rome. **Date 1989.**

Il-Qaddej ta'Alla, Guzeppi De Piro: Korrispondenza, III: Ittri mill-iskola, mid-direttur spiritwali u mid-direttur ta' San Guzepp.
= Letters Joseph received from various persons during his years of secondary education. In this volume there are also letters Joseph received from Fr Emmanuel Vassallo, the director of St Joseph's, Malta, and from Fr Sammut sj, his spiritual director, while he was at the Capranica in Rome (1898-1902) and in Davos – Switzerland ((1898— 1904). **Date 1989.**

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Davos.
= A few pages related to the period De Piro spent in Switzerland (1902-1904) to be cured for tuberculosis. Date 1902-1904.

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Djarju.
= Personal notes of De Piro himself from the time he started studying for the priesthood until he clarified his ideas about the nature of the Society he wanted to found. Almost each and every entry is related to the Missionary Society. Years covered: 1898-1909. **Date 1988.**

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Monsinjur u Dekan.
= Mainly photocopies of the acts of the Chapter of the Cathedral where De Piro was canon and dean. Correspondence between Archbishop Peter Pace and Fr Joseph De Piro, re: the latter's nomination as Monsignor, and Dean of the Metropolitan Chapter. Also some documents related to the role of dean of the Chapter. **Date 2001.**

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Kungress Ewkaristiku, 1913.
= Letters related to the appointment of Mgr Joseph De Piro as member of the organising committee of the International Eucharistic Congress, held in Malta in 1913. **Date 2001.**

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Segretarju tal-Arcisqof Mawru Caruana.
= This includes only the letter of appointment of Mgr De Piro as secretary to Archbishop Mauro Caruana (1915-1918). Date 1915.

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Rettur tas-Seminarju.
= Original documents and photocopies related to the years 1918-1920, when Monsignor was rector of the Major Seminary at Mdina, Malta. **Date 2003.**

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Gudja.
= His nomination as acting parish priest (July-August 1922). Also, information about conflict between two parish parties. **Date 2001.**

Mons. Guzeppi De Piro: Frangiskani tal-Qalb ta' Gesu`- Sorijiet ta' Nuzzo.
= Correspondence between the Mgr De Piro and the administration of these two Maltese religious female Congregations. **Date 2001**.

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Kumitat Speciali ta' Konsultazzjoni dwar ir-restawr tal-Knisja ta' San Pawl – Rabat.
= The minutes of the Committee set up by the Archbishop Mauro Caruana in order to study the possible restoration of the Rabat Parish Church, Malta. De Piro was the president of this Committee. **Date 2001.**

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Predikatur imheggeg tal-Kelma ta' Alla, 3 vols.
= Whole or parts of sermons written by Monsignor himself. **Date 1987.**

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Politika.
= Pages related to De Piro's share in the National Assembly and its central Commission (1918-1921), the Sette Giugno riots (1919), the conflict between Lord Gerard Strickland and the Church (1930), and the Senate of the Third Maltese Parliament (1932-1933). **Date 2001**.

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Unione Leoniana.
= A very few pages of documents related to the statutes of this Unione and De Piro's membership in the same. **Date 2001.**

Mons De Piro: Sptar Zammit Clapp.
= Containing mostly the nomination and yearly confirmation of De Piro's membership in the Committee of Administration of this hospital. **Date 2001.**

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Fra Diegu.
= The documents related to Monsignor as director of this Institute (1907-1933). **Date 2001.**

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Istitut Gesu`Nazzarenu – Istitut San Frangisk ta' Paula.
= The documents which witness to De Piro's direction of these two ecclesiastical charitable institutes and his efforts to help in the foundation of the Missionary Sisters of Jesus of Nazareth (1922-1933). **Date 2001**.

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Istitut ta' San Guzepp (Malta).
= Documents related to De Piro as director of this Institute (1922-1933). **Date 2001.**

Mons Guzeppi De Piro:Istitut ta' San Guzepp (Ghawdex).
= Material related to Monsignor, as founder and director of the Home (1925-1933). **Date 2001**.

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Oratorju San Domenico Savio, Birkirkara.
= A Collection of documents related to the history of the Oratory since its beginning (1910-1933). **Date 1997.**

M.S.S.P. at the time of the Founder.
= Documents and letters, to and from Monsignor, related to the various moments of the history of the Society, until the death of the Founder (1908-1933). **1989.**
= Appeal to Pope Pius X. 3/11/1909.
= La Fontaine – De Piro, 27/1/1910.
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= De Piro, Bugeja, Mamo – Archbishop P. Pace, 6/6/1910.
= La Fontaine – De Piro, 30/6/1910.
= De Piro – M.A. Pace, 11/11/1910.

= Pietro Pace – De Piro, 19/1/1911.
= Gerardu Debono, no. 11.
= Fr John Vella, 26, 39, 44-45, 61-66; no.2.

Regole della Compagnia di S. Paolo. Fascicoli I-III.
= The Constitutions of the Society, written by the Founder and approved by Mgr Mauro Caruana, Archbishop of Malta, on 18 March 1924 (first two Fascicoli) and 5 October 1932 (the third Fascicolo). **Date 2003.**

Atti del Consiglio del Padre Preposto della Compagnia di San Paolo.
= These are the official acts of the first Council of the Society of St Paul. As assistants to the Founder there were Fr Michael Callus and Fr Joseph Spiteri, both of them members of the Society. Years covered: 1927-1933. **Date 2001.**

San Pawl: Almanac ta'L-Istitut tal-Missioni (1922-1936).
= A yearly publication for missionary animation. Most probably De Piro was not only the publisher but also the author of almost all the material of 1922-1933 editions. English translation by Fr Frans Ferriggi mssp.

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Dar Sant'Agata.
= Documents related to St Agatha's Motherhouse. **Date 2001.**

Conti, Chiesa di SantAgata – Rabat
= Documents showing the passing on of the Church to the Society of St Paul. **Date 2001**.

Acquisto siti attigui a S. Agata – Rabat.
= Documents showing the acquisition of land on which St Agatha's Motherhouse was built. **Date 2001**.

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Appuntamenti Varji.
= De Pior was asked to sit on various committees and make part of many organizations, both ecclesiastical and civil, e.g. Congregazione Degli Onorati, Casa San Calcedonio per gli Ezercizi Spirituali, Camera Pontificia Maltese, Malta War Hospital for Children, Comitato Pro Maltesi Morti o Feriti il 7 0 8 guigno, Committee: Smyrna Refugees (1922), Special Committee British Empire Exhibition (1924), Tourist Committee, etc., etc. **Date 2001.**

Mons Guzeppi De Piro: Testment Sigriet.
= The Servant of God made his testamentary will on 8 February 1932. **Date 2001.**

De Piro: other documents
Cause of canonisation of the Servant of God, Joseph De Piro: Diocesan Process, Tribunal sessions "Ne Pereant Testes". Archbishop's Curia 1987.
= The sessions held during the year 1987 by the Diocesan tribunal in order to gather testimonies, *ne pereant testes*.

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[KM = a monthly periodical which Fr George started publishing in December 1930 for private use of his Society.]

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