

NATIONAL

# How Senglea's Maria Bambina statue came to be crowned

Vatican rescript authorising its coronation was published 100 years ago

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In 2021, Senglea will celebrate the centenary of the solemn coronation of the treasured statue of *Maria Bambina*. The coronation was the fruitful conclusion of many lengthy efforts.

Ever since the statue's presence in Senglea was first recorded in 1618, people have constantly prayed and beseeched its intercession. When trouble such as earthquakes, plagues and drought arose, they turned with fervent devotion to *Maria Bambina*. The September 8 procession, held annually since 1685, is considered a votive act of thanksgiving since Senglea was delivered from the plague in 1813.

The practice to crown devout images started in mid-17th century. The first in Malta was that of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (Valletta - 1881), followed by Our Lady of St Luke (Mdina Cathedral - 1895), Our Lady of Mellieha (1899), the Immaculate Conception (Cospicua - 1905) and Tal-Herba (Birkirkara - 1910). In Senglea, regardless of a 300-year-old tradition of devotion, and the desire to have the *Bambina* crowned, no formal request had as yet been submitted.

In 1915, Mgr Mauro Caruana, OSB, who during his childhood had links with Senglea, was installed Bishop of Malta. Immediately, supplications were forwarded to him to mediate with the Vatican to have the *Bambina* crowned.

But since World War I was raging at the time, everything was held in abeyance. Once the hostilities ceased, the Senglea Collegiate Chapter exhorted Mgr Caruana to forward the request. This was eventually presented to the Vatican early in 1920.

The rescript of the coronation was issued by the Vatican on April 25, 1920, and received in Malta on May 7 - 100 years ago.

Immediately, the Senglea Chapter set up a provisional committee with the remit to select from its members, the clergy and the laity, suitable people to form a constituted committee to organise the festivities. Both committees were to be under the presidency of Canon Joseph Adami, the archpriest of Senglea.

Everyone was astonished by the expeditious response from Rome. Mgr Manuel Vassallo, the diocesan secretary, wrote to Archpriest Adami: "I remained surprised how this petition was approved in such a short time, and it came to be as we all wished. This is truly a sign that the Blessed Virgin wants to compensate the people of Senglea for their love towards her."

Sunday, May 23, 1920, was the day chosen for the decree to be solemnly announced to the people. For the occasion, Archbishop Caruana went to Senglea accompanied by Mgr Manuel Vassallo, who read, from the pulpit, the said decree:



From left, Canon Dr Joseph Adami, archpriest of Senglea; a portrait of Archbishop-Bishop Mauro Caruana, OSB, found at Senglea Collegiate Chapter Hall; and a portrait of Pope Benedict XV at Senglea Collegiate Chapter Hall.

"To his Excellency Don Mauro Caruana, Archbishop of Rhodes and Bishop of Malta, "Peace in the Lord. Recently, you explained to our chapter, who solely has the authority and honour to crown devout images of Mary long renowned for their worship and miracles attributed to them, that in the collegiate church and parish of the city of Senglea in your diocese, there is a statue of Our Blessed Virgin Mary, well known for the miracles and graces received by those seeking her intercession. This age old devotion, sought by all people of that island, is particularly combined with the victory the Christians achieved against the Turks on September 7, 1565, and the deliverance of the city from the plague in 1813.

"Therefore, spurred by this truly special devotion filled with love, to fulfil the desire of the reverend chapter, clergy and people, we fervently prayed that this image be adorned by a gold crown over its head, as our chapter normally does with other miraculous images of the Mother of God.

"Having always sought to do our utmost to assign to the Holy Virgin the signs of worship she deserves, with the intent to examine this supplication, we met in the chapter hall on April 11 of this year, and discovered how ancient is the worship towards this statue and the miracles and graces attributed to this image.

"Foremost we sought advice and obtained approval of Mgr Joseph de Bisogno, dean of our chapter, having ascertained that the holy image holds whatever is necessary for a solemn coronation.

"For this reason, to the glory of the most Holy Trinity and in order to further honour the Mother of God, we unanimously decide

and order that the holy statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, *Maria Bambina*, be crowned by a gold crown.

"Also we authorise Your Excellency to carry out the rite of the coronation on a day of your choice, whilst you may delegate another bishop, if some reason prevents you from carrying out this rite.

"Issued from Rome on April 25, 1920, the sixth year of the Pontificate of His Holiness Pope Benedict XV.

"Signed Giulio Malvezzi, secretary and Giuseppe Casciola, Chancellor."

**"Everyone was astonished by the expeditious response from Rome"**

After reading the decree, Mgr Vassallo delivered a brief speech explaining how that event would be a tribute to the people of Senglea. A reply on behalf of the Senglea chapter was made by Canon Giovanni De Domenico. In the presence of the canons and clergy, the archbishop intoned the *Te Deum* and then imparted the Eucharistic benediction.

After the ceremony, the town's Queen's Own band organised a festive march through the streets of Senglea.

In accordance with the remit, the provisional committee assembled the official committee comprising 16 members to organise the liturgical functions. A sub-committee of a further six people was also formed to organise the external functions.

Many others lent a helping hand or gave offerings towards the costs. The highest expense was the crown to be placed on the

head of the statue. It was to be made of gold adorned with diamonds and gems. The Muscat firm was entrusted with the manufacturing of the crown in gold and Pace Feraud was in charge of the chiselling. The Testa firm was entrusted to select diamonds and gems and the Darmanin firm was responsible for their encasing. Besides the high cost of the crown, a significant amount of money was needed to embellish the church.

The decoration of the statue itself was also discussed. One opinion was that it should be lined with silver plates. But time was short and to undertake such a major expense was considered inappropriate. The decision was, therefore, taken to gild the statue and fix ornaments of precious stones. The Farrugia firm undertook the gilding. The statue's clothing was designed and made by Micallef and the Darmanin firm was responsible for mounting the decorations.

Giovanni Farrugia donated a pair of gold sandals adorned with diamonds. The Pulo brothers paid for the lining, with silver plates, of the globe beneath the statue. A portable altar to be placed in front of the statue was made out of walnut wood by Paul De Giovanni, based on a design by Michele De Giovanni.

The date of the solemn coronation was set for September 4, 1921. Archbishop Caruana was to conduct the rite, assisted by Mgr Angelo Portelli, OP, Auxiliary Bishop, and Mgr Spiridione Polomeni, titular bishop of Ruspa and honorary canon of the Senglea collegiate. Alas, as the day was approaching, Polomeni was unable to travel to Malta due to ill-health. So Mgr Giovanni Maria Camilleri, OSA, bishop of Gozo, agreed to assist the coronation ceremony in his stead.



The *Maria Bambina* statue placed in the basilica before the coronation. Right: On the eighth day of every month, for the duration of a year, a special Mass with a short homily on the Blessed Virgin was celebrated as spiritual preparation. The photo shows the statue of the *Bambina* placed on the high altar on October 8, 1920.



The gold crown that was to be placed on the head of *Maria Bambina*.



The statue of *Maria Bambina*

The extraordinary solemn coronation of *Maria Bambina* was never forgotten. The coronation festivities held were recounted by the people of Senglea from generation to generation. Indeed, the year 1921 remained enshrined in the hearts of those who were born and lived in the city which endears so much *Maria Bambina's* protection.



The committee at the helm of the celebrations: (Back row, from right) Rev. Prof. Joseph Darmanin and Raffale Attard. (Middle row) Stefano Sant'Angelo, Rev. Goffredo Lubrano, Canon Don Salvatore Adami, Canon Dean Don Salvatore Mousu, Canon Don Giuseppe Spiteri, Rev. Francesco Abela and Giuseppe Caruana. (Front row) Dr Francesco Benedetti (ass. Secretary), Canon Princerius Francesco Marengo (vice-president), Canon Archpriest Giuseppe Adami (president), Dr Paolo Borg Grech (secretary) and Canon Don Giuseppe Bonanno. Not in photo: Giuseppe Mifsud (treasurer) and Giovanni de Giovanni.