

*Il-Frangiskani Maltin (Ta' Ġiezu)*. By Ġorg Aquilina, OFM. Malta: Klabb Kotba Maltin, 2011. 744 pp. ISBN 978- 978-99932-7-352-3.

Fr. George Aquilina – Patri Ġorg to all who have had the privilege to have known him – has earned a solid reputation as a historian with the several important books to his credit. His death last year has bereaved Malta of a great scholar as well as a model archivist and a truly dedicated Franciscan friar.

Aquilina's history of the church and monastery of the Hierosyomilitan sisters in Valletta, published in both Maltese and English editions, was an outstanding prize-winning volume, while his collaboration with Prof. Stanley Fiorini has given us two priceless volumes in the *Documentary Sources of Maltese History* series. In particular their edition of the seminal Dusina report of 1575 has made available to any reader interested in Maltese ecclesiastical history one of the most fundamental books in the area.

Patri Ġorg's latest book, *Il-Frangiskani Maltin (1482–1965)*, must, however, be considered as his crowning work. It is the work of a lifetime (or perhaps a couple of lifetimes), the monumental outcome of over forty years of meticulous research in local and foreign archives, collecting every little bit of available information and carefully analysing and weaving it into an excellent work of historical research. Perhaps my only carp is that such a book was written in Maltese (with all due respect to our national language and so on) but this means that the mountains of information it contains will only have a limited local availability seeing that an English edition (not just a summary) appears to be an impossible dream financially.

Although the subject is on the face of it a religious one, Fr. Aquilina's book naturally throws light on a variety of aspects, not less social, economic, and artistic, and which makes the volume an important contribution to the history of our island as well as to the manifestation here of the Order – better known locally as *Ta' Ġiezu* – founded by Francis of Assisi that has probably remained closest to his spirit and charisma.

It is a mark of Aquilina's objectivity that he does not make use of

his book to strike once again at the issue of seniority among the three Franciscan Orders. Indeed he is able to look at past excesses of inter-Order rivalry as when he looks down, for example, at the great efforts of the Conventuals to prevent the Observants, as the Friars Minor were once known, from holding a procession with the statue of St Anthony of Padua in March 1700 because they considered the saint as 'their' property! He is, however, unfortunately reticent about the controversial events connected with the crowning on 1 May 1963 of the statue of St Joseph *ix-xih* which has been venerated for centuries in the oratory attached to the Rabat convent.

The Observants' early years in the Maltese islands are certainly clouded with mystery as most medieval events tend to be owing to a scarcity of surviving records. They were definitely in Gozo in 1489 in the establishment which later passed on the Conventuals to become the present St Francis convent, the transfer of which is still a mystery possibly hidden in some dusty archive.

The local Observants' long efforts to cut themselves off from the province of Sicily succeeded in 1838 after a long fratricidal struggle which Aquilina describes as the 'saddest event' of their history in Malta. It is a story of much wasted energy and funds, with the friars having to face calumnies and humiliations and which could have led to the Order leaving the island altogether. It was definitive action by the British, keen to reduce dependency on a foreign authority that led to this decision that had been in the air for so long.

The *custodia* was raised to a fully-fledged province named after St Paul in 1914 and belonging to the English language, although in 1939 it was decided to include it among the Italian provinces.

The Maltese Franciscan community carried out extremely valid missionary work both in the Holy Land and also in non-Catholic territories, and also among Maltese communities in heathen lands. By dint of originally forming part of the Sicilian province which had been entrusted with looking after the Holy Sites in Palestine, the Maltese friars were closely connected with events there, a connection they still cherish to this day.

The Maltese Franciscans also had important missions in Egypt which it kept till the mid-twentieth century. They also served in

China, Libya (where they still maintain vigorous presence in Tripoli and Benghazi), Corfu, North, Central, and South America, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

Another long chapter details the multifaceted activities the Franciscan carried out and still do in the islands, such as, for example, during the pestilences of 1675–76 and 1813 and the cholera outbreaks of 1837 and 1850, the French blockade (when all the friars had to move into the Valletta friary), the two world wars (when the Sacro Cuor church at Sliema received two hits and lost two friars), the Apostleship of the Sea, and many other valuable services to the community.

The Valletta friary is also responsible for several Holy Week activities, including the procession of Our Lady of Sorrows which has unofficially obtained the status the national manifestation of its kind. The oratory is also home to one of the most respected local icons, the miraculous crucifix by the Sicilian Franciscan Frate Innocenzo which is carried out in procession in exceptional circumstances.

Fr Aquilina also gives extensive accounts of the various churches and convents which the Franciscan Minors have at Rabat, Valletta, Sliema, Ghajnsielem, Hamrun, and Baħar ic-Cagħaq where they also run a retreat house. The accounts of the Rabat and Valletta convents, so rich in history both of them, could easily form separate publications of their own which would be more accessible to local readers. Not many might be aware, for example that Grand Master L'Isle Adam was a great benefactor of the Rabat convent and which is where he died and where his intestines (minus his heart which was sent to Paris) were buried. The Valletta church is also an important artistic showcase in its own right that deserves to be better recognized, which it is unfortunately not since it lies away from the usual tourist routes. One of its chapels was a *jus patronatus* of Gian Francesco Abela, the father of Maltese historiography, and whose parents are buried there.

The book also contains four important appendices which are a mine of information for future researchers. These include a transcription of 69 documents which are basic to the study of the province. Another precious appendix, the outcome of years of research, is annotated list of the 2010 deceased Franciscan friars who served in the Maltese province together with an alphabetical list of all living Franciscans.

Also invaluable is the appendix that transcribing the texts on plaques, tombs, and beneath paintings found in the Franciscan churches.

Fr Aquilina's book is a monumental contribution not only to his order, but to local ecclesiastical history as well as Maltese history in general. One hopes that the local religious orders will find and encourage young historians among their brethren to carry on such priceless research. The Maltese monastic orders have recently lost many of their best researchers, the like of Fr Frangisk Azzopardi, Fr Alexander Bonnici, Fr Henry Schembri, and Fr Mikiel Fsadni. The vacancy left by Patri Gorg will certainly take a lot of filling.

University of Malta

Louis J. Scerri.

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