

# Honouring a dedicated priest: Mgr Prof. Arturo Bonnici



FABIAN MANGION

Born in Senglea on December 17, 1903, Arturo Bonnici was the second child of Vincenzo and Elvira née Griscti.

After his secondary education at the Lyceum, Valletta, Arturo joined the Faculty of Arts at the Royal University of Malta in October 1921, and he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in October 1924.

During this course, he showed interest in writing poetry. His poems, written in Maltese, English and Italian, offer an insight into his cultural background and portray a deeply-rooted love for his faith, his hometown and his country.

The environment provided by his hometown as well as his own family were important factors that eased Bonnici's decision to proceed for the priesthood.

In October 1924, he entered the Seminary, Floriana, and joined the Faculty of Theology. He was ordained priest on September 22,

1928, by Archbishop Dom Mauro Caruana, OSB, at St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta. On October 1, he graduated with a Doctor of Divinity and a Bachelor of Canon Law at the University.

Immediately after his ordination, he was appointed director of the Institute for Catholic Education and ecclesiastical assistant of the Catholic Action, both at Senglea.

In 1929, when Bonnici was harbouring plans to take up a teaching career at the Lyceum, he was invited to enrol in the services of the Archbishop's Curia. His first assignment was that of an *attuario*.

On January 3, 1931, Bonnici was appointed editor of the Catholic newspaper *Lehen is-Sewwa*, a commitment of considerable importance, which he held for three years.

When in 1932, Canon Emmanuele Galea, secretary of Archbishop Caruana, was appointed a member of the Cathedral Chapter, Bonnici became pro-secretary, helping Mgr Galea. Concurrently, he was installed as Galea's successor as canon theologian of the Senglea Collegiate Chapter.

Two years later he was promoted to the post of primicerius in the same Collegiate Chapter, the highest office of this institution.

In 1936, he was also assigned the office of acting-chancellor of the Curia. He retained these two conjoint offices till 1937, when Mgr Enrico Bonnici was appointed chancellor.

Apart from this involvement in diocesan life, Don Arturo devoted particular attention to preaching. In 1930, he joined the *Piccola Missione* dedicated primarily to periodical missions in different parishes of the diocese. Due to his clear exposition of topics as well as his eloquence, he acquired wide popularity as a preacher.

In 1937, following the apostolic constitution *Deus Scientiarum Dominus* (1931), Governor of Malta Sir Charles Bonham-Carter appointed Can. Arturo Bonnici Pro-

fessor of Church History. In order to adequately prepare to teach this field of specialisation, Bonnici proceeded to Rome and enrolled as a student in the Faculty of Church History at the Pontifical Gregorian University.

In July 1939, he obtained a Licence in Ecclesiastical History from the said university. The following October he started lecturing at the University of Malta. He was by then a fully qualified historian, having gained a thorough knowledge both of his main subject as well as its subsidiary sciences: historical methodology, palaeography, Christian archaeology and archivistries, among others.

After the premature death of Can. Prof. John Theuma Relf, on January 16, 1941, Bonnici became Acting Professor of Patrology, Christian Archaeology and Liturgy.

During the war, Bonnici, together with his family, had to leave Senglea and found refuge in Rabat.

In 1942, Mgr Galea, now vicar general of the diocese and auxiliary bishop to Archbishop Caruana, informed Bonnici that the Archbishop had appointed him general secretary at the Curia.

In 1944, Prof. Bonnici became chairman of the Diocesan Board for the Co-ordination of Catholic



As Canon Primicerius of the Senglea Collegiate Chapter.

Organisations, commonly known as 'The Junta'. Two years later, in 1946, Archbishop Michael Gonzi nominated him president of the committee in charge of the building of the Catholic Institute, Floriana. Its aim was the promotion of Catholic culture in all its ramifications.

As a gesture of gratitude for his dedication both to Church life as well as to his academic milieu, Archbishop Gonzi appointed him

Canon-Coadjutor of the Cathedral Chapter in 1947 and Canon Penitentiary in 1953. In 1947 he was also assigned the directorship of the *Istituto Maltese di Educazione Cattolica* at St James church, Valletta. He retained this post till 1960.

In 1950, although deeply immersed in various pastoral, academic and administrative duties, he decided to embark on a new project which later, in 1971, he termed as "the boldest venture" of his life. He deplored the sad situation prevailing in Malta regarding the low level of scientific interest of the Maltese in the history of their island-home. He sought to promote a sound revival of this interest, hoping thereby that the Maltese people would appreciate more fully the achievements of their forefathers.

