

L-Origini tal-Kongregazzjoni tal-Filippini fl-Isla

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Il-kunvent tal-Filippini jmur lura għall-1662, meta żewġ qassisin u żewġ djakni, mill-Isla, kisbu l-awtorizzazzjoni mill-Isqof Mikiel Balaguer biex iwaqqfu istituzzjoni reliġjuża fil-belt tagħhom stess – l-Isla³. Ftit xhur wara, it-talba tagħhom giet milqugħa b'kundizzjoni waħda li l-qassisin ta' din il-kongregazzjoni għada jkunu jistgħu jzommu lilhom infushom ekonomikament. Dawn il-fundaturi-qassisin ta' dan il-kunvent, Dun Gio. Simone Schembri, Dun Evangelist Gandolfo u d-djakni, Giuseppe Lamagna u Orazio Mifsud kienu mqanqlin minn żelu reliġjuż għid imnissel mill-koncilju ta' Trentu, magħruf fl-istorja bħala Kontra-Riforma.

Fig. 3.1 (paġna 58) – Fr. Gio. Simone Schembri, one of the founders of the Philippine Congregation in Malta; Portrait at the sacristy of Porto Salvo's church in Senglea.

Bħala parti mill-filosofija għada, il-Knisja Kattolika kienet qed tnedi hidma pastorali għada fil-qalba tal-ibliet. Għal din il-missjoni, ordnijiet reliġjużi għada ġew imwaqqfa b'appoġġ shiħ mill-Kurja Rumana. Dawn kienu jinkludu l-Ġizwiti ffondata minn San Injazju ta' Loyola, il-Theatini mwaqqfa minn Gaetano de Conti ta' Tiene, Paolo Consiglieri, Bonifaċju da Colle u Giovanni Pietro Caraffa, li aktar tard sar Papa Pawlu IV⁴, l-Ordni tal-Kapuċċini, il-Karmelitani Skalzi fuq Santa Tereza ta' Avila u fl-aħhar, l-Ordni tal-Filippini, liema struttura kienet tixbah lil dik tal-Ġizwiti. Dawn l-istituzzjonijiet monastiċi kollha, bl-eċċezzjoni tal-'Theatines', fethu kunvent f'Malta, jew fil-Belt Valletta jew fil-madwar.

L-Ordni tal-Filippini, l-ewwel dar tagħhom li fethu f'Malta, kienet fil-Birgu fl-1652⁵. Il-Kongregazzjoni li twaqqfet fl-Isla, għaxar snin wara, imxew fuq l-istess prinċipji b'differenza li dawn kienu qed jimxu fuq ir-regola ta' San Filippu Neri mingħajr ma kienu jagħmlu parti mill-Kongregazzjoni Filippina. Il-moħħ wara din il-Kongregazzjoni fl-Isla kien id-Dumnikan Gio. Simone Schembri. Il-fatt li l-Kongregazzjoni tal-Filippini kienet fethet dar il-Birgu, waqt li Schembri dak iż-żmien kien qed jistudja fil-kunvent tal-Birgu biex isir Patri Dumnikan⁶, kien influwenzat li jwaqqaf kongregazzjoni simili fil-belt twelidu, l-Isla. Schembri kien impressjonat tabilhaqq bil-regoli-gwidi tal-edukazzjoni u xogħol pastorali tat-Tridentini. Għal din ir-raġuni l-idea li kellu ma kinitx biss li jibni knisja u dar tal-irtiri fl-Isla, fejn il-qassisin, setgħu jgħixu bħala komunità waqt li jibqgħu jgħixu f'ambjent sekulari. Izda wkoll li jinvesti b'mod qawwi fl-edukazzjoni li kien jaraha bħala sors importanti għal edukazzjoni reliġjuża b'impenn shiħ u t-ktattir tal-kultura lin-nies ta' beltu.

L-idea tiegħu sabet appoġġ utiq mill-Kleru Djoċesan Senglean. Fil-fatt, huwa kien mogħti l-Knisja tal-Portu Salvo li kienet tinsab fit-tarf tal-Isla fil-qalba li dak iż-żmien kienet meqjusa bħala l-mandraġġ tal-belt. Mill-iskeċis ta' Schellinkx li kienu saru fl-1664-5⁷, imqabbel mal-istess żmien meta Gio. Simone Schembri waqqaf il-kongregazzjoni tiegħu, wiehed malajr jinnotta li din l-istess xaqliba tal-Isla kienet żgarfata jew mitluqa. Dak li issa hu kkunsidrat bħala għelien tal-Isla, *il-Gardjola*, din ma kinitx għadha mibnija, filwaqt li l-knisja nsibuha mpittra bid-djar żgarfati madwarha. Għal din ir-raġuni, il-pjanti ta' Schellinkx huma dokumentazzjoni importanti li hu kien ħalla għall-posterità. Din hija stampa awtentika tax-xaqliba li hu stess kien żar fl-mawra tiegħu f'Malta. Mill-iskeċis ta' Schellinkx, kien jidher, li bħala artist, kienet għoġbitu d-deskrizzjoni tal-firxa żgarfata tal-madwar u xbihat ta' nies mċewlha jew komuni. Għalhekk din l-għażla ta' Schellinkx ma kinitx waħda każwali, iżda bi ħsieb partikulari maħsub – dak li jpingi l-ifqar inhawi fl-ibliet tal-port. Fir-realtà, din il-medda art tal-Isla hija l-unika firxa art mitmuma bħala belt madwar il-port li tpiċtrett minn Schellinkx matul il-żjara tiegħu f'Malta.

