



# 10 THE COLLEGIATE BASILICA AND SANCTUARY OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LADY IN SENGLEA

Can. Dr Jonathan Farrugia

## **A Brief Historical Overview of the Grand Harbour's Sentinel and its Church**

When the Knights of St John arrived in Malta in 1530, they immediately set up their residence in Birgu in order to have control over the natural harbour between that town and the peninsula comprising the stretch of land between Xebb ir-Ras and Xagħret Mewwija. Parallel to Birgu, within the area of the harbour, there lies another small peninsula made up of two hills, which was locally known as l-Isla, referring to its quasi-insular constitution. This peninsula was chosen by the Knights to be their recreation area. In 1539, the first church was built, and since the land was used for bird hunting, it was dedicated to St Julian the Hospitaller.

Due to the threat continually posed by the Ottoman forces, and especially after the attack on Gozo in 1551, Grand Master Juan D'Homedes saw it fit to start fortifying the area rather than leaving it open with easy access from land and sea. In 1552, Fort St Michael was completed on the hill that was closest to the mainland. Eventually, the

fortifications around the peninsula and the surrounding areas all the way to Fort St Angelo in Birgu were continued by D'Homedes and his successor, Claude de la Sengle, who, in 1554, founded a new city on the peninsula and gave it his name, Senglea.

The threat materialised in the months between May and September 1565, when the Ottoman armies landed in Marsaxlokk and made their way across Malta in order to conquer the island. This sent shockwaves of terror across Europe; Queen Elizabeth I wrote in one of her letters: "If the Turks should prevail against the Isle of Malta, it is uncertain what further peril might follow to the rest of Christendom". Out of the three forts built by the Knights, two fell under Ottoman control; it was only Fort St Michael that held fast throughout the siege, despite the harsh attacks throughout July and August. With Fort St Elmo on Xebb ir-Ras hill fallen and Fort St Angelo in Birgu breached, Fort St Michael remained the only sentinel of the Grand Harbour until the arrival of the Gran Soccorso on 7th September, and it was due to this that after the siege, Senglea was given the title of Invicta, the unconquered city.

*Opposite:*  
The beloved and miraculous effigy of Christ carrying the cross, locally known as *ir-Redentur*, is the work of Saverio Laferla and was finished in 1742. (Photo: Senglea Parish Archives)

Senglea's basilica overlooking the Grand Harbour.  
(Photo: Gino Parnis)



Dawn on 8th September saw the departure of what was left of the Ottoman fleets, and since then, the day of the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary was locally known as *il-Vitorja*, Victory Day. Francesco Balbi di Correggio, an Italian mercenary fighting on the side of the Knights, wrote in his diary in his entry for that day: “Ears never heard music more sublime than the bells pealing on the eighth day of September, the day of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary. These past months the toll of bells signalled fighting and death, but today their sound heralds the dawn of a day of great joy!”

### The Monument Marking the Great Victory of 1565

Since Malta was a Christian fortress, and the day of victory fell on a Marian feast, it was deemed fitting to build a church in honour of the Virgin Mary's birth in thanksgiving. No place was more appropriate than Senglea for various reasons; Birgu, the largest town in the area, already had its parish church, Bormla was still largely uninhabited, and Senglea was the city that held fast throughout. Up until then, religious services had been carried out in the small church dedicated to St Julian. Thus, a new church was planned to be built on the hill closest to the unconquered Fort St Michael.

The enterprise to build a new church was not easy, especially since the town was inhabited by locals who were not rich. The date of the commencement of the building project is unknown; however, we can say that this should have happened during the 1570s. In 1575, the small church of St Julian in Senglea became a vice-parish, meaning that the population in that area was growing, so presumably, the status of an autonomous parish was delayed until the completion of the new, bigger church dedicated to the Nativity of Mary, which must have been accomplished towards 1580. In 1581, this church was elevated to a parish.

Slowly but steadily, the new parish started its journey with the foundation of confraternities, pious societies, lots of pastoral work, and even educational projects.

We do not possess many detailed descriptions of this church; however, we know that by 1618, it still did not possess a painting or a statue of the Virgin Mary represented as a baby or as a child. This lacuna was fixed in 1618 due to the providential donation of a statue of the Virgin to the parish. The statue had been found floating in the sea off the coast of Dalmatia in the Venetian Gulf, probably from the remains of a shipwreck. Onboard the ship that found this statue, there were two men from Senglea who, upon arriving at their





hometown, convinced the Captain to donate it to their church. A new altar, very close to the main altar, was built for this statue, and it was dedicated to Our Lady of Succour. Instead of a painting, the statue was placed in a niche upon it. Soon after this event, this altar became the most popular one in the church; it was here that the people prayed for the intercession of their Blessed Mother.

