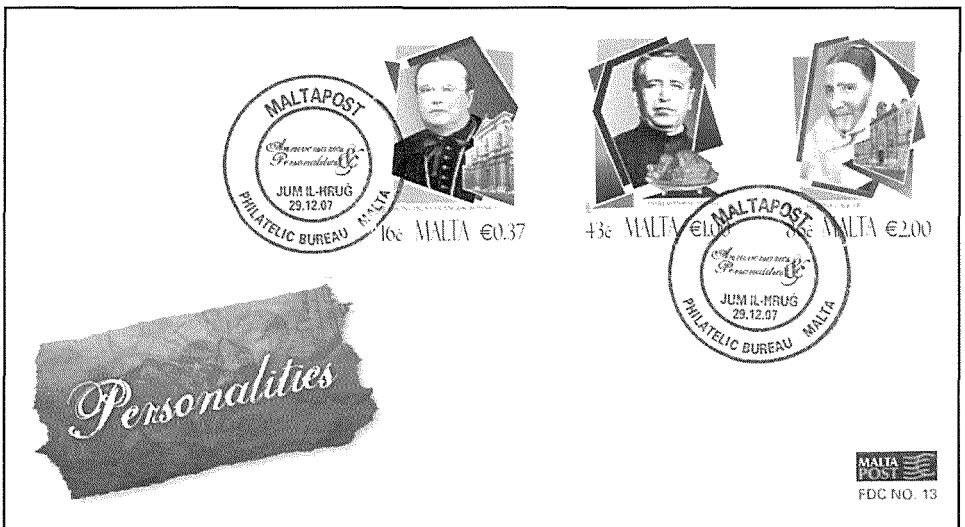


# Who was Mons Prof FRANGISK BONNICI?

by John Cardona



The Most Reverend Canon Monsignor Prof. Francesco Bonnici D.D. (1852-1905) was a PHILANTROPIST - FOUNDER OF ST JOSEPH INSTITUTE HAMRUN, known also as: ISTITUTO CANONICO BONNICI



*Mons Prof Frangisk Bonnici. 16c, Patri Manuel Magri 43c. and C. Cauchi 86c.*

Monsignor Prof Francesco Bonnici, was the son of Dr Guseppe Luigi Bonnici M.D. District Medical Officer in Cospicua, and Teresina nee Ferris, sister of Achille, and Canon Paolo Ferris. The brother of his great grand Father was Dun Salvator Bonnici who was instrumental by means of a Papal Bull, Exigit Apostolici Officii issued by Pope Pius VI, on the 21 May 1786, in elevating the Church of Senglea into a, Collegiata insinja becoming the First Archpriest of Senglea. He was also Theologian to Grand Master De Rhoan.

Mons F. Bonnici was born in Cospicua on the 14 July 1852, but as his father had been posted soon after his birth, to Mqabba he was raised there. He was the eldest of eight children, two becoming Medical Doctors; Theodoro becoming Professor of Surgery at our University, and Consultant Surgeon with the British Army, and Benjamin a General Practitioner who eventually practised in Floriana.

At the age of sixteen he joined the Theology course in our University, graduating at the age of 20 on the 18 July 1872 in Sacred Theology. When he finished his University studies, he was still under age to be ordained Suddjakonat, so he remained a Kjeriku.

Monsignor Scicluna Bishop of Malta, appointed him, although still a Kjeriku, Professor of Literature and Spiritual Director in the Seminary at Mdina, remaining in this post for three years. This was indeed a very special situation to have the Spiritual Director of the Seminary a Kjeriku, showing the great esteem Bishop Scicluna had for him, ordaining him in 1876.

Two years later the same Bishop appointed him Rector of Floriana Seminary, a post he held for five years, and was instrumental in reforming the whole academic structure of the Seminary, making it one of the best academic institutions in Catholic Malta.

In 1882 at the age of thirty he became a Canon of the Mdina Cathedral Chapter.