Fl-istorja tal-Kongregazzjoni tal-Filippini, Pelagio kien ta' ħjeli li din iż-żona kienet tabilhaqq fqira. Iċ-ċimiterju miftuħ tal-Isla kien għadu sa dak iż-żmien qrib ta' din il-knisja⁸. Iktar minn hekk, meta faqqgħet il-pesta fl-1676, dan il-kunvent kien magħżul bħala post xieraq għall-vittimi milqutin minn dan il-flagell⁹. Dawn iż-żewġ imkejjen ikomplu jsaħħu l-fehma li z-żona kienet mxewlha minhabba l-fatt li ġeneralment dawn ikunu jinsabu f'postijiet mill-aktar fqar f'belt. Madanakollu l-ikbar problema kienet l-injuranza reliġjuża u soċjali li l-faqar kien qed johloq. Fil-fatt l-għan ta' Schembri li jwaqqaf din il-kongregazzjoni f'dan il-post partikulari tal-Isla kien, li jgħib dak li Pelagio irrifera għalihom bħala 'the reform of customs' – riformi li jbiddu l-mod tal-ħajja u d-drawwiet¹⁰.

Għalhekk, Dun Gio. Simone Schembri, imqanqal ukoll bħal Schellinkx, mill-miżerja tal-post, iddecieda li jibni centru ta' taġġim fl-istess imkien. Għaldaqstant, il-bini ta' librerija kien ta' importanza kbira li Dun Gio. Schembri ma naqasx ma jagħtix l-attenzjoni li kien jixirqilha. Il-librerija li kienet imwaqqfa għall-membri ta' din il-kongregazzjoni lawrijati fit-teoloġija u f'ċiviltajiet oħra – f'belt fil-port bħalha waħda mill-ifqar bnadi – bi skop li l-għerf miġbur minn dawn il-kotba, isarrfuh f'taġġim

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3 A. Ferris, *Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, (Malta, 1866) 257.

4 Catholic Encyclopedia, Theatines, Clerics Regular. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14557a.htm>

5 A. Bonnici, *History of the Church in Malta*, vol. 2, (Malta, 1968) 44.

6 A[rchivum] C[atthedralis] M[elitense], Miscellanea 54, f. 92r.

7 W. Schellinkx, *Viaggio al Sud, 1664-1665*, ed. B. Aikema, H.Brand, F. Kuyvenhoven, D. Meijers, P. Mens, (Rome, 1983). 46,52.

8 A.C.M. Misc. 54, f. 93r.

9 Ibid, f. 86r. The words used in the document are '*clausura degli infetti*'.

10 Ibid, f. 84v. '*la riforma dei costumi*'.

lin-nies komuni tal-lokal. Irrid ngħid, mill-ewwel, li l-għan tiegħu, mhux biss kien wiehed nobbli, iżda kien bniedem ta' vizjoni, għall-fatt li x-xaqliba ta' madwar il-knisja bdiet tiġi mfittxija min-nies tal-klassi tan-nofs – li issa bdiet hierġa – wara ftit snin li kienet għaddiet f'idejha il-hidma pastorali ta' din il-kongregazzjoni. Din setgħet tkun ippruvat mit-tiswir tal-bini tat-tmintax-il seklu – djar mibnija doppju fuq il-faċċata skansaw l-isfidi taż-żmien u l-gwerra. Iktar importanti kien li għal nofs is-seklu 18, l-Isla saret waħda mill-ibliet sinjuri bi klassi ta' negozjanti u bahrin li bdiet thabbatha mal-sinjurija tal-belt kapitali¹¹. Il-popolarità tal-qassisin Filippini bdiet tinhass malajr.

Fig. 3.2 (paġna 59) – Senglea's point as it looked like in the middle of the seventeenth century from W. Schellinkx drawings.¹²

Fig. 3.3 (paġna 60) – Another detail from a drawing by W. Schellinkx with a view of Senglea.¹³

Seba' snin wara li kienu allogġjati fil-knisja tal-Portu Salvu, il-patrijiet Filippini bdew jibnu kunvent ġdid, u sena wara, fl-1670, taw bidu għal knisja ikbar u ġdida¹⁴. F'dan it-taħbit kollu Dun Gio Schembri sab l-għajnuna fin-nies tal-inhawi u kien thalla miktub li kemm irġiel, nisa kif ukoll tfał tal-*contrada*¹⁵ (akkwati) taw daqqa t'id filwaqt li l-Gran Mastru ta' dak iż-żmien, Raffaele Cottoner, ta l-kunsens tiegħu lil Dun Schembri seta' jgħaqqad dik il-parti tat-triq prinċipali tal-Isla li kienet tkompli fuq wara tal-Knisja tal-Portu Salvu. Dan kien ifisser li t-triq prinċipali, jew aħjar kif kienet magħrufa dak iż-żmien, *Strada Reale* għet issingjata, biex il-wisa' tagħha tirbħu d-dar reliġjuża ġdida¹⁶.

Barra dan, it-trobbija ta' Fr. Gio Simone Schembri kienet fattur determinanti f'dan ix-xenarju kollu. Huwa kien ġej minn familja tat-tajeb b'valuri reliġjużi sodi. Il-ġenituri rabbew lil uliedhom f'ambjent axxetiku u meta t-tifel tagħhom¹⁷ – li kien ta' qabel tal-aħħar – sar patri Dumnikan u aktar tard ridt iwaqqaf kongregazzjoni reliġjuża tiegħu, missieru kien għenu billi tah flus għal dan il-proġett tiegħu, filwaqt bħala arkitett, afdat bil-bini tal-*chostro*¹⁸ (kjostru) kien il-Maestro Petruzzo Debono, minn Haż-Żebbuġ – li beda jkun magħruf. L-impenn shih ta' Dun Gio. Schembri għal dan il-proġett johroġ mit-testment lil din il-kongregazzjoni, fejn halla ġidu kollu ... sal-kotba.

