

Watchfully caring from on high

THE ROTUNDA of Santa Marija tal-Virtù in Rabat was the scene of a national and a diocesan event, a century ago. On September 22, 1901, a large statue of Christ, Redeemer of the World, was placed on top of the church.

It is indeed fitting to commemorate the centenary of a religious happening which the people of Malta spoke about for many years. It was an event which stirred deep religious sentiments. The statue was intended as a visible reminder of the consecration of Malta to the Redeemer at the beginning of the 20th century.

The site chosen had a very long history and is archaeologically very significant. The Tal-Virtù area abounds in Phoenician and Romano-Punic tombs, as well as palaeo-Christian hypogea. That the place was a Christian burial site is attested to by G.F. Abela, A.A. Caruana, and more recently, by M. Buhagiar.¹ A crypt, perhaps the result of the amalgamation of several burial chambers, exists beneath the church of Santa Marija tal-Virtù.

The present church was preceded by a mediaeval one which is mentioned in many pastoral visitation reports, even as far back as that by Duzzina (1575). The mediaeval church suffered some damage in the earthquake which shook Malta in 1693.

The present church, a conspicuous part of the Tal-Virtù skyline, dates back to the beginning of the 18th century. According to research undertaken by Mario Buhagiar, work on the rotunda – modelled on the one at Sarria in Fioriana of 1678 – seems to have begun in May 1717. The dome probably took just over two years to be built, between early 1729 and April 1731.²

But my intention here is to recount the events of a century ago with regard to the statue. There was quite a build-up, especially through

the endeavours of Notary Pietro Baroli.

In an effort to counteract the activities of some small anti-Christian and anticlerical groups, a local committee was formed to organise religious and other celebrations, especially in the context of the Holy Year of 1900. This Holy Year committee "comprised representatives of many sectors of Maltese society: parish priests, nobles, doctors, notaries."³

The committee was considering erecting a cross at Ta' l-Gholja, a steep hill in the limits of Siggiewi, something which was to materialise in 1903 as the Laferla Cross (Salib ta' l-Gholja). However, on second thoughts, the committee decided to mark the Holy Year with a monument on another hill, Tal-Virtù.

Bartoli, a member of the Holy Year committee, writing in *La Gazzetta di Malta* of August 23, 1900, appealed to every family to contribute a penny. Thus, every family could claim to have contributed its own precious little mite to the statue. He wrote: "*Malta dovrebbe, anch'essa, erigere una Croce monumentale in omaggio al Salvatore dell'umanità... coll'obolo di tutto il popolo maltese, senza distinzione di classe e di partito, contribuendo ciascun capo di famiglia, per una sola volta, un soldo inglese*".⁴ This proposal came at the suggestion of the Central Committee of the Holy Year, sitting in Rome, which was encouraging cities and dioceses to erect large crosses or statues of the Redeemer on the summit of hills and mountains.

The bishop of Malta, Mgr Pietro Pace, in November set up a special steering committee to oversee all that was required to erect a statue to commemorate the Holy Year. He expressed his firm desire that the

new statue would serve as an "*augurio per l'avvenire che la Croce continua a dominare sulle menti e nei cuori dei Maltesi*".⁵

Although things took off rather late (as often happens in Malta), things started to happen surprisingly quickly. The statue of the Redeemer was commissioned in Rome at the workshops of Rosa Zanazio & Co.⁶ It was to be a replica of a statue prepared a year earlier, on the San Giuliano Hill in Caltanissetta, Sicily. The statue, 15 feet high, was designed by Ernesto Basile and was cast by the Fratelli Mercatoli.⁷

It is also amazing how quickly the statue was completed. It arrived in Grand Harbour on August 20, 1901, on board the steamship *Eana*, belonging to the Compagnia Generale Italiana. Michael Galea describes the journey of the new statue to Tal-Virtù. It was placed securely on a cart which was drawn by eight horses (eight oxen, according to another source⁸). A detachment of soldiers from the Royal Malta Artillery under the command of Lieutenant Carbonaro accompanied the statue.