Some years later, the church had to be enlarged with some alterations in its structure. The works were completed by 1657. The façade had three doors, and two bell towers were erected as well as a dome. During the second half of the 18th century, the altars started to be covered in marble and decorations in their niches were sculpted in stone. An example of the exquisite motifs that were found in the church can be seen in the naves on the left of the main altar after these were discovered in 2016. In 1786, this church, being one of the richest and most beautiful on the island and also one of the most active parishes, was raised to the status of collegiate on 21st May, with the Papal bull *Exigit Apostolici Officii*. The investiture of the

canons that formed the first Chapter took place on 7th September. The parish church of Senglea was the first one to be given this honour among the parishes of the Three Cities.

From a description of the church found in an 1805 manuscript, we understand that even though the church was the same one as before, some structural changes had been made, such as the building of small domes on the altars along the left and right naves. The beauty of the church with its fine marble works and sculptures was thus underlined.

Two further milestones in the glorious history of the Collegiate Church of Senglea took place in 1921, when the church was elevated to the rank of basilica on 3rd January and then gained the title of sanctuary on 4th September, when the beloved statue of Our Lady was solemnly crowned. These were also two milestones in Maltese ecclesiastical history since the church of Senglea was the first diocesan church to obtain this dignity (the other two churches

*Left:*  
The basilica en fête nowadays. (Photo: Gino Parnis)



The enormous crowd gathered at the Senglea Marina on 4th September 1921 for the solemn coronation of the statue of Marija Bambina. (Photo: Senglea Parish Archives)

The former church of Senglea decorated for the feast of Marija Bambina before it was elevated to the dignity of basilica. (Photo: Senglea Parish Archives)



that had already been given the title of basilica were run by religious orders), and the *Bambina* was the first statue in Malta to be crowned with permission granted by a Papal bull.

Unfortunately, this church was bombed and almost completely razed to the ground during the Second World War. Thankfully, only a handful of mobile artefacts were lost because soon after the first bombs hit Malta, all the paintings, statues, and silverware were taken to other churches around the island for safekeeping. The church was rebuilt, almost entirely, between 1946 and 1956. Within the range of a few years, new decorative sculptures in stone and marble were carved by Marco Montebello, Malta's best stone craftsman in the post-war period, and very soon, all the pilasters of the main nave and the whole area of the choir were covered in precious marble brought from Italy. The newly built basilica was consecrated in 1957, when with great joy, the statue of the Bambina was, once again, placed

in it, after an absence of 17 years. Since then, projects to turn this modern church into a true artistic gem have never ceased.

In 2016, this basilica was one of the shrines chosen to have a *porta misericordiae* for the Year of Mercy.

### **The Effigy of the Virgin Mary (*il-Bambina*) and the Other Statues**

Many references have been made to the beloved statue of the Virgin Mary known as *il-Bambina*. As we have said, the origins of this statue are unknown. According to an old manuscript belonging to the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception founded in Senglea around 1650, the statue was found adrift in the Venetian Gulf early in the 17th century. It was probably a devotional statue on a ship that got shipwrecked. Tradition has it that the ship that collected this image from the sea sailed to Malta on some business, and two men who were on the said ship convinced the Captain to donate the statue to their parish church, which still lacked a titular statue. This happened around 1618, and thus Senglea's Bambina was the first titular statue carved in wood to find its place in a church in Malta.

The statue was placed in a niche above an altar designed exclusively for it, and that altar came to be the focus of the people's devotion towards the Blessed Virgin. Originally, it was not intended to be taken around the streets in procession; instead, it was meant to be an object of devotion to be kept in the church. The first known procession with the statue took place on 3rd April 1718, when it was carried shoulder high in pilgrimage all the way to the rural church of *Santa Marija tal-Ħlas* in Hal Qormi. During this pilgrimage, special prayers were made because Malta had been hit by a drought that lasted months. As the statue was being carried back to Senglea, a downpour started. Another similar occasion happened in 1742,



when, due to another drought, the statue was taken in procession to the parish church of Ħaż-Żabbar, and once again, the rain started pouring when the statue was brought back into its church in Senglea. During this pilgrimage, a woman living in the outskirts of Ħaż-Żabbar, who had been in excruciating labour pains for three days, asked the Blessed Virgin, whose effigy was being carried in close proximity of her house, to have mercy on her, and soon after, she gave birth to a healthy baby. Another pilgrimage was organised in 1757 when Malta was ravaged by strong winds and thunderstorms which damaged several buildings and polluted the air for many days. The statue was taken to the church of Our Lady of Safe Haven, built on the other hill of Senglea, and similar thunderstorms were not recorded again.