He excelled in teaching Christian Doctrine to children and youngsters, and on the 30 September 1884 at No 2 Carmel Str, Mqabba, in the house that he was brought up in, founded il-Missjoni ż-Żghira, formulating its rules, and together with a small group of Priests and lay men, went round Malta's villages to teach children and youngsters Christian Doctrine. This event was recorded on a marble slab, which is attached to the wall of his residence in 1934, commemorating the fiftieth year of the founding of, il-missjoni ż-Żghira. Maybe, this philanthropic fact, inspired later on, Dun Gorg Preca to form the MUSEUM. Mons F. Bonnici's pioneer work in this field inspired Dun George to expand. Probably this was the reason why, his future nephew the Rev Mons Enrico Bonnici, came out so strongly in favour of Dun Gorg, and was instrumental in persuading Bishop Dom Maurus Caruana to let Dun Gorg continue with his good work after his suspension.

When in 1885 Bishop Buhagiar came to Malta he appointed Mons F. Bonnici

as his personal secretary. Although occupying high office he remained close to the people and could see and feel, the poverty, and social ills prevailing at that time.

So his next dream was how he could find a home for poor boys, orphans or abandoned children, where they could be given a roof, food, religious instructions and a trade, so that when eventually they left the home they perhaps could find a job.

This was indeed an ambitious project, not only needing considerable initial expenditure, but the daily running cost which was greatly needed to be attended to continually.

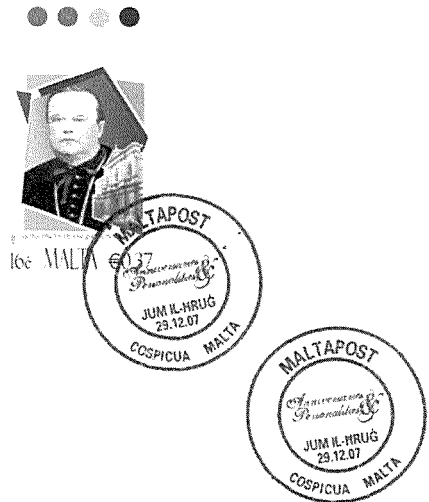
He was not a rich man, but with the little he possessed and with what initially Bishop Buhagiar gave him, he was successful in opening the first home, near the Church of, tas-Samra on the 27 August 1888, and so his very humane philanthropic dream became a reality.

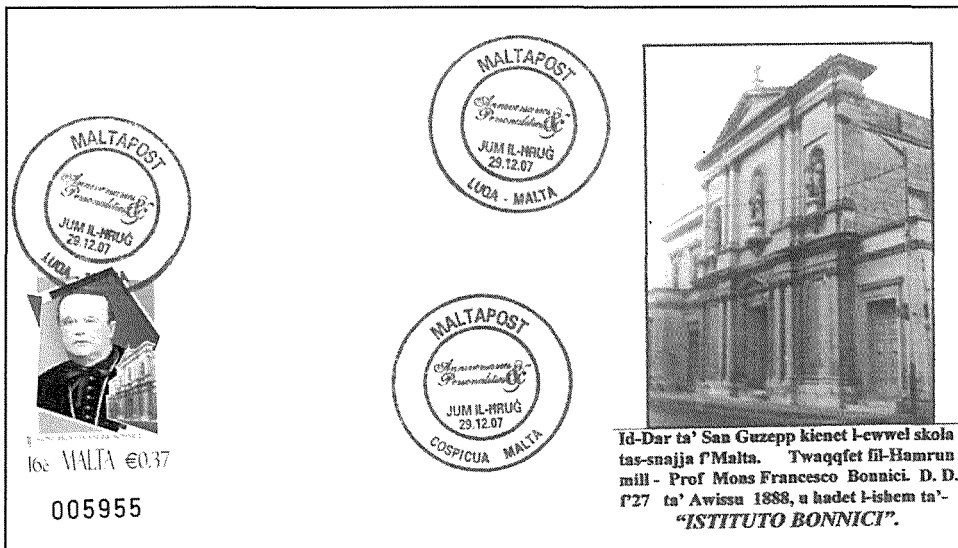
He opened this house for boys and as this was going to be the first trade school in Malta, what better name than St Joseph Institute - St Joseph having been himself a carpenter. It soon became full with children whom he picked up from the street, from immoral surroundings, and questionable circumstances, children who would probably ended up in prison. It was a relief to many families and consolation to others. So this initial home soon demanded a bigger one.

On the 13 May 1893, he was able to persuade the Government of the day, to give him on 99 year lease, a fairly large house, where St Joseph Institute is to day, surrounded by fields, and known as, ill Palazzo l-ahmar, in the limits of Hamrun. It retained its original name of St Joseph, but became known also as Bonnici Institute after its founder as well.