Bi sfortuna, ix-xogħol ta' din il-komunità qala' daqqa ta' ħarta meta fl-1676, Malta ntaqtet mill-pesta. L-Isla kienet waħda mill-lokalitajiet li sofriet b'qilla u li 1,885 abitant inkluz l-Arċipriet, il-Wisq Rev. Francesco Azzopardi mietu minn dan il-flagell¹⁹. Barra minn hekk, din l-imxija laqtet hażin it-tkomplija tal-bini tal-knisja. L-iżvilupp tal-bini kien batta u 40 sena wara, l-Isqof Canaves osserva fil-viżta pastorali tiegħu, li kien għad baqa' xogħol xi jsir f'din il-knisja²⁰.

Ladarba din il-faży tal-bini tal-kunvent kienet lesta, fl-1690, il-qassisin Filippini bdew jibnu knisja ġdida taht is-sorveljanza tal-arkitett Senglean Carlo Vella²¹. Meta kienet se tkun lesta fi-tieni nofs tas-seklu tmintax, kienet se tkun għeljem li tiddomina u thares fuq il-Port il-Kbir. Il-kobor tagħha wkoll iddistingwieha, u dan mhux biss għal ġmielha fuq barra, iżda, fuq id-dimensjoni fuq ġewwa li saħansitra kellha hames artali. Dan kien ifisser li kienet thabbatha ma' parroċċi fl-irhula f'dak li hu kobor. Il-bini ta' din il-knisja, malajr beda jissejjaħ bħala l-Knisja ta' San Filippu liema isem kiseb popolarità fl-inhawi li l-qassisin beda jkollhom il-parruċċani tagħhom – għadill l-knisja baqgħet iddedikata lill-Madonna tal-Portu Salvu.

Li tant jispikka f'din il-komunità kien, li minkejja kienu żgħar fin-numru mqabbel ma' komunitajiet reliġjużi ohra, u diżastri li sehħu, bħalma kienet il-pesta, setgħu ġabu fix-xejn din il-komunità. Iżda, xorta m'exxielhom jagħtu kontribut fejjiedi lill-komunità fl-Isla u jagħmlu bidla fil-mod tal-ħajja permezz tal-edukazzjoni u tkattir taċ-ċiviltà²². Hidmiethom kemm dik spiritwali u dik soċjali mill-ewwel bdiet tinhass u d-dokumentazzjonijiet ta' lejn l-aħħar is-seklu sbatax²³ kienu xhieda tal-marka li hallew fuq dawk kontemporanji mill-mod ta' ħajja li għexu li kienet espressjoni ta' mogħdrija u żelu.

L-entuzjażmu li kien jinħass f'din il-komunità ċkejna, reġa' feġġ madwar nofs is-seklu 18, meta l-Filippini hassew il-htieġa li jibnu mill-ġdid id-dar tagħhom, li kienet tikkompreni t-tkabbir fil-binja eżistenti. Dan seta' jsir wara li xtraw xi djar fil-qrib, kif ukoll biex jitlesta l-bini tal-knisja. Dawn id-djar, flimkien ma' bini qadim ieħor twaqqgħu biex minflokhom titla'r-residenza akbar. Il-Filippini żguraw li fil-binja jkun hemm librerija xierqa. Infatti, parti minn dan il-bini, fil-qalba fejn jgħammru l-qassisin, intgħazel il-lok adatt biex iservi ta' librerija. Ix-xogħol tal-bini kien jinkludi wkoll kappella privata. Il-proġett kollu kien tlesta fl-1781, fl-istess sena li l-knisja għet ikkonsagrata

Il-knisja u l-kunvent kienu se jwettqu diversi hidmiet soċjali u pastorali, aktar tard fis-seklu tmintax, dsatax u l-għoxrin seklu. Matul l-assedju tal-Franċiżi (1798–1800) il-kunvent intlaqet minn balal ta' kanun sparati minn batteriji Maltin f'Tal-Borg (Paola) li kkawżaw ħsarat fis-soqfa tal-bini²⁴. Meta l-assedju ntemm u f'Malta reġgħet il-ħajja normali, il-gżira b'xorti hażina ntaqtet minn żewġ katastrofi. Fl-1814, il-pesta reġgħet messet lil gżirtna. Madanakollu, l-Isla kienet l-unika lokalità mhux mittiefsa

11 A. Schembri, *Senglea 1586-1744 An Historical Demographic Analysis*, (Unpublished MA Thesis, History, 1999) 183.

12 Schellinkx, image fig. 52.

13 Ibid, image fig. 46.

14 A. Bonnici, *L-Isla Fi Ġrajjet il-Bażilika – Santwarju ta' Marija Bambina*, vol. 2, (Malta, 1986) 79.

15 A.C.M. Misc. 54, ff. 84r, 88r-v.

16 Ibid, f. 83r.

17 A. P. Senglea, *Liber Baptizatorum (1586-1644)*, vol.1. Maestro Gio. Maria Schembri and his wife Isabella had the following offspring during their time of residence in Senglea; Carlo Antonio (b. 07-02-1619), Giovanna (b. 28-10-1621), Matteo (b. 06-11-1624), Antonietta (b. 03-11-1629), Agatha (b. 31-01-1632), Gio. Simone (b.04-11-1634), Gio.Batta (b. 19-10-1637)

18 Ibid, f. 85r.

19 Bonnici (1986) 106-107

20 Ibid, 197

21 Ibid, 79

22 Perezempju fl-1715, fil-viżta pastorali tal-Isqof Canaves, kien hemm disa' qassisin.

23 Ibid, 262-263

24 V. Xuereb, *Il-Knisja ta' San Filippu tal-Isla (fil-futur qrib)* 24

minn dan il-flaġell²⁵. Fl-1837, xeghlet l-epidemija tal-kolera. Izda, did-darba din il-belt kienet inqas ixxurtjata. Il-kolera, kienet imxija ġdida fi bliet iffullati. Il-gvernatur ta' dak iż-żmien, Henry Bouverie rrekwiżizzjona l-kunvent u użah bħala post ta' kwarantina għall-imsejtna vittimi infettati²⁶.

Il-Filippini, li dak iż-żmien kienu kollha mill-Isla kellhom jabbandunaw il-kunvent u jmorru joqogħdu għand il-familji tagħhom sakemm spiċċat l-marda. Mill-aktar importanti kien il-fatt li kemm l-assedju tal-Maltin fl-1798 u l-ordni ta' rekwiżizzjoni tal-kunvent maħruġa mill-gvernatur, ma hallew danni fuq il-librerija u kienet mehlusa bil-ħniena minn rovina.

Meta l-Filippini rritornaw lura fil-kunvent fi tmiem l-epidemija, huma komplew iwettqu il-ħidma pastorali. Madanakollu, il-ġranet ta' glorja kienu diġà spiċċaw qabel tmiem is-seklu 19. Dawn il-qassisin tal-Isla kienu, tista' tghid, kienu komunità mill-istess lokal fejn in-novizzi prattikament kienu kollha mill-istess belt. Sfortunatament, il-membri bdew jonqsu ftit ftit ma' tmiem is-seklu. Billi kienet komunità lokali u allura ma kinitx marbuta b'regoli tal-Ordni tal-Filippini, dan kien ifisser li ma setgħux jilqgħu novizzi minn pajjiżi barranin. Għal din ir-raġuni l-komunità spiċċat b'membri wiehed mat-tmiem id-dsatax-il seklu. L-aħħar qassis kien Dun Angelo Raggio li kien ukoll l-aħħar prepostu jew superjur tal-kongregazzjoni²⁷. Bil-mewt tiegħu fl-1928, is-sensjela li nbdiat mill-1662 kienet imwaqqfa bir-riżultat li l-kunvent u l-knisja għaddew f'idejn id-djoċesi. Wiehed seta' jithasseb jekk tmiem din il-kongregazzjoni kinitx maħsuba jew inkoraġġietha. Il-kappillani konventwali tal-Ordni ta' san Ġwann fir-Rabat ukoll messithom l-istess xorti matul dan is-seklu. Fi kliem iehor, il-qassisin Filippini setgħu kienu vittmi ta' aġenda mohbija mill-kleru djoċesan biex jieħdu taħt idejhom dan il-post ewlieni fl-Isla u jeliminaw komunità li kienet qed tkun rivali għall-qassisin djoċesani. Din setgħet ġrat minn taħt; billi jiskuraġġixxu tfal zghazagh milli jingħaqqu l-ordni liema ordni kienet dejjem waħda zghira fl-Isla. Min-naħa l-oħra jhajarhom jidhlu bħala seminaristi djoċesani. Kien x'kien il-każ, dan il-kunvent kieku, kien ikollu rowl importanti f'dik li hi pastorali matul il-Tieni Gwerra Dinjija. Il-parroċċa kienet inqerdet kompletament waqt l-attakki bil-bombi u sussegwentement il-knisja tal-Filippini ħadet l-inkarigu ta' parroċċa hi minflok fejn bdiat taqdi d-doveri, sakemm il-knisja-parroċċa reġgħet inbniet mill-ġdid u tlestiet fl-1957²⁸.

**Fig. 3.4 – Portrait of the last provost of the Philippine congregation of Senglea, Fr. Angelo Raggio.
Sacristy of Porto Salvo church in Senglea**

Ladarba d-doveri parrokkjali ssoktaw bil-bini mill-ġdid tal-Knisja tal-Vitorja, il-parroċċa hasbu u raw kif il-Knisja tal-Portu Salvo u l-kunvent tal-Filippini jagħtuhom dimensjoni ġdida billi għaddewhom lill-Ordni tal-Ġizwiti. Kien hemm tliet raġunijiet ewlenin wara din l-għażla: l-ewwel li l-Ġizwiti kienu magħrufin għall-impenn tagħhom favur l-edukazzjoni u l-ħidma pastorali; it-tieni, kienet ikkunsidrata bħala ordni li tista' sserraħ moħħok minnha, fis-sens li ma ġgibx firda fil-komunità tal-parroċċa. Dan il-għaliex, waħda mill-karatteristiċi tar-regoli tal-Ġizwiti hija, li ma torganizzax festi. It-tielet raġuni kienet li l-Ġizwiti bħala ordni kienet l-aktar waħda li tixbah l-kongregazzjoni Filippini li fl-imghoddi tat-ħafna lill-komunità Sengleana. Tabilhaqq, il-Ġizwiti ntefgħu, bla dewmien, għax-xogħol pastorali u edukazzjoni. B'impenn reġgħu bdew jorganizzaw il-librerija l-qadima, li garrbet danni matul il-gwerra u li din se tiġi ttrattata fil-kapitlu li jmiss. Izda, kien importanti li jifitħu librerija oħra fejn setgħu jerfegħu l-kotba u oġġetti li kienu akkwistaw riċentement. Fi kliem iehor, il-Ġizwiti ngħataw biex jirrestawraw il-kultura Sengleana li batiet konsiderevolment minħabba l-gwerra. Partikularment l-eżodu ta' Sengleani li ħarġu mill-Isla, li halliet konsegwenzi negattivi fejn bosta familji li telqu matul il-gwerra, ma rritornaw qatt lura. Id-djar li darba kienu mimlija b'dawn familji kienu issa mibnija b'mod zgarfat biex jilqgħu fihom familji fqar u li ma kellhomx fejn imorru joqogħdu.