The organising committee had decided to place the statue on the top of the rotunda of Santa Marija tal-Virtù. In fact, the lantern crowning the 1731 dome was removed to make room for the new statue.¹⁰

The committee's decision was undoubtedly motivated by devotional considerations. People on their way to Rabat from Valletta, Siggiewi, Zebbug, Mosta and other villages would immediately notice the statue of the Redeemer and perhaps utter a silent prayer. Passengers on the train from Valletta to Rabat would not fail to observe the conspicuous statue on the dome.

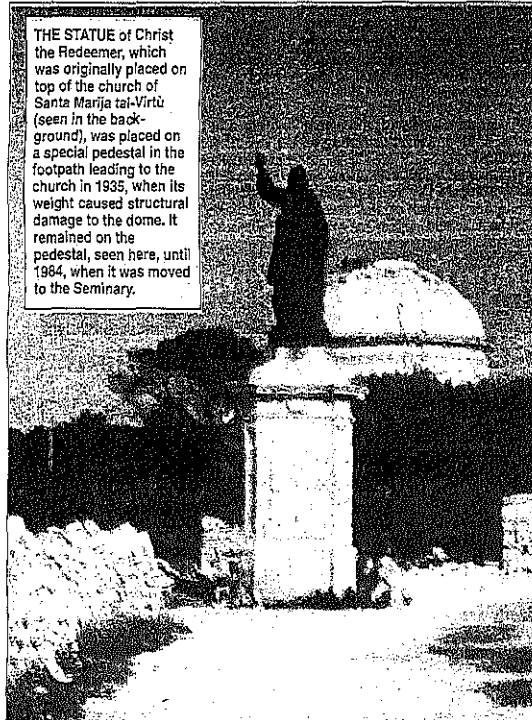
However, Buhagiar concludes that the committee's decision, perhaps taken with much religious fervour, would in the long run turn out to be a blunder for both aesthetic as well as for architectural/structural reasons,¹¹ as we shall see.

The inauguration ceremony was held on Sunday, September 22, a little more than a month after the statue's arrival from Italy. The organising committee did its utmost to make the event a truly memorable one. On the days preceding the celebration, special religious functions were organised. Three renowned preachers delivered sermons during a triduum: Fr Luigi Attard, OFM, Fr Lorenzo Caruana, OP, and Fr Paolo Gauci. On the first and third day of the triduum, Mgr Salvatore Grech presided over the liturgy, whereas on the second day, it was the Vicar-General, Bishop Salvatore Gaffero. On September 21, eve of the great day, a large gathering for children was organised. The Dean of the Cathedral Chapter, Mgr Vincenzo Vassallo, celebrated Mass and explained the significance of the following day's events.¹²

Early on Sunday morning, crowds started flocking to Tal-Virtù. Pilgrims from all over the island arrived either on foot, or on donkey, or by train (which ran from Valletta to Rabat) which made extra trips. An imposing pilgrimage left Saqqajja Square in the morning.

During the pilgrimage, led by Mgr Salvatore Grech, prayers were said, the Rosary recited and litanies

THE STATUE of Christ the Redeemer at the Archbishop's Seminary (Photo: Dunstan Xuereb)



THE STATUE of Christ the Redeemer, which was originally placed on top of the church of Santa Marija tal-Virtù (seen in the background), was placed on a special pedestal in the footpath leading to the church in 1935, when its weight caused structural damage to the dome. It remained on the pedestal, seen here, until 1984, when it was moved to the Seminary.



MAINTENANCE work on the statue, October 1998 (Photo: Dunstan Xuereb)



SEMINARIANS welcoming the restored statue on its arrival at the Seminary at Tal-Virtù, Rabat, in November 1984



ARCHBISHOP JOSEPH MERCECA at the blessing and reinauguration of the statue, December 1984

Sebastian, on Boschetto Road, not far from the road to Tal-Virtù, the Cathedral Chapter and bishops joined in: Bishop Pace, the Vicar General, Bishop Gaffero, and the bishop of Gozo, Mgr Giovanni Maria Camilleri, OSA.¹⁴

Many dignitaries were present and a large crowd of the faithful witnessed the historic event. According to one source, there were 9,000 pilgrims,¹⁵ whereas the newspaper *Malta* referred to a crowd of 40,000.¹⁶ All parish priests were present.

The renowned orator Judge Paolo De Bono (1848-1906) delivered a marvellous speech. In his biography of the famous jurist, Fr Calleja (who passed away recently) wrote: "De Bono's Christian convictions were not moulded by pietism or theological formulas. They sprang, rather, from his intellectual frame of mind combined with the belief... that these higher moral and ethical principles were the bedrock on which

the Christian religion rested... De Bono never hesitated to give public vent to his Christian credo."¹⁷

The blessing and inauguration of the statue of the Redeemer on top of the Santa Marija tal-Virtù church was to be immortalised by the poems which were read out on that glorious September day. The talent of men such as Canon Aloisio Farrugia, Fr Paolo Gauci, Fr Carmelo Psaila (Dun Karmi, the national poet, then only 30 years old), Alberto Casareo and Guzzè Muscat Azzopardi, was much appreciated. Two large marble slabs, each with an inscription commemorating the celebration, were fixed on either side of the west door of the church.¹⁸

Mgr S. Grèch, a member of the organising committee, made a short speech and symbolically presented the statue to the bishop; Bishop Pace replied by praising the idea of erecting the statue, "a permanent monument to the faith of the Maltese and

their love for Christ the Redeemer", could not have been nobler and happier.¹⁹

Afterwards Bishop Pace blessed the statue and consecrated the cross embraced by the Redeemer. The three bishops and the prelates who were present venerated the cross. The statue was then hoisted to its prepared position on the rotunda.

As this was carried out, church bells pealed over the island, and petards and fire-crackers were let off.²⁰ The bands played the Papal hymn, and the crowd erupted into an applause and shouted "Viva Kristu Redentur!" The La Valette Band's boys' choir sang.

Bishop Pace then entered the church where the Blessed Sacrament had been exposed for adoration. Eucharistic blessing was then imparted from the church's main door, while the thousands of people present raised candles. It was indeed, a remarkable spectacle which bore witness to the genuine faith of the Maltese.²¹

The account books regarding Tal-Virtù church, kept in the archives of St Paul's parish, Rabat, reveal that a feast in honour of the Redeemer started to be celebrated every year, a celebration which eventually died out some 30 years later when the Tal-Virtù church was closed because it was declared unsafe.

With regard to the statue's positioning atop the rotunda, where it stayed for 34 years, Buhagiar correctly remarks: "The placing of a cumbersome statue on a baroque dome in the place of an elegant lantern that had been purposely designed to give the right climax to the architecture was not, on aesthetic considerations, a happy compromise. It was also an engineering blunder."

"The fabric of the church, weakened by a succession of tremors, was not sufficiently strong to support the 4.57m-high statue and the stress soon became apparent. On September 18, 1923 another earthquake caused alarming cracks in the masonry. Repair works were immediately undertaken, but the church remained structurally unsafe and Bishop Mauro Caruana ordered its closure."

The statue of the Redeemer, raised atop the Tal-Virtù rotunda with great pomp in 1901, was quietly brought down in September 1935, and placed on a specially-constructed pedestal, not far from the footpath leading to the church. According to a receipt (dated September 29, 1935) conserved in the Rabat parish archives, the expenses paid to Salvatore Sapiano for the task amounted to £27-14s.²²

Exposed to the elements and to other unfortunate situations, the statue, the glory of Christian Malta in the first years of the 20th century,

was to suffer a humiliating period in its history. The cross, borne by the Redeemer in his left hand, and the aureola went missing.

Eventually, in 1984, through the initiative and co-operation of Mgr Lawrence Gatt, then Rector of the Seminary at Tal-Virtù, and the Rabat collegiate chapter, as well as through the financial assistance of NSTF (Student Travel Foundation), the rusty statue was brought down from the pedestal which had been its resting place for 49 years. It was sand-blasted and repaired by Cassar & Cassar Co.

Fr Gino Gauci was involved in the restoration of the cross, in fixing the inscription²³ and the aureola. The statue was returned to its former glory.

I still recall when, as a student at the Major Seminary, I witnessed the arrival of the statue on November 2, 1984 on a large trailer-cum-crane (owned by Sarrard Co.) which found it very difficult to manoeuvre itself through the Seminary entrance.

In the meantime, during the late summer of 1984, while the statue was being restored, the pedestal outside Santa Marija tal-Virtù church was dismantled by stone-masons, led by Paul Buhagiar, and carefully rebuilt within the Seminary grounds, close to the main entrance. The whole operation had been under the supervision of architect Joseph Borg Costanzi.

After the statue was placed on its pedestal on November 2, it was

blessed by Archbishop Joseph Mercieca on December 23, 1984 and a soirée was organised in the Seminary chapel for the occasion.

After a welcome speech by Mgr Lawrence Gatt, the Seminary choir led by Mro Albert Borg, OSA, sang *Adoramus*, composed by Borg himself. Dr Mario Buhagiar delivered a commemorative address on Tal-Virtù church and the statue, while Chev. J.P. Vassallo, former Director of Education read the poem *A Cristo Redentore*, written by his great-uncle, Dun Karm. The choir then sang C. Cascioli's *Christus factus est*, which was followed by a speech by Archbishop Mercieca.²⁴

The statue again underwent restoration and repainting in October 1999,²⁵ through the timely efforts of three seminarians, David Muscat, Charles Cini and Louis Farrugia.

An inscription fixed to the pedestal, beneath the statue and commemorating last year's Great Jubilee was unveiled by the Seminary Rector, Fr Joseph Mifsud Bonnici, on October 29, 2000 at the conclusion of an Open Day held at the Seminary. After deacon Joseph Cilia read out a prayer he had written, a special Jubilee flame was lit, as Boy Scouts sounded a fanfare. The Jubilee hymn was sung in Maltese.

The "perpetual" flame, in front of the Redeemer's statue, seeks to be a continuation and a humble reminder of the blazing hearts and the ardent faith of our forefathers... *Veterum exemplar!*



THE SEMINARY RECTOR, Fr Joseph Mifsud Bonnici, unveiling a plaque on the statue's pedestal in October last year, commemorating the Jubilee Year (Photo: Dunstan Xuereb)

References

1. Mario Buhagiar, "The Crypt and Church of S. Marija tal-Virtù at Rabat", in *Melita Historica* 7/4 (1979), 326-327.
2. *Ibid.*, 332-335.
3. Joe Calleja, *Paolo De Bono. The Intelligent Judge*, Malta 1996, 18.
4. *La Gazzetta di Malta*, August 23, 1900, quoted in Calleja, 18. See Brendan Mark Gatt, "The Statue of Christ the Redeemer at the Archbishop's Seminary", *The Times*, October 23, 2000.
5. Michael Galea, "L-Istatwa tar-Redentur f' Tal-Virtù", in *Lehen is-Sewwa*, September 24, 1977.
6. Some years ago, my attempts to locate the whereabouts of the company at its Rome address proved unsuccessful. The statue of the Immaculate Conception at the parish church in Hamrun, originally commissioned by the Archconfraternity of the Immaculate Conception at St Francis Church, Valletta, was also made at Rosa Zanazio.
7. Calleja, 19, note 31.
8. Galea, 7.
9. Calleja, 19, note 31.
10. Buhagiar, 335, note 123.
11. *Ibid.*, 339-340.
12. Galea, 7.
13. *Ibid.*, 7.
14. Calleja, 19; Galea, 7.
15. Buhagiar, 339 who bases himself on information from a commemorative booklet of the celebrations, written by P. De Bono, *Solenne Inaugurazione del Monumento Nazionale a Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo Redentore eretto dalla Pietà dei Maltesi sulla Collina tal-Virtù*, Malta, 1901.
16. Information quoted by Galea, 7.
17. Calleja, 68.
18. Buhagiar, 339.
19. Galea, 7.
20. See De Bono's description in the commemorative booklet.
21. Galea, 7.
22. Buhagiar, 339-340.
23. *Ibid.*, 340, and note 179.
24. The present inscription on the cross reads "Christus vincit - Christus regnat - Christus imperat - Fides futuris saeculis - Princeps pacis". In 1984 only, parts of the original cross were traced in an ironsmith's workshop in Rabat, and from these an attempt was made to make out the 1901 inscription. Yet I have traced another possible version of the 1901 inscription: "Christus vincit - Christus triumphat - Christus imperat - Fides et pietas Melitensium Christo Salvatori" (Galea, 7).
25. *Theirk ta' l-Istatwa ta' Kristu Salvatur* (programme), Archbishop's Seminary Archives (unpublished documents). Also see *Il-Hajja*, December 27, 1984; *The Times*, December 29, 1984; *Lehen is-Sewwa*, December 29, 1984.
26. Gatt, 23.