**Prof. Mons. Francesco Bonnici D.D. (1852-1905)**  
**Founder of St Joseph Institute - Hamrun**  
**(Canonico Bonnici Institute)**  
**First Trade School in Malta: 27 August 1888**





In 1905 one of his successors Dun Gorg Bugeja as Director of the Institute was able to obtain it from the Government on perpetual lease, for 20 guineas a year, and later it was reduced to one guinea a year.

This was the first trade school (Institute) in Malta where boys without any future, were thought a large variety of trades, to become: carpenters, cobblers, tailors, confectioners, bakers, printers etc.

It was in the print shop of this institute that his future nephew Mons Enrico Bonnici, a future Director of the Institute published the first edition of *Il-Lehen Is-Sewwa*, as its first Editor, on the 1<sup>st</sup> September 1928 during the religious conflict between Lord Strickland and the Church.

The boarding children needed people to look after them, and Mons F. Bonnici founded a semi Religious Order which he named, *Congregazione dei fratelli Della Carita* enrolling men of exemplary character, wearing a grey cassock. Among them there was Fra Luigi Poggi. Helping the Director Mons F. Bonnici, in the management and running of the Institute, there was Dun Giuseppe Cauchi from Floriana and Dun Alfred Gatt from Valletta a saintly man, who was and still is held in high esteem by many devoted Maltese.

Not far from this Institute in, Villa Santa Vennera in the same street he opened up another house for babies calling it the Institute of the Sacred Family. The two sisters of Mons F. Bonnici who were nuns together with some of their colleagues, and the sisters of Dun Ang Dalli took care of the babies. Unfortunately due to lack of funding this house had soon to close down.

St Joseph Institute also had financial problems and in order that the Institute would not also close down as the Institute of the Sacred Family had done, he



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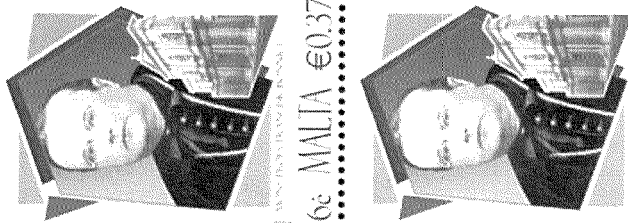
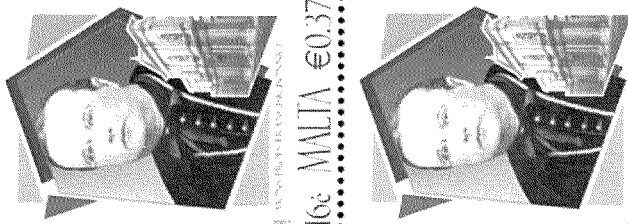
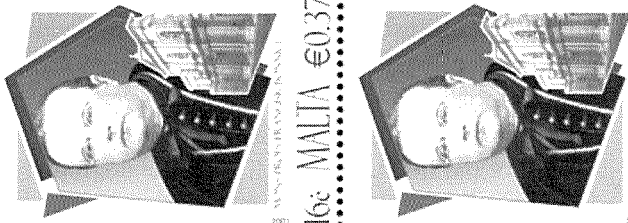
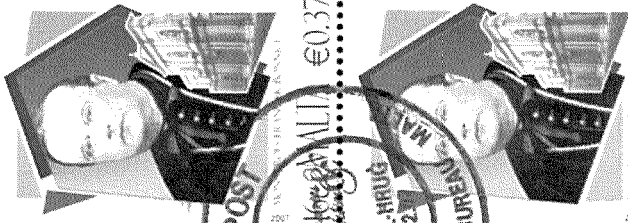
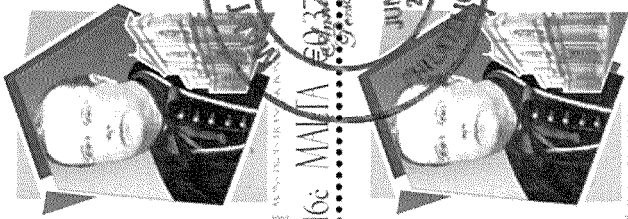
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embarked on a big fund raising campaign, and began publishing a periodical, which he named, *il-Fabbro di Nazareth - Bollettino Mensuale della Casa di San Giuseppe*.