B'xorti ħażina, il-kapitlu tal-Ġizwiti fl-Isla issa ngħalaq ukoll għar-raġuni li l-komunità tal-Ġizwiti, bħal ta' qabilha, il-Kongregazzjoni Filippina, kienu naqsulha l-vokazzjonijiet. Skont ir-regoli tal-komunità Ġizwita, kunvent ma jistax ikollu inqas minn tliet patrijiet. F'dan il-każ ikollhom iħallu l-kunvent. Minflok, huma għaddew il-bini kollu lill-patrijiet Sależjani biex ikomplu jwettqu l-ħidma pastorali lill-komunità lokali.

Ikun xi jkun il-futur, il-patrimonju li hallew il-patrijiet Filippini fl-Isla, dak arkitettoniku, l-influwenza u s-sens bibliografiku tagħhom, ikomplu jswaru l-ħajja Sengleana u ngawdu l-ġid tal-wirt kulturali li għaddewna bħala xhieda awtentika tagħhom.

25 Bonnici, (1991) 62.

26 Ibid, 114.

27 Ibid, 214.

28 Bonnici, (1991) 369.

The Origins of the Philippine Congregation in Senglea

Simon Mercieca¹ and Antoinette Schembri²

The Philippine convent at Senglea traces its origins to 1662, when two priests and two deacons, natives of Senglea, sought permission from bishop Michael Balaguer to set up a religious institution in their home town.³ A few months later their request was approved on the sole condition that the priests of this new congregation could maintain themselves economically.

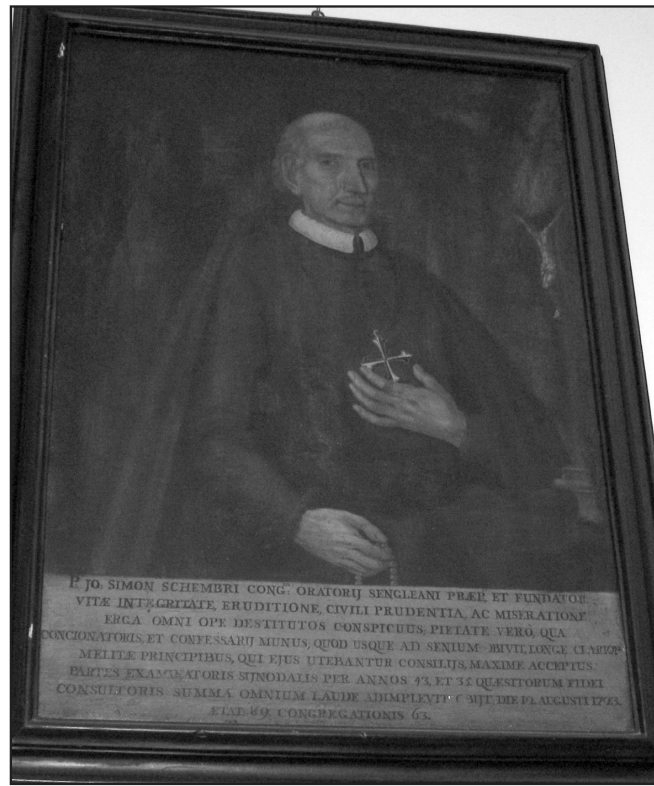


Fig. 3.1 – Fr. Gio. Simone Schembri, one of the founders of the Philippine Congregation in Malta; Portrait at the sacristy of Porto Salvo’s church in Senglea.

These founding fathers of this convent, Fr. Gio. Simone Schembri, Fr. Evangelista Gandolfo, and the deacons Giuseppe Lamagna and Orazio Mifsud, were inspired by the new religious zeal generated after the Council of Trent, known in history as the Counter-Reformation. As part of the new philosophy, the Church was seeking to introduce new pastoral work in urban centres. For this mission, new Religious Orders had been created with the full support of the Roman Curia. These included the Jesuits, founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Theatines founded by Gaetano dei Conti di Tiene, Paolo Consiglieri, Bonifacio da Colle and Giovanni Pietro Caraffa, who later became Pope Paul IV,⁴ the Capuchin Order, the Discalced Carmelites following St. Theresa of Avila and finally the Philippine Order, whose structure was very similar to that of the Jesuits. All these Monastic Institutions, with the exception of the Theatines, opened a convent in Malta, either in Valletta or in its environs. The Philippine Order opened their first house in Malta at Birgu in 1652.⁵ The congregation which was set up in Senglea ten years later followed the same principles with the difference that they were following the rule of St. Philip Neri without being part and parcel of the Philippine congregation. The mind behind Senglea’s congregation was the Dominican Gio. Simone Schembri. The fact that the Philippine Congregation had opened a house in Birgu at a time when Schembri was in town studying at the Dominican priory⁶ influenced him in setting up a similar congregation at his native city of Senglea. Schembri was strongly embedded in the Tridentine precepts of education and pastoral work and therefore his idea was not only to have a church and a retreat house in Senglea, where priests, while remaining part of the secular world can live in a community, but also to strongly invest in education which he rightly foresaw as the key to religious success and the cultural accretion of his fellow townsmen. His idea found strong support from Senglea’s diocesan clergy. In fact he was given the church of Our Lady of Safe Haven which was situated at the far end of Senglea, in the heart of the popular quarter which in those days formed what can be defined as the slum area of the city. Judging

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3 A. Ferris, *Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, (Malta, 1866) 257.

4 Catholic Encyclopedia, Theatines, Clerics Regular. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14557a.htm>

5 A. Bonnici, *History of the Church in Malta*, vol. 2, (Malta, 1968) 44.

6 A[rchivum] C[atedralis] M[elitense], Miscellanea 54, f. 92r.

from Schellinkx's drawings made in 1664-5,⁷ that is in the same period when Gio. Simone Schembri set up his congregation, one can immediately notice that this area of Senglea was a derelict place. What is now considered as the landmark of Senglea, the *Gardjola*, was not yet built, while the church is depicted surrounded by shabbily built houses. Schellinkx's drawing is in this sense a very important document as he has left for posterity a true picture of the area which he himself had visited during his stay in Malta. It seems from Schellinkx's drawings, that as an artist, he liked the depiction of derelict landscapes and portraits of poor or common people. Therefore Schellinkx's choice was not haphazard, but followed a particular philosophy – that of painting the poorest areas of the harbour cities. In fact, Senglea's landscape is the sole complete landscape of the harbour town depicted by Schellinkx during his stay in Malta.

In his history of the Philippine congregation, Pelagio hinted that this zone was a very poor area. Senglea's open cemetery was still at this time to be found next to this church.⁸ Moreover, when the plague erupted in 1676, this convent was earmarked as the place for the seclusion of the infected victims.⁹ The existences of these two structures confirm that this zone was a derelict area, as such structures were usually to be found in the poorest areas of a city. Yet, the biggest existing problem was the religious and social ignorance that poverty was bound to create. In fact, Schembri's aim in setting up this congregation in this particular area of Senglea was to bring about what Pelagio termed as '*the reform of customs*'.¹⁰

Gio. Simone Schembri therefore was also, being inspired, like Schellinkx, by this depressed area to establish within its limits a centre of learning. The creation of a library was thus of tremendous importance to which Schembri had given particular attention. In one of the poorest areas in the harbour city, a library was being founded for the theological and cultural accretion of the members of this community with the aim that the knowledge acquired from these library books would then be divulged to the common people. I immediately want to state that his aim was not only noble, but that he was a man of foresight, as the area round his church became one of the places in Senglea to be sought after by the emerging bourgeois for their residence, a few decades after being taken under the pastoral care of his congregation. This can be attested by the morphology of 18th century buildings – the double fronted town houses, some of which have survived the challenges of time and war. More importantly, by the middle of the 18th century, Senglea became one of the richest towns with a class of business men and sailors which began to rival the capital city's bourgeoisie.¹¹ The popularity of the Philippine fathers began immediately to be felt.