On April 26, 1950, Mgr Prof. Bonnici founded The Malta Historical Society and was unanimously elected as its president. Year in year out, till his demise, he was elected by acclamation to this post.

Less than two years later, the first issue of *Melita Historica* was published with Joseph Cassar Pullicino as its editor, involving both local and foreign scholars. It provided constant original contributions, shedding new light for the better knowledge and appreciation of the historical development of the Maltese islands. Indeed, *Melita Historica* seems to have been the springboard whereby Bonnici embarked on a deepening of his interest in certain areas of local ecclesiastical history.

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In 1954, he was appointed a member of the Archives Advisory Committee which planned the systematic cataloguing of the Archives of the Order of St John, still preserved in Malta's National Library. His participation was providential to deepen his knowledge of the Order's history.

His passionate love and disinterested attachment to the Conventual Church of St John merited him the title of Conventual Chaplain *ad honorem* of the Sovereign Military Order of St John conferred on him in 1963 by Grand Master Angelo de Mojana. Actually, till his death, he was the Cathedral Chapter's deputy for this church.

Concurrently with these scientific activities, he kept alive a deep



Canon Bonnici (seated at the centre) together with a group of aspirants of the Catholic Action at the Domus Pio X, Senglea.



Family group photo taken in 1910. Arturo is in front. Three of his family members have left their mark on Malta's heritage: the renowned sculptor Vincenzo Bonnici (1821-1865) was his great-grandfather; the famous designer and sculptor Aristide Bonnici (1851-1888) was his grandfather; and Giuseppe Bonnici (1835-1900), the artist who drew his inspiration from the school of Tommaso Minardi, was his cousin.

interest in communicating with the people, first through the Rediffusion – the cable radio then in use in the Maltese islands, and later through television, the importance of which he immediately perceived. His contributions were duly appreciated by academics as well as by the man in the street.

When he was reaching the age of retirement from lecturing at the University, which actually occurred in 1965, he started harbouring a plan to re-edit Achille Ferris's *Storia Ecclesiastica di Malta*. However, upon further reflection, Mgr Bonnici decided to embark on a thoroughly new account of local ecclesiastical history. His attention from 1960 onwards was centred in the materialisation of this enterprise.

The first volume of his *History of the Church in Malta* was published in 1967, followed by the second in 1968 and the third in 1975. These volumes mark Bonnici's major publication, in which he made it a point not just to merely record the factual chronological sequence of events but the gradual unfolding of various developments and their impact on the local ecclesial milieu. Meanwhile, in 1969 he was appointed a member of the Government Advisory Board on Education.

The last eight years of Mgr Bonnici's life were full with his active insertion both in the ecclesial community as well as with his constant participation to cultural life in Malta. He continued to perform his duties as secretary at the Curia until the

installation of Mgr Joseph Mercieca to the Metropolitan See of Malta.

A short while later, on December 16, 1976, Archbishop Mercieca appointed him vicar general of the diocese. It was a grateful appointment indeed for Mgr Bonnici after so many years of dedicated service to the local Church.

The 1970s brought out an aspect of his life that had enticed him during the early years of his priesthood and remained with him for ever afterwards – journalism. On January 13, 1970, he started a series of articles in *Lehen is-Sewwa*.

By September 22, 1978 – the day that marked the 50th anniversary since his ordination to the priesthood – his health had seriously deteriorated. The end of his human existence arrived during the early hours of October 21, 1978. Clergy and people showed their highest respects at the funeral held at St John's Co-Cathedral. All prayed that the Almighty bestow on him his merited reward.

Mgr Bonnici was successful in keeping interwoven the priestly and academic vocations, manifesting clearly that these can safely proceed together without any fear whatsoever of detracting each other's importance, as both help mankind in aiming at higher ideals in the daily vicissitudes of human experience.

Moreover, Bonnici's academic post at the University, his links with the ecclesiastical authorities, the friendly relations he managed to establish and maintain with a considerable number of people, his constant dedication to the duties entrusted to his care, his *savoir faire* in dealing with all categories of people, his kindness and gentlemanly behaviour, his sense of gratitude towards all who collaborated with him in different projects – qualities that endeared him both to his students as well as to all who knew him – made him a perfect gentleman whom everyone admired.



July 27, 1949: Mgr Bonnici (front row, fourth from left) leading a Maltese diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes.