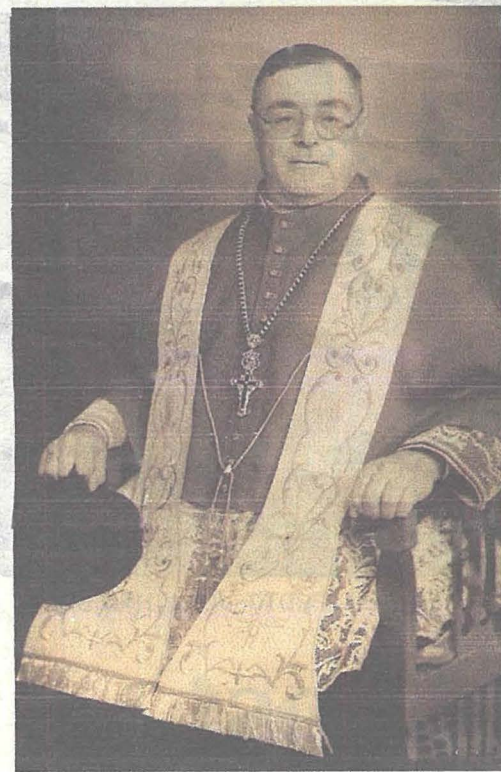


LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY



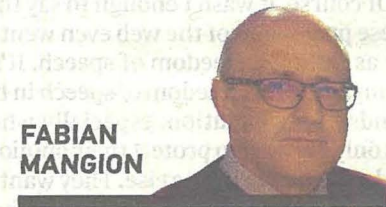
Mgr Gian Karl Burlò (1898-1970).



October 17, 1944: Burlò accompanying Sir Edmond Schreiber, Governor and Commander-in-Chief (centre) and Vice Admiral L. H. K. Hamilton (Flag Officer, Malta) around the streets of war-torn Senglea.



# Remembering Mgr Gian Karl Burlò, Senglea's post-war archpriest



FABIAN MANGION

Gian Karl Burlò, son of Emmanuel and Catherina née Chircop, was born in Senglea on September 16, 1898.

Educated at the government primary school, the Archbishop's Seminary and the Royal University of Malta, he was ordained priest on December 20, 1924. He obtained a bachelor's degree in Church law (B.L.Can.) and a Doctorate in Theology (D.D.) from the University of Malta on October 1, 1925. He then taught for seven years at the Archbishop's Seminary and 16 at the Lyceum.

Early on, his interest in the formation of youths was evident. He assembled youngsters to form a *praesidium* of the Legion of Mary. During the tough years of World War II, he served as military chaplain at Fort Ricasoli. For the valour he showed and the service he had rendered in such difficult circumstances, he was decorated with the Africa Star, Defense Medal, War Medal and 1939-45 Star.

On January 14, 1948, Mgr Michael Gonzi, Archbishop of Malta, nominated Burlò as archpriest of the Senglea parish, succeeding Canon Archpriest Emmanuel Brincat, MBE, who heroically lived in Senglea throughout the war years.

On January 18, Senglea-born Mgr Emmanuel Galea, Auxiliary Bishop and Vicar General, in the presence of the members of the Senglea Chapter and a large congregation, officially installed Canon Burlò as Senglea's new archpriest.

Since at the time the basilica was in ruins due to the severe war bombardments, the ceremony was held in the church of Our Lady of Porto Salvo, which was miraculously spared from severe damage. This church served as Senglea's parish church between 1944 and 1957.

Burlò immediately set his sights and energy on rebuilding the basilica. During those years, he found effective support and valuable assistance from Canon Francesco Abela, procurator responsible for its reconstruction.

Senglea, situated very close to the dockyard, was considered a dangerous place to live in. Since the beginning of the war, most Senglea families found refuge in other safer towns and villages. As reconstruction began, while some families never returned, others, mainly those whose houses had escaped the ravages of war, started coming back. So, by the time Burlò became archpriest, Senglea was no longer uninhabited.

Burlò was eager to see Senglea coming back to normality and committed special effort to reanimate the spiritual life of the parish. At a time when the role of the laity and their active participation in the parish was becoming increasingly important, the value of religious groups – mainly the Catholic Action, the

Society of Christian Doctrine and the Legion of Mary – started being felt.

Burlò's first titular feast of *Maria Bambina* was that celebrated in September 1948 at the church of Our Lady of Porto Salvo.

In 1953, Giovanni Farrugia, a devotee from Senglea, started collecting money on his personal initiative, together with gold and silver offerings, so that the statue of the *Bambina* could be covered with silver and gold plates. Burlò accepted the offerings which Farrugia, with a genuine purpose, had obtained from the people.

Since at the time, the parish had other priorities, this proposal was left for a later stage. This desire which, in reality had been left pending since the 1920s, when the said statue was crowned by a Vatican decree on September 4, 1921, was realised between the years 1985-1996 when Canons John Sladden and Vincent Cachia were archpriests of Senglea.

To make the people more sensitive to the needs of Senglea, the first issue of a local newspaper called *Invicta* was published in February-April 1954. The publication marked the fourth centenary since Grand Master Claude de la Sengle founded the city which still carries his name. Local organisations contributed articles in the newspaper which also provided historical information about the city and useful news on daily life. Updates about what was going on in Senglea thus reached those who, due to the war consequences, found it difficult to return back to their hometown.

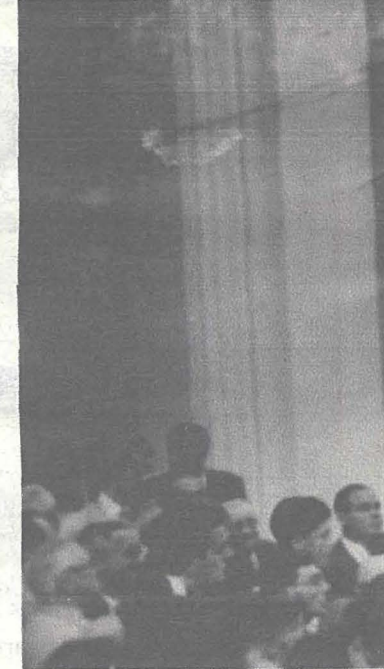
Pope Pius XII declared 1954 to be a special Marian Year. In Senglea, various activities were held and Burlò led a parish delegation to Rome to participate in a Marian congress held on November 1, 1954. That year's main memorial is the marble statue of *Maria Regina* high on the basilica's façade. It was blessed by Burlò and hoisted in place on January 29, 1956.

**"Burlò immediately set his sights and energy on rebuilding the basilica"**

In 1955, Senglea was going through an issue that affected the Chapter and the people. When the Senglea Collegiate, on January 3, 1921, was bestowed the title of Minor Basilica by a Vatican decree, it was automatically given all the privileges that Rome's minor basilicas enjoyed. This included precedence over the other collegiate churches in Malta.

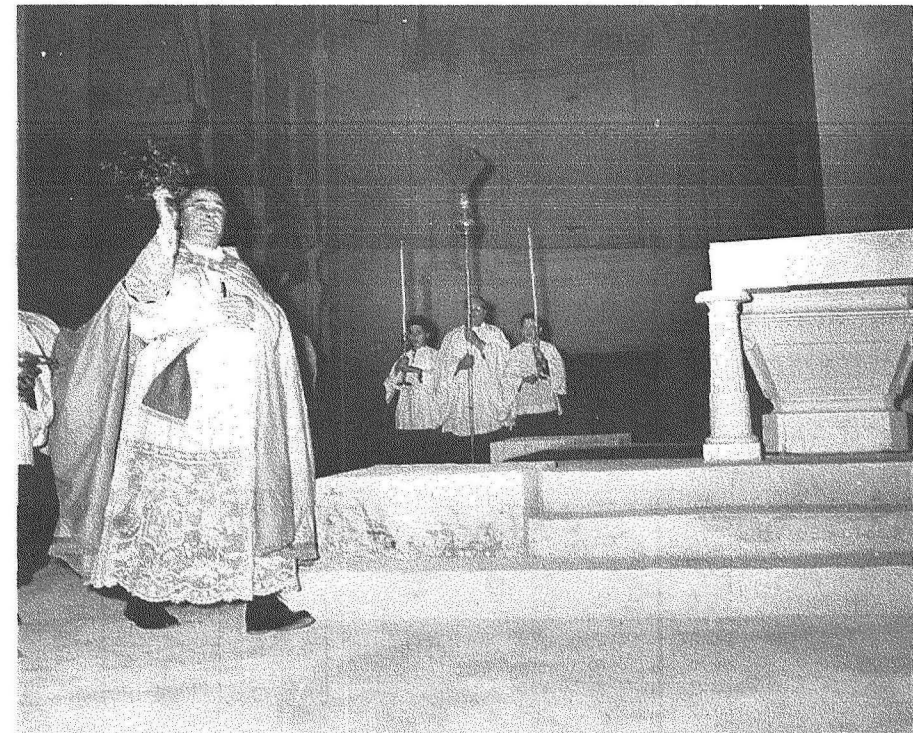
This right was never implemented by the Church authorities in Malta. Parishoners living in Senglea found this very hard to accept and insisted with the Chapter not to refrain from implementing its rights. They pressed hard for the issue to be resolved fairly. During that year, for the first time, a lay commission was formed to work on the resolution of this matter.

By 1956, the rebuilding of the basilica was completed. The architect in charge of the reconstruction was Joseph Caruana,

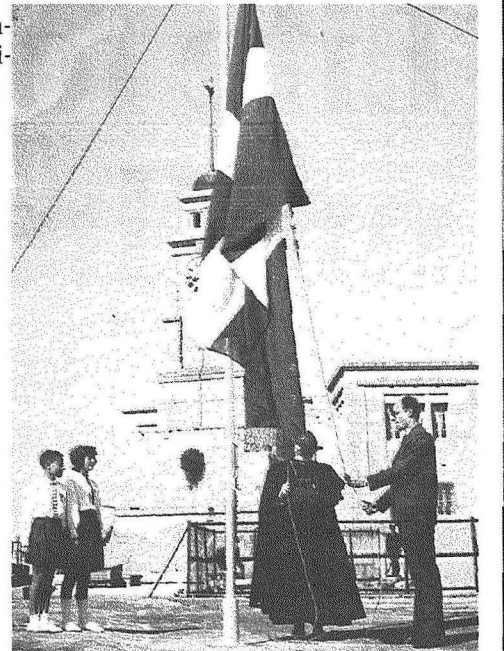


while Joseph Sammut was in charge of the building. Since the basilica was almost totally rebuilt, a new consecration was required. This was held by Archbishop Michael Gonzi on August 24, 1957. In the afternoon of August 25, 1957, the statue of the *Bambina* was solemnly transported from Porto Salvo church to the basilica. The said Porto Salvo church, built between 1670 and 1690, was always given importance for pastoral work among those living in the surrounding area. In 1958, the archbishop entrusted the church and the convent of St Philip, annexed to it, in the hands of the Jesuits, thus offering Burlò much needed help.

November 1, 1954: Senglea's delegation in Rome for the Congress of Marian Sanctuaries (from left) Lawrence Grech, Grace Casalietto, Mary Ashmore, Joseph Sammut, Archpriest Burlò, Canon Carmelo Muscat, Victor Tabone, Mary Baron, Joseph Baron, Teresa Tabone and Carmelo Tabone.



March 24, 1956 (eve of Palm Sunday): Burlò blessing the rebuilt basilica so that it could be used for the first time on Good Friday of that same year.



July 15, 1954: Burlò, aided by Pio Mangion, hoisting the flag of the Order of St John on Senglea's main entrance as part of the fourth centenary commemorations of the Great Siege held in Senglea.