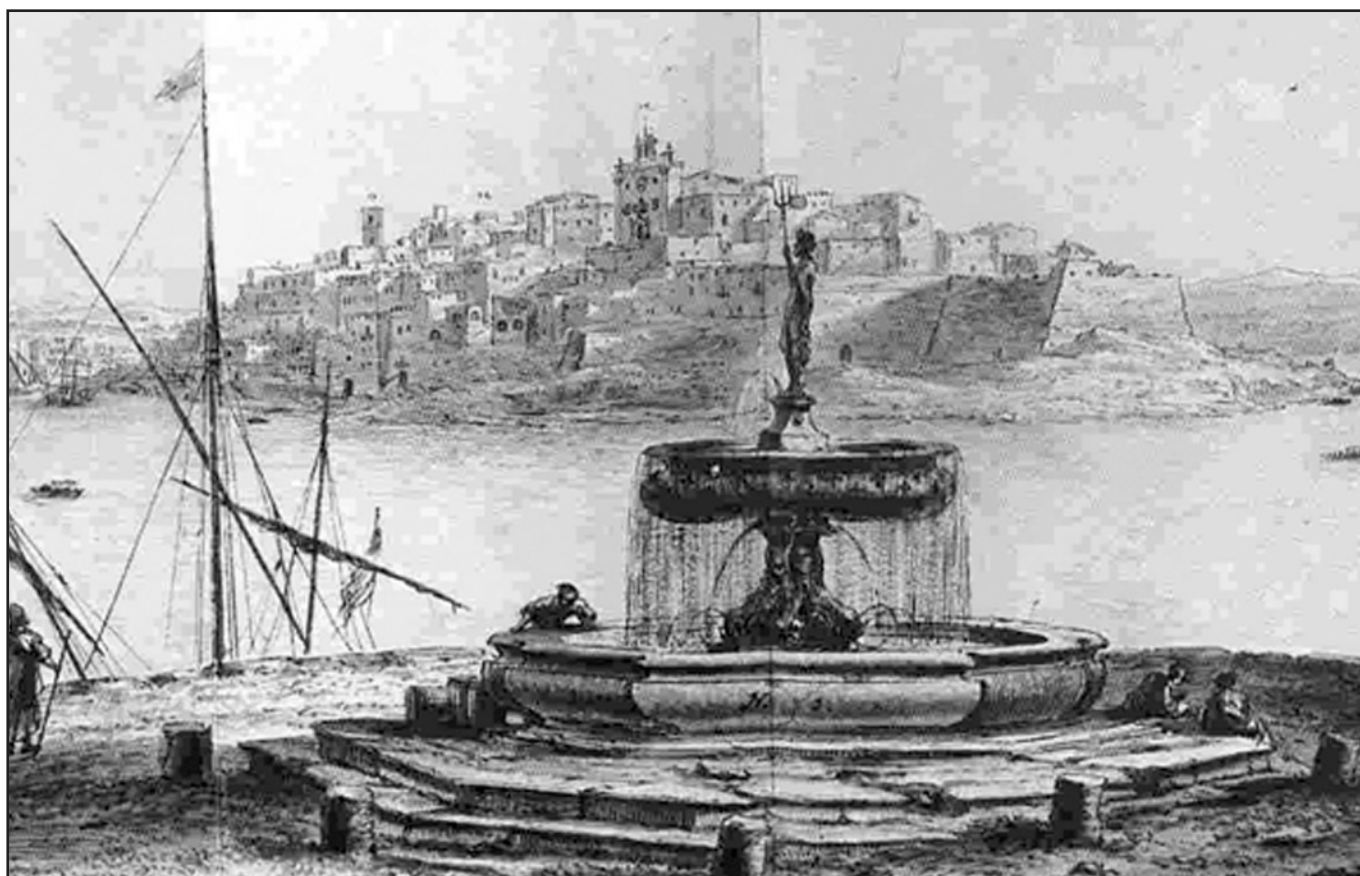


Fig. 3.2 – Senglea's point as it looked like in the middle of the seventeenth century from W. Schellinkx drawings.¹²

7 W. Schellinkx, *Viaggio al Sud, 1664-1665*, ed. B. Aikema, H.Brand, F. Kuyvenhoven, D. Meijers, P. Mens, (Rome, 1983). 46,52.

8 A.C.M. Misc. 54, f. 93r.

9 Ibid, f. 86r. The words used in the document are '*clausura degli infetti*'.

10 Ibid, f. 84v. '*la riforma dei costumi*'.

11 A. Schembri, *Senglea 1586-1744 An Historical Demographic Analysis*, (Unpublished MA Thesis, History, 1999) 183.

12 Schellinkx, image fig. 52.



Fig. 3.3 – Another detail from a drawing by W. Schellinkx with a view of Senglea.¹³

Seven years after they had set up residence in the church of Porto Salvo, the Philippine fathers began to build a new convent, and a year later, in 1670, they started the building of a new larger church.¹⁴ In this endeavour, Schembri found the help of the people living in the area, and it is recorded that men, women and even children of the *contrada*,¹⁵ gave a helping hand whilst the Grand Master of the time, Raffaele Cottoner, consented that Schembri would annex that part of the main street of Senglea which overlooked the back of the Porto Salvo church. This meant that Senglea's main street, or as it was called at the time, *Strada Reale*, was cut at the end to make space for this new religious house.¹⁶

Moreover, the family background of Fr. Gio. Simone Schembri played a determining factor in all this development. He came from a well to do family with strong religious values. The parents brought up their children in an ascetic environment and when their penultimate son, Gio. Simone,¹⁷ became a Dominican and later on wanted to set his distinct religious congregation, his father helped him by donating money for this project whilst an emerging Zebbug-born architect, Maestro Petruzzo Debono was entrusted with the work on the *chiosstro*.¹⁸ Schembri's total commitment to this project re-emerges in his testament, in which he left all his wealth, including his books, to this congregation.

Unfortunately the work of the community received a setback in 1676, since in that year the plague struck Malta. Senglea was one of the areas to be severely affected and, 1,885 of its inhabitants, including the parish priest Fr. Francesco Azzopardi, died from this infestation.¹⁹ Moreover, this epidemic effected the continuation of the building of the church. The progress slowed down and 40 years later, bishop Canaves noticed, during his pastoral visit, that there was still work being done on this church.²⁰

Once this construction phase on the convent was completed, in 1690, the Philippine priests began the building of a new church under the supervision of the Senglea-born architect Carlo Vella.²¹ Once it was finished in the second half of the eighteenth century, it became a landmark overlooking the Grand Harbour. Its size also made it a distinctive landmark, not only for its exterior beauty but also for its internal dimensions since it had five altars; which meant that it rivalled in size parish churches in rural areas. Soon the building began to be known as the church of St. Philip, which in itself attests the popularity that the priests began to have with their neighbours – in spite of the fact that the church still remained dedicated to Our Lady of Safe Haven.

What is most striking about this community is the fact that despite their small number when compared to other religious communities, and catastrophic shocks such as the plague, which could have easily annihilated the community, they still succeeded in giving a solid contribution to Senglea's community and bring about educational and cultural change.²² Their spiritual and social work began immediately to be felt, and late seventeenth-century attestations²³ show that they had impressed their contemporaries as their way of life became an expression of piety and zealotry.

13 Ibid, image fig. 46.

14 A. Bonnici, *L-Isla Fi Ġrajjet il-Bażilika – Santwarju ta' Marija Bambina*, vol. 2, (Malta, 1986) 79.

15 A.C.M. Misc. 54, ff. 84r, 88r-v.

16 Ibid, f. 83r.

17 A. P. Senglea, *Liber Baptizatorum (1586-1644)*, vol.1. Maestro Gio. Maria Schembri and his wife Isabella had the following offspring during their time of residence in Senglea; Carlo Antonio (b. 07-02-1619), Giovanna (b. 28-10-1621), Matteo (b. 06-11-1624), Antonietta (b. 03-11-1629), Agatha (b. 31-01-1632), Gio. Simone (b.04-11-1634), Gio.Batta (b. 19-10-1637)

18 Ibid, f. 85r.

19 Bonnici (1986) 106-107.

20 Ibid, 197.

21 Ibid, 79.

22 For example in 1715, during the pastoral visit of Bishop Canaves, they numbered nine priests.

23 Ibid, 262-263.

The dynamism existing within this small community re-emerges around the middle of the 18th century, when the Philippine fathers felt the need to rebuild their home, which comprised the enlargement of their premises after having bought some houses in the vicinity, as well as, finishing the construction of the church. These houses, together with another older building, were pulled down to make place for a bigger community residence. The Philippine fathers made sure that this building would also have a proper library. In fact an area of this building, situated at the heart of the living quarters of the priests, was chosen to house the library. The work also included the construction of a private chapel. The whole project was completed in 1781, the year in which the church was consecrated.