In 1813, Malta was struck by the plague, and the clergy and people of Senglea made a vow with Our Lady, Christ the Redeemer, and St Roque, that should the city remain uncontaminated, three annual processions would be introduced, one with each of these statues. No one in Senglea contracted the disease, and it was from that year that the annual procession on 8th September started to be organised, in special thanksgiving to Our Lady for her protection. It is understood that during this time, the outstanding Maltese sculptor Mariano Gerada made some alterations to the statue, including the sculpting of a globe underneath her and a full-size halo behind her, in order for the statue to be easily carried in procession. In 1875, the halo was covered in silver, while in 1903 a silver pedestal—the first one in Malta—was made to carry her.

The great devotion towards this effigy pushed the parish priest Can. Joseph Adami to make a request to the Pope to issue the permit to have it solemnly crowned. A dossier with details of the 300-year-old devotion was drawn up and sent to the Vatican with a covering letter by Bishop Maurus Caruana. Permission was granted by Pope



The beloved statue of Marija Bambina in bygone times. (Photo: Senglea Parish Archives)

Benedict XV on 25th April 1920. For the occasion of its solemn crowning, which took place a year later on 4th September, the globe underneath the Madonna's feet was covered in silver sheets, and a new golden crown studded with gems was cast exclusively for her. The ceremony took place on the Senglea waterfront, and the crowds seen in the pictures prove it was an outstanding occasion, one which Malta had never witnessed before or since.



The golden crown (1921) and the gem-studded golden rose (1971) used to decorate the statue of the Child Mary. (Photo: Gino Parnis)



In 1971, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the crowning, a golden rose with ruby decorations was designed by Emvin Cremona and manufactured to be placed annually at her feet in a special ceremony for children. The statue itself was eventually covered in gold and silver sheets, making it unique in every way. In order to mark the 75th anniversary of this statue's coronation, special celebrations were made, which included her transference to Valletta for an extraordinary Mass at St John's Co-Cathedral and its transportation back to Senglea by sea. On the 400th anniversary of this beloved statue's arrival in Senglea, the silver wings of the putti underneath Mary's feet were exchanged for golden ones.

*Right:*  
The statue of Marija Bambina decorated for the feast nowadays. (Photo: Gino Parnis)

Apart from the beloved Bambina, the basilica possesses numerous other processional statues, some of which were made by the foremost statue-makers of Malta. Three of the most exquisite are surely the statue of the Immaculate Conception (1804) by Mariano

Gerada, the statue of the Holy Trinity (1840) by Senglea's own Antonio Chircop, and the statue of Our Lady of Shackles (1850) by Alessandro Farrugia. Other statues include the statue of St Roque (1813) by Carlo Duranti; the statue of St Joseph (c. 1879) by Girolamo Darmanin; the statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (c.



1880) made by Aristide Bonnici, originally as Our Lady of Doctrine and eventually changed into Our Lady of Mount Carmel after alterations made by Carlo Darmanin; and the statue Our Lady of the Rosary (1888), brought from Marseilles. There are also other smaller statues that used to enjoy great devotion like the statuettes of the Ecce Homo (sculpted by Rev. Bartolomeo Ellul in 1784), Our Lady of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (brought from Marseilles, c. 1884), Our Lady of Doctrine (made locally), and St Tarcisius (brought from Bolzano).

### **The Paintings and Fixed Artefacts in the Church Complex Today**

Many are the artefacts that can be admired in the basilica all year round; these include paintings, wooden decorations, and fine works in marble.

Every altar in the basilica has its own painting. Thankfully, some of the paintings that adorned these altars in the past have been preserved and are now found in the sacristy or in the Chapter Hall. The wood and marble decorations come mostly from the post-war period, replacing previous ornaments that were lost together with the church during the 1940–1942 bombings. Among the most outstanding projects made in recent years, there is the painting of the dome completed in 1993 by Frank Portelli and the decoration of the stone motifs with gold leaf throughout the building.

Upon entering the church from the main door, one's attention is immediately drawn to the enormous wood, bronze, and marble tribune above the main altar. The original one was built in 1921 when the church was elevated to the rank of basilica. The wooden upper part of the present tribune is a copy of the original made by the Stuflessen Company of Bolzano, who had also made the one destroyed in the war. It was completed for the fourth centenary of

the Great Siege. The Carrara marble main altar below it was placed there in 1948. Above the main door, one can see the base of the organ gallery, which is a masterpiece of stone sculpture. The design was made by Salvatore Bugeja, who also carried out the wooden sculpture of the balcony, while the stone was carved by Marco Montebello between 1975 and 1978.

