

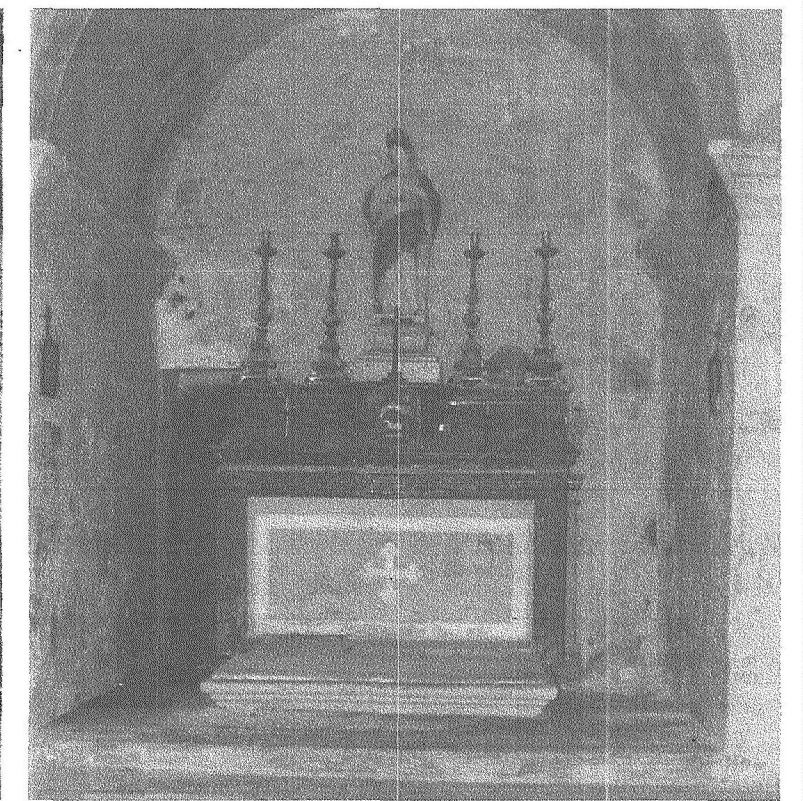
LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY



A scene from Act 6 (on the way towards Calvary) and Act 7 (the Crucifixion) from a Passion play by Mgr Joseph Darmanin at the Senglea Catholic Action Centre.



The Darmanin family grave at the Santa Maria Addolorata Cemetery.



The church of St Barbara, Victoria, where Darmanin was first buried.

Mgr Joseph Darmanin: a model of wisdom, guidance and loving concern

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From time to time we hear of bad examples among the priesthood. In reality, such priests constitute just a small percentage of the clergy. Rarely do we hear about God's faithful servants who make up the large majority of priests and who, day in, day out, fulfil their ministry in quiet fidelity and love. One such priest was Mgr Joseph Darmanin, who was born almost 140 years ago.

The second child of Salvatore and Maria née Glavino, Joseph was born in Senglea on April 29, 1880.

He was educated at a private primary school in Senglea and at the Lyceum. In 1900, he did very well in his matriculation examination and later on he obtained a B.Lit. and D.D. He was ordained priest on December 22, 1906.

Originally, he wished to become a Jesuit but, due to the untimely death of his father, he had to change plans. Nonetheless, from his very first call, one thing remained a constant light guiding his path until the very end: the A.M.D.G. (*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*), the Latin motto of the Society of Jesus, attributed to the

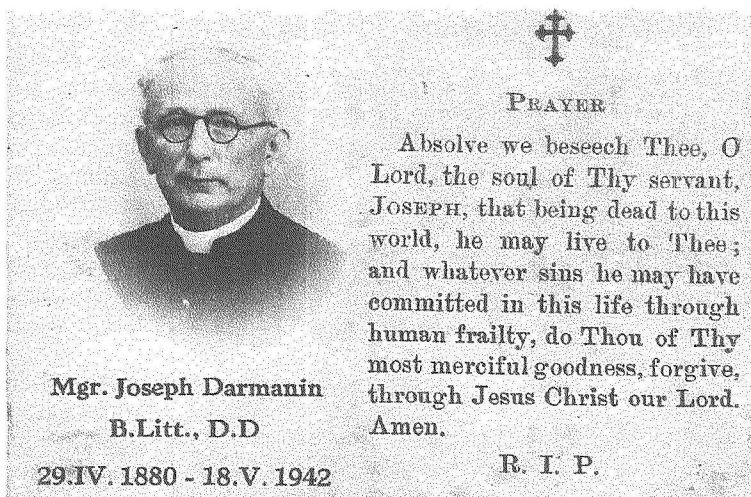
founder of the Jesuits, St Ignatius of Loyola, who intended it to serve as a cornerstone of the Society's religious philosophy.