The church and convent would fulfil diverse social and pastoral functions in the late eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The convent was hit by cannon balls fired by Maltese batteries at Tal-Borg (Paola) during the French blockade (1798-1800), causing damage to the roof of the building.²⁴ Once the blockade was over and normality returned to Malta, the island was unfortunately hit by two catastrophes. In 1814, plague again struck. Senglea, however, was the sole area to be spared this contagion.²⁵ In 1837, an epidemic of cholera broke out. This time, the town of Senglea was less fortunate. Cholera was the new epidemic of overcrowded cities. The governor of the day, Henry Bouverie, requisitioned the convent and used the premises as a quarantine place for the poor infected victims.²⁶ The Philippine fathers, who at this time all hailed from Senglea, had to leave the convent and go to their family home until the end of the contagion. What is most important is the fact that both the Maltese blockade of 1798 and the requisition order issued by the governor had no collateral effects on the library and it was mercifully spared from destruction.

Once the Philippine priests returned to their convent at the end of the epidemic, they resumed their pastoral work. However, their days of glory were by the end of the 19th century already over. These priests of Senglea were almost a local community where their recruits practically all hailed from the same town. Unfortunately, their numbers dwindled by the end of the century. Being a local community which was not bound by the rules of the Philippine Order meant that they could not receive recruits from abroad, with the result that by the end of the 19th century, the community counted only one member. The last priest was Fr. Angelo Raggio who was also the last provost or head of the congregation.²⁷ With his death in 1928 the chain which had been started in 1662 was severed with the result that the convent and church devolved to the diocese. One suspects that the end of this congregation was planned or at least encouraged. The Conventual chaplains of the Order of St. John at Rabat also suffered from a similar fate during this century. In other words, the Philippine priests could have become victims of the hidden pressure of the diocesan clergy to recover their authority over this prime area in Senglea and eliminate a community which could have been rivalling the diocesan priests. This could have happened by covertly discouraging young boys from joining this order which in Senglea was always a small one, in favour of joining the secular priesthood. Whatever the case, this convent would play an important pastoral role during the Second World War. The parish church was completely destroyed during the bombing with the consequence that the church of the Philippines would assume a pastoral role in the town, and continued to be used as Senglea's parish church until the new church was rebuilt and completed in 1957.²⁸

Once the parochial duties were resumed with the rebuilding of the church of Our Lady of Victories, the parish community sought to give a new meaning to the church of Safe Haven and to the convent of the Philippines, by handing them over to the Jesuit Order. There were three principal reasons behind this choice: first, the Jesuit fathers were known for their commitment to education and pastoral work; secondly, it was considered to be a 'safe Order' in the sense that it would not bring division within the parish community as it is not in the nature of this Order to hold popular festivities. A third reason was that the Jesuits were the Order, which most resembled the original Philippine congregation, which, had given so much to Senglea's community in the past. In fact, the Jesuits immediately set out to invest in pastoral work and education. They engaged themselves in reconstructing the old library which, as will be noted in the next chapter, suffered damages during the war. Importantly, they would also open another library where to store their books and their recent acquisitions. In other words, the Jesuits set out to rebuild the cultural fabric of Senglea which had been severely affected by the war, in particular by the huge outward migration from the town, with the negative consequence that many families who had left during the war never returned. The houses which these families once occupied were shabbily rebuilt to house poor and homeless families who were seeking shelter.

Unfortunately, the chapter of the Jesuit history in Senglea is now closed since the Jesuit community, like its predecessor, the Philippine congregation, is suffering from lack of vocations. As it goes against Jesuit regulations to have a convent with less than three priests, they had to quit this convent. Instead, the whole edifice was handed over to the Salesian Brothers to offer pastoral support to the local community.

Whatever happens in the future, the legacy that the Philippine fathers left in Senglea, in the form of the architectural heritage, their influence and their cultural library will still live on and will continue to be a testimony of Senglea's rich cultural heritage.

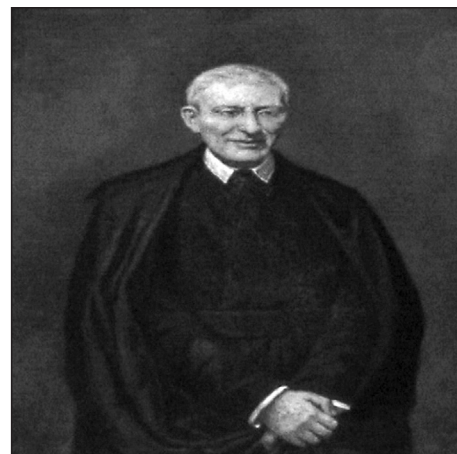


Fig. 3.4 – Portrait of the last provost of the Philippine congregation of Senglea, Fr. Angelo Raggio. Sacristy of Porto Salvo church in Senglea

24 V. Xuereb, *Il-Knisja ta' San Filippu tal-Isla*, (forthcoming) 24.

25 Bonnici, (1991) 62.

26 Ibid, 114.

27 Ibid, 214.

28 Bonnici, (1991) 369.