

Mgr Luigi Vella – the priest of the Eucharist



FABIAN MANGION

It was about four in the afternoon on July 17, 1928 – 90 years ago – when in a house in Victoria, Gozo, a priest lay dying. To those standing by his bedside, in those last hours of his life, he murmured: “I am seeing Father Eymard.” Someone ran into another room and brought a picture of the Blessed Peter Julian Eymard (1811-1868), a French Catholic priest and founder of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, but the dying man said: “No, he is here near me.” Five hours later, he sighed gently and died.

Luigi Vella's early years were as uneventful as his surroundings, yet with clear hints that monotony was not to be his lot. Born in Victoria on December 10, 1859, the seventh of the 14 children of Michaele Vella and Maria Teresa Mercieca, he was baptised at St George's parish church by Archpriest Michael Buttigieg. As could be expected from his two pious parents, the young boy was brought up in a truly Christian way. He could not have found a better school than that of his own family, which included Mgr Giuseppe Mercieca, his maternal uncle, who was Archbishop Pietro Pace's vicar general and an elder brother, Giuseppe, who later became parish priest of Kerċem.

As a child, he regularly attended daily Mass, accompanied by his parents and very soon he joined the Piccolo Clero at St George's parish church. Aged 12, he started attending the government secondary school, from where he went on to join the local Seminary, then under the direction of the Jesuit Fathers. He did remarkably well at classical studies and philosophy, showing that he had memory, intelligence, and above all, an inexhaustible capacity for application.

On completion of his classical studies, at the age of 19, Vella started the course of Theology. He was ordained priest on December 19, 1882, by Bishop Pietro Pace at the Gozo Cathedral. Vella celebrated his first solemn High Mass at St George's parish church and asked his dear friend Canon Giuseppe Farrugia to deliver the panegyric on that happy occasion.

Since his first years of priesthood, Vella was renowned for his eloquent preaching and great wisdom. The Jesuits, who knew Fr Vella well and indeed appreciated his remarkable talents in the field of studies, at once appointed him master at the Seminary and prefect to a section of the college's students. However, he was not destined to remain at the Seminary for long. The Jesuits were sorry to lose him, but the young priest had a vaster field stretching out before him. His youthful enthusiasm was at work in another form of active social apostolate.

“He possessed the brilliant gift of communicating knowledge and bore out the five principles of teaching laid down by the masters of old: clarity, brevity, utility, maturity and lovability”

In 1887, Fr Vella was appointed chaplain at Victoria's Civil Hospital, a post he retained for 12 years. There he understood the sufferings of humanity, being a sincere friend of the sick and a comforter of hundreds of men and women on their deathbed.

While serving as chaplain at Victoria's Hospital, he did not put aside his studies. In 1900, Vella



Luigi Vella as a seminarian.

was conferred with a doctorate in Sacred Theology after brilliantly passing an examination before a commission which had as its president the Bishop of Gozo, delegated ad hoc from Rome. In that same year he was made Canon Theologian of Gozo's Cathedral of the Assumption of Our Lady, a post he was to hold till he became Archdeacon of the same Collegiate in 1923.

Every Sunday afternoon, for 24 years on end, Mgr Vella, as Canon Theologian, explained the Sacred Scriptures in front of congregations at the cathedral, with people flocking there even from various surrounding villages to hear his clear, well-studied and practical sermons.

Mgr Vella was also in frequent demand as a preacher in various Gozo parishes, notably at St George's of Victoria, Gharb, Xewkija, Sannat and Kerċem. Quite often he was also asked to ascend the pulpit of churches in Malta. He was untiring in his preaching: Lenten courses, retreats to religious congregations, and sermons of all kinds seemed to succeed each other almost without interruption.

Mgr Vella was always sought after within the confessional. Here, his balanced judgement stood him in good stead. People knew that he was not merely matter-of-fact, but



The Vella family. Don Luigi, wearing the decoration *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice*, is seen second from right in the middle row. To his right (seated) is his mother Maria Teresa.

also very sensible. And the faithful thronged to his confessional.

In 1909, when the Fathers of the Society of Jesus left Gozo, Mgr Vella was again asked to teach. Mgr Giovanni Maria Camilleri, the good, wise bishop governing Gozo at the time, called him to occupy the chair of Dogmatic Theology at the Seminary. He abundantly repaid the trust his Bishop had in him. As a professor, he possessed the brilliant gift of communicating knowledge and bore out the five principles of teaching laid down by the masters of old: clarity, brevity, utility, maturity and lovability. Above all, his students noted that the whole bent of his mind and heart was always directed heavenward.