In 1909, Darmanin opened *Dar iż-Żgħażaġh Piju X* in Senglea, an organisation for youths, intended to offer catechetical and social activities, named after Pope Pius X. Darmanin had an extraordinary manner with which he drew youths and adult men so as to nurture in them the Christian values that he cherished so much.

Setting up a Catholic Action Centre in Senglea was a long-held dream of Darmanin's, realised through the generous beneficence of the Bonanno family. In this place, he organised conferences and delivered speeches by which he formed true Christian consciences essential for those who wished to bear witness to Christ in the secular sphere of life.

For many years, the main hall of this centre served as the stage for a Passion play in seven acts written by Darmanin himself. It would be performed during Lent, in advance of the commemoration of the Passion and death of Jesus Christ. This annual event served to make young people feel valued in the community since many of them were involved in the production and cast.

When the Apostolic See, on April 25, 1920, issued the decree



Darmanin's memorial card, distributed after his death.

by which the solemn crowning of the statue of *Maria Bambina*, venerated at Senglea's collegiate church, was to be carried out, various committees were set up. A keen and hard-working organiser, Darmanin formed part of the committee that was responsible for the organisation of the celebrations held inside the collegiate church, which eventually, on January 3, 1921, was raised to the dignity of basilica.

His commitment to teaching was inextricably entwined with his priestly life. From 1906 to 1908 he taught Latin at St Paul's Institute. He was very often praised for the rapid and effective method with which he helped students to approach their Matriculation examination.

He also taught English and geography, and later taught languages at the Vincenzo Bugeja Technical Institute. Together with Mgr P. Cauchi, he opened St Paul's School in Valletta.

On December 1915, Darmanin voluntarily offered himself as military chaplain. The role of the military chaplain was a spiritual one that drew gratitude and was held in high esteem. The chaplain tended to the spiritual welfare of the soldiers before, during and after combat.

Catholic chaplains would impart individual and general absolution to the soldiers and mariners, preach and celebrate Mass in military camps, on the battlefield and on warships before combat. Unarmed, they

would accompany the soldiers and the sailors fallen in battle, administer the sacrament of Extreme Unction and offer prayers before the dead were buried.

At first, Darmanin served in Malta, which at the time was filled with thousands of wounded. During the performance of his duties, which included comforting the sick in hospital, he contracted a terrible disease which kept him for two months at Cottonera Hospital.

Serving in the King's Own Malta Regiment, in October 1916, Darmanin was promoted to warranted officer, becoming a 4th class chaplain to the forces, a rank equivalent to a captain in the army. This compelled him to ask permission to go to the front.

In January 1918, he was transferred from London to Italy with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). The BEF was the British army sent to the Western Front during World War I. Here, in addition to his duties as chaplain, he also performed the role of interpreter for the army.

Wearing military attire, Darmanin was one of the few Maltese who witnessed the fear, horror and havoc of World War I first hand. He shared the lives of soldiers and sailors living in military camps and cabins, suffered the unending tension with them and risked his life during

air raids and gunfire on ships, camps and on the battlefield.

He did his utmost to keep officers' and soldiers' morale high notwithstanding the suffering and anguish caused by the war. He had a unique flair for telling humorous stories which lightened the mood and were very popular among his comrades.

He helped to keep many sane in the midst of the turmoil and established friendships among soldiers and officers, Catholic and Protestants alike. He was fortunate enough to see a good number of them draw closer to the Church.

"He helped to keep many sane in the midst of the turmoil"

Back from military service, Mgr Darmanin found himself inside the Major Seminary in Mdina where he was vice rector from 1922 to 1923 and professor of moral theology. He worked tirelessly for those preparing for the priesthood.

In 1925, Archbishop Maurus Caruana appointed him rector of this institute, the gem of the diocese. For six years, till 1931, through his wisdom and erudition, he imparted his knowledge and instilled the quality of godliness, so essential for a priest.

