LIFE&WELLBEING HISTORY

Honouring a dedicated priest: Mgr Prof. Arturo Bonnici



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

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

During this course, he showed 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.

hometown as well as his own family the priesthood.

ordained priest on September 22. highest office of this institution.

1928, by Archbishop Dom Mauro Cathedral, Valletta, On October 1. 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 After his secondary education 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 considinterest in writing poetry. His erable importance, which he held for three years.

When in 1932, Canon Emmanuele Galea, secretary of Archbishop Caruana, was appointed a member of the Cathe-The environment provided by his dral Chapter, Bonnici became prosecretary, helping Mgr Galea. Conwere important factors that eased currently, he was installed as Bonnici's decision to proceed for Galea's successor as canon theologian of the Senglea Collegiate Chap-In October 1924, he entered the ter. Two years later he was pro-Seminary, Floriana, and joined the moted to the post of primicerius in Faculty of Theology. He was the same Collegiate Chapter, the

Caruana, OSB, at St John's Co- the office of acting-chancellor of the Curia. He retained these he graduated with a Doctor of 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 Charles Bonham-Carter appointed Can. Arturo Bonnici Pro-

"He deplored the low level of interest of the Maltese in the history of their

island-home"

In 1936, he was also assigned 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 Licentiate 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 archivistics, 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.

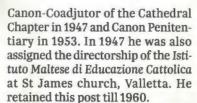
In 1942, Mgr Galea, now vicar informed Bonnici that the Archbishop had appointed him general secretary at the Curia.

In 1944, Prof. Bonnici became



Organisations, commonly known as 'The Junta'. Two years later, in 1946, Archbishop Michael Gonzi nominated him president of the committee in charge for general of the diocese and auxiliary the building of the Catholic Instibishop to Archbishop Caruana, tute, 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 chairman of the Diocesan Board well as to his academic milieu, for the Co-ordination of Catholic Archbishop Gonzi appointed him



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.

"On April 26, 1950, Mgr Prof. Bonnici founded The Malta Historical Society and was unanimously elected by acclamation, year in year out, as its president"



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.

In 1954, he was appointed a memmittee which planned the systematic cataloguing of the Archives of Order's history.

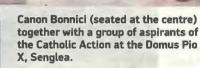
His passionate love and disinterfor this church.

interest in communicating with the The first volume of his History of ber of the Archives Advisory Compeople, first through the Rediffuthe Church in Malta was published sion - the cable radio then in use in in 1967, followed by the second in the Maltese islands, and later 1968 and the third in 1975. These the Order of St John, still preserved through television, the importance volumes mark Bonnici's major pubin Malta's National Library. His of which he immediately perceived. lication, in which he made it a point post at the University, his links with participation was providential to His contributions were duly appre- not just to merely record the factual deepen his knowledge of the ciated by academics as well as by chronological sequence of events friendly relations he managed to the man in the street. When he was reaching the age of developments and their impact on ested attachment to the Conventual retirement from lecturing at the the local ecclesial milieu. Mean-

Church of St John merited him the University, which actually occurred orem of the Sovereign Military plan to re-edit Achille Ferris's Storia Order of St John conferred on him Ecclesiastica di Malta. However, in 1963 by Grand Master Angelo de upon further reflection, Mgr Bon-

title of Conventual Chaplain ad hon- in 1965, he started harbouring a member of the Government Advisory Board on Education.

The last eight years of Mgr Bonnici's life were full with his active towards all who collaborated with Mojana. Actually, till his death, he nici decided to embark on a thor-insertion both in the ecclesial com-him in different projects - qualities was the Cathedral Chapter's deputy oughly new account of local eccle-munity as well as with his constant that endeared him both to his stusiastical history. His attention from participation to cultural life in Malta. dents as well as to all who knew him Concurrently with these scien- 1960 onwards was centred in the He continued to perform his duties - made him a perfect gentleman tific activities, he kept alive a deep materialisation of this enterprise. as secretary at the Curia until the whom everyone admired.



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 the ecclesiastical authorities, the but the gradual unfolding of various establish and maintain with a considerable number of people, his constant dedication to the duties while, in 1969 he was appointed a entrusted to his care, his savoir faire in dealing with all categories of people, his kindness and gentlemanly behaviour, his sense of gratitude