Indeed, Mgr Vella's life had as its core the small church in Victoria known as Ta' Savina. He devoted himself totally to it and until the very end of his days. This church was destined to be – and through Mgr Vella's zeal actually became – a fine sanctuary of perpetual adoration.

“There are many ways of gaining heaven,” Mgr Vella used to say, quoting St Pius X, “but the safest, easiest and shortest way is through the Holy Eucharist.”

At Ta' Savina church, he propagated, by his own example, own writings and devotion towards the Blessed Sacrament.

In 1901, he demolished the old church, and with the enthusiastic help of many, he succeeded to erect the present edifice which was consecrated on February 17, 1904. It was officially, and most solemnly, inaugurated on April 29, 1913,

inaugurated on April 29, 1913, by Cardinal Domenico Ferrata, Papal delegate for the XXIV International Eucharistic Congress that was being celebrated in Malta at the time. Cardinal Ferrata himself, publicly called

Mgr Vella “un altro Padre Eymard” (Another Father Eymard).

As a merited reward for his many labours, Pope Pius XI sent Mgr Vella the medal *Benemerenti*. Many years before, in 1890, Pope Leo XIII had decorated him with the medal *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice*. Pope Pius X wished to raise him to the episcopate, as coadjutor to Archbishop Pietro Pace of Malta, but humility, ever his characteristic virtue, made him gently and modestly decline the high offer.

Despite his absorbing activity, Mgr Vella left a surprisingly large number of writings. Gifted with a very versatile and fertile pen, he published many periodicals, the most popular among them being *Id-Devot ta' Maria*. Although of a religious nature, it carried several articles and local news which today are important to researchers as a documentation of the social, religious history of Gozo.

Writing always in Maltese, he wrote various booklets on the lives of saints, as well as some novels based on local history, such as *Nikol Ghabdul*, concerning the last years of the Arabs in Malta, Bernard Dupuò, set in the first years of the Order of St John in Malta and *Fernandu Montagues*, with its background in the Aragonese domination. He also started writing a history of Gozo, in Italian, but did not live to finish the work.

Indeed, this Gozitan priest of virtuous Christian life, marked by unpretentiousness and faithfulness to the Church, was a “model of priesthood”, as Mgr Michael Gonzi, then Bishop of Gozo, chose to call him in a speech delivered in the Cathedral's *Aula Capitulare* a month after Mgr Luigi's death on July 17, 1928. The



Mgr Luigi Vella, Archdeacon of the Cathedral of the Assumption, Gozo. Right: The marble slab and epitaph at the Gozo Cathedral which cover the grave where Mgr Vella was laid to rest.



April 29, 1913: Mgr Vella is seen at the main door of Ta' Savina church awaiting the arrival of Cardinal Domenico Ferrata.



The altar of perpetual adoration at Ta' Savina Church.



The last group of seminarians to whom Mgr Vella lectured Dogmatic Theology in 1925-1926. (Standing, from left): Nicholas Mifsud (Siggiewi), Alfred Gatt (Nadur), Bernard Portelli (Gharb), Francis Xuereb (Paola), Joseph Cauchi (San Lawrenz), Emmanuel Brincat (Paola), Carl Vella (Qala), John Farrugia (Zejtun), George Grech (Għasri). (Seated, from left): Carmel Lia (Tarxien), Angelo Camilleri (Qala), George Grech (Victoria), Mgr Luigi Vella, Dominic Vassallo (Rabat), Francis Azzopardi (Qala), Lawrence Portelli (Xagħra). (Seated in front, from left): Joseph Sciortino (Sliema) and Espedito Tabone (Xagħra).

two greatest characteristics of Mgr Luigi Vella's life, Archdeacon of Gozo's Cathedral and first rector of the church of Perpetual Adoration Ta' Savina, had been: affection towards the Holy Eucharist along with absolute conformity to God's will.

He had a remarkable ability to lead an erudite life while remaining humble, never forgetting what he was called for: to walk hand-in-hand

with the humblest of people. He was a man who took God's gift and returned it tenfold; not only to God, but to all who were blessed by having him in their lives. He will be remembered as a preacher, confessor, a professor, a writer – but before that and above all, he will be identified as “the priest of the Eucharist”.

On June 26, 2015, a memorial statue of Mgr Luigi Vella was

unveiled at Savina Square in Victoria.

Undoubtedly, no better place could have been chosen as a location for the monument since Mgr Vella's life was deeply rooted in this picturesque square situated in the heart of Gozo. Though the square is tiny, it is filled to the brim with memories, among which are the laudable

works of Mgr Vella who, even today, 90 years after his death, is still invoked by many to intercede with the Lord, so that he may relieve them from pain, sorrow or sickness.

Acknowledgement
The author wishes to thank Fr John Meilaq for his invaluable help and assistance.