By means of this Journal he wanted to bring St Joseph Institute more to the attention of the public, by giving information about its function, about the education of the boys, and their need of assistance, and its need to survive. In the first issue we read;

“The house of St Joseph is above everything else a home opened for the poor children whose parents cannot afford to educate them. In the Institute we have Laboratories where the youngsters while learning a trade, prepare themselves for a future job and so be in a position to become good citizens.

In the Institute we have a school for primary education, with a curriculum in keeping with the requirements of the various trades. This house is more than an, Orfanatrofju, because it welcomes not only those without parents, but also those whose parents were unable, or do not want to look after their children because of their poverty. Sometimes it is the parents themselves that evict the children.

In the second issue we find;

We picked up a child of eight years, sprightly and full of beans. He did not know his surname, nor did he know the name of his parents. You do not have a mother, I asked?, Yes he replied I had once upon a time a mother, but one night when I went and knocked on the door nobody opened the door for me. I wept on the door step, a woman that lived down the road saw me, took me to her home and fed me and treated me like her child. One day while playing in the street, somebody who I do not know grabbed me and took me to a house I do not know where.

Mons Bonnici ends this article by stating

“We could well understand what happened, and we thank Divine Providence that we were able to rescue this boy from the hands of the devil. If we had not, that boy would not be an angel of innocence as he is today.

A shocking story even to day, let alone in 1896.

Another fund raising activity was the founding in 1897 of the I-Opera della Buona Morte everybody could enroll at a fee of 1d a month. When a member was dying and the Institute notified, the children went in front of the Blessed Sacrament and prayed for the member. After his death, prayers and masses for the repose of the member’s soul were held. The Opera della Buona Morte is still in existence to day.

In 1890 Mons Bonnici was appointed Professor of Philosophy at the University and in 1900 appointed Professor of Moral Theology in the same Malta University. Who would have told him that his nephew Mons Prof Carmelo Bonnici would occupy the same chair of Moral Theology thirty five years later?

In 1898 ten years after the foundation of the Institute he became sick and had to let go the Directorship, but he did not abandon the Institute, so much so that he continued paying off the debt he had incurred on behalf of the Institute, and after his death his mother learned that he still had to pay £80 for bread supplied to the Institute, paid it herself, as he died penniless.

He died at midnight of Christmas Eve of 1905 in his mother's house in Hamrun in the street to day named after him as Canon Bonnici. He was buried in the Mdina Cathedral. In 1952 during the directorship of his nephew Mons Enrico Bonnici his remains were exhumed and reburied in a grave that Mons De Piro during his directorship had prepared for him in Saint Joseph Institute.

His students on learning about his death quickly formed a committee representing the various religious organizations he was involved in and at their own expense paid for a solemn funeral held in the Jesuits Church in Valletta on the 15 January 1906, and the marble slab on his grave in the Mdina Cathedral. Mons Prof E. Vassallo who was a great admirer of Mons F. Bonnici delivered l-Elogio Funebre Recitato nella Chiesa del Gesu, which was printed at St Joseph Institute, by the printing press he founded, and which exists even to day.

Hundreds of boys have been able to be educated there over the years, and after Mons F. Bonnici's demise, numerous Directors have been appointed, all worked hard to improve on what they found. In the 1950's a meat Committee was set up under the chairmanship of Prof Walter Ganado, and a Bread Committee as well which is still in operation to day. You can help by a donating Lm15 = €34.94

At the moment members of the Missionary Society of St Paul (MSSP) are administering the Institute having an uphill battle to make ends meet. A yearly almanac has been published since 1908, and they deserve our continued financial help.

It is indeed to be commended that the Malta Post has included in its Personalities Stamp set this year Mons Prof F. Bonnici whose Institute is still helping those in need in 2007.

(Dr A Bonnici M.D, is a grand nephew of Mons F Bonnici)

Ref; Mons Francesco Bonnici D D; Elogio Funebre by Sac Prof Emmanuele Vassallo J.C.D

Mons Kan Prof F Bonnici D D; "Taghrif Fuq il Hajja u l-opri tieghu by Mons Enrico Bonnici

Id Dar ta San Gusepp; Alexander Bonnici O.F.M.Conv