January 29, 1956: Burlò blessing the statue of *Maria Regina* on the basilica's parvis.

Senglea now began to face new challenges. Apart from the shortage of priests, there was also lack of enthusiasm towards the parish church among the many families who started living in Senglea without being born in it.

The foremost social undertaking in Senglea was *Ospizio Sant' Anna*. Burlò, through the valuable aid offered by Canon Vincent Camilleri, the last procurator, launched a new beginning for this residential home for the elderly. The original 18th century building lacked modern amenities. Residents especially felt the need for a radical reform, which was eventually implemented in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the post-war period, Senglea experienced a great sense of civic awareness and, on the initiative of the Queen's Own Band, a civic committee was formed in 1958. Burlò, together with Canon Carmelo Muscat, represented the Chapter on this committee. In this atmosphere of revival, Muscat wrote *Innu lil Senglea*, to which Senglea-born Maestro Francesco Tesoriere, on February 24, 1959, composed the music.

This zeal was somewhat thwarted at the beginning of the 1960s due to the politico-religious dispute. People found other interests that attracted them and, unfortunately, the people of Senglea began to suffer the consequences of division

due to conflicting political ideas.

For some time, the debate over the question of precedence arose again. After the basilica was inaugurated, the case was first reopened by the lay commission. In protest, in 1959, the external festivities and processions started being cancelled. In September that year, the statue of *Maria Bambina* was not even taken out of its niche for the feast. In 1960, the Good Friday procession was not held and the statues were not set in the church.

The Chapter strove for 40 years for a solution to the issue of precedence, without success. Disputes have ceased since then, although the issue has never been forgotten. Even though statements by the Council's Congregation clearly

cated that Senglea's Collegiate enjoyed the right of precedence, discussion on the matter has not to be revived.

Burlò continued to struggle to improve the embellishment of the basilica. In this respect, the *Ciborium Magnum* was the major project of his time, inaugurated on March 24, 1964.

Senglea, so much tied with the Great Siege of 1565, cannot but recall the siege on special occasions. In 1965, Malta celebrated its fourth centenary. In Senglea, the organising committee, under Burlò's direction, worked with the aim of manifesting the city's vital role in it.

In order that pastoral work in the parish would be more organised and coordinated, Burlò assembled the Parish Pastoral Council and he hastened to enact the liturgical reforms as directed by Vatican II.

Due to health reasons, Burlò resigned from the post of archpriest on November 5, 1966. On May 21, 1967, he was appointed

Honorary Canon of the Metropolitan Cathedral Chapter, Mdina, and soon after Mgr Coadjutor of the said Chapter.

Mgr Gian Karl Burlò, the archpriest who witnessed Senglea rise again from devastation, the shepherd dedicated to his flock, the erudite theologian and the Conventual Chaplain of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, continued to live in Senglea, where he died on August 10, 1970.

During the reconstruction of the basilica, Burlò intended to prepare a grave for himself and his successors underneath the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, as evidenced by the inscription on a tombstone placed on it. However, after a solemn funeral held at the Senglea basilica on August 11, he was interred at Santa Maria Addolorata Cemetery.

On August 25, 2007, 50 years after the reopening of the basilica, the Burlò coat-of arms was sculptured on the church façade in his memory.

**Correction**

Last Sunday's article by Joseph F. Grima, 'Mgr Pietro Dusina's arrival in Malta in 1574', included an image said to be Mgr Dusina. Although the image has for many years been said to represent Dusina, this is incorrect. The image, a 16th-century oil-on-canvas painting of a figure holding a book with the name of Dusina on the cover, is actually of Marianus Testaferrata, who died in 1571. To date it seems no image of Dusina has come to light, whether in Malta nor in his native Italy. This information was sent to Grima by researcher/photographer Daniel Cilia after the article was published. The mistake is regretted and Grima would like to thank Cilia for pointing it out.