Furthermore, it was a time when the Catholic Church, under the leadership of Pope Pius XI – the Pope of the Missions – was highlighting the value of missionary work. As a result of these developments, in November 1928,

Mgr Spinosa, rector of the Major Seminary of Liège, France, wrote an article in Malta, one of Malta's newspapers, asking the Maltese to collect used stamps in order to raise funds for the missions.

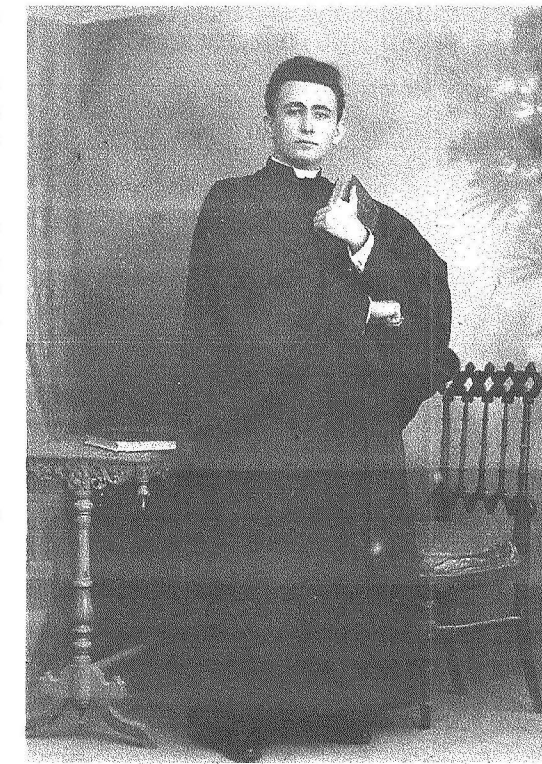
Inspired by this article, Darmanin proposed to his seminarians that they set up a society which could imbue the seminarians themselves with the missionary spirit and help the missions financially.

The society, called St Paul Missionary Crusade, started in November 13, 1928, with the formation of a committee. Its aim was twofold: the raising of funds for the missions and the education of the seminarians in the missionary spirit.

These aims were achieved by sending money to the missionaries and through prayers for the missions, conferences and study circles, subscriptions to missionary periodicals and correspondence with missionaries abroad. Some seminarians also embraced the missionary vocation and fearlessly crossed geographical and/or cultural boundaries.

Darmanin was also the first inspector of religious instruction in the state elementary schools. He used to visit schools with an eagerness to share with others the experiences and practices which he, both as a human being and as a priest, had acquired through mingling with people from various levels in society. With great acumen he managed to transfer all he had in his mind and heart to others.

Above all, Darmanin initiated a new system for the teaching of Catechism in state schools. He also managed to set up a library in the prison, where he was also



Darmanin in 1907 after graduating Doctor of Divinity. Right: Wearing military attire.



chaplain, so that prisoners, during their phase of confinement, could calmly spend time reading and acquiring knowledge.

In addition to his other duties, Darmanin retained time for writing. One of his books was *Ir-Religjon Imghallma liż-Żgħar* (Religion taught to the young). It was a small and practical book of doctrine which, at the time, was a novelty for Malta. He also wrote *Gabra Żghira ta' Talbu u Tagħlim* (A small compendium of prayers and teachings).

He also translated from Latin to Maltese the first and second book of Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. The third book and another one on St Alfons Maria de Liguori

remained unprinted due to World War II and his subsequent death. Moreover, he contributed various articles to periodicals and newspapers.

With the start of the World War II hostilities, the Cottonera area, so close to the Dockyard, became very unsafe to live in. This situation compelled many families to find refuge in securer places.

Darmanin, together with his family, went to live as a refugee in Victoria. Unfortunately, after suffering a heart failure, he died on May 18, 1942.

At first, he was interred at St Barbara's church, beneath Gozo's Cathedral. After the war, on September 20, 1946, his mortal

remains were transferred to Santa Maria Addolorata Cemetery where they were reburied in the family grave.

Mgr Joseph Darmanin was famed for his wisdom and goodness, as well as for not shirking his duties as a priest. He was sought after for the inspiring sermons that he thoroughly prepared, and through the confessional he consoled souls.

Through the gift of priesthood, he blessed, encouraged, comforted and strengthened others. Indeed, with his death, Malta and Gozo truly lost a model priest, because the voice that spoke of God had been silenced and the hands that once blessed became impotent.