The green and reddish-brown marble covering the pilasters on the right side of the main nave is still the original marble used to decorate the church at the beginning of the 20th century, while those on the left, having been destroyed during the war, were covered with similar marble in 1971. Sixteen colossal white marble busts of the apostles and evangelists can be seen jutting out of the pilasters. These were a project carried out at the beginning of the 20th century, together with the marble baptismal font (1911) and the marble pulpit (1931). All the marble was purchased from Pietrasanta di Carrara in Italy and cut into shape by the company of Federico Bonetti.

While walking around the basilica, one can admire the beautiful and symmetrical marble altars put in place after the war, as well as the paintings above them, including St Francis of Paola (Salvatore Mardanelli, c. 1930), the Holy Trinity (Tommaso Madiona, 1853), St Catherine of Alexandria on the altar of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Stefano Erardi, late 17th century), Our Lady of Sorrows (Corrado Giaquinto, 1725), the Assumption with Sts Anne and Carlo Borromeo (Stefano Erardi, late 17th century), Our Lady of Shackles (Giuseppe Bonnici, 1881), Our Lady of the Rosary (Emvin Cremona, 1957), the Immaculate Conception (Francesco Zahra, 18th century), St Joseph (Giuseppe Bonnici, 1860), and Our Lady of Mount Carmel (Ramiro Calì, 1921).

Apart from these, there are paintings by Emvin Cremona depicting four popes linked to Senglea's church (1961) and two



The sacristy.  
(Photo: Gino Parnis)



Eucharistic scenes (c. 1960) in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament. Two enormous paintings in the choir show the presentation of Mary in the temple and her Annunciation, both painted by Francesco Zahra in the 18th century. There are also two small portraits of St Therese of Lisieux and St George Preca.

Moving into the sacristy, one can see many other old paintings, the most important of which are: St Demetrius (Giuseppe Cali, c. 1885), the old painting of St Francis de Paola (late 18th century), Sts Roque and Sebastian (late 17th century), Christ the Saviour (school of Guido Reni, 17th century), Pentecost (Vincenzo Manno, late 18th century), St Barbara (late 17th century), as well as a cycle of four paintings by Rocco Buhagiar (late 18th century) depicting episodes from the life of Mary.

Up in the Chapter Hall, there is conserved the beautiful and enormous titular painting of the basilica, which adorned the choir until 1940. It shows St Anne holding the baby Virgin on her lap

with St Joachim and other figures bowing in veneration, while high above, God the Father, singing and dancing angels, patriarchs, and important female figures from the Old Testament look down in



*Right:* The titular painting depicting the Nativity of Mary by Tommaso Madiona (1850), nowadays found in the Chapter Hall. (Photo: Jonathan Farrugia)

joy. This masterpiece was executed by the Senglean artist Tommaso Madiona in 1850. In the Chapter Hall, there are also displayed portraits of popes and bishops related to Senglea, the original parchments of the institution of the Collegiate Chapter (1786), the bull for the crowning of the Bambina (1920), and the bull elevating the collegiate to basilica (1921), together with a series of photographs of the Chapter and the coats of arms of the canons. In the landing leading to the Hall, there are a number of old paintings that used to adorn the sacristy in the past, others that were in buildings belonging to the parish, as well as others that had been donated. Particular attention ought to be given to a quasi-identical copy of Raffaello Sanzio's Deposition of Christ made by Madiona as a test of his talent before he was commissioned to work on the titular painting. The display units in this landing show various small artefacts related to the church, some of which are bozzetti of statues venerated therein.

#### **Decorative Silver Artefacts Used on Feast Days**

Like all other old parishes, and even more so, Senglea boasts the possession of an extraordinary collection of ecclesiastical silverware, which is put on display for the feast of the Nativity of Mary. This includes 12 antependia, 19 sanctuary lamps, 16 sets of *carte gloria*, 12 sets of candlesticks, and 16 missal covers used to decorate the altars, together with 32 chalices, 18 monstrances, ciboria, ewers, basins, dishes, salvers, all kinds of altar furnishings, censers, and acolyte candlesticks. There is also a quantity of so-called processional silver, which includes the processional cross (Saverio Cannataci, 1803); the Chapter mace (1913); items belonging to the confraternities, like medallions, lanterns, crosses, banners' emblems (*kruċetti*), and staffs (*lasti*); and the procession leader's staffs (*surġentini*). One must not forget the numerous silver frames and the large quantity



The silver antependium, manufactured in 1864 for the main altar. (Photo: Gino Parnis)

of silver and golden items donated to the statues in thanksgiving for received graces. The above-mentioned items date from the early 18th century to the late 20th century.

Probably the most outstanding collection includes the silver antependia. The first to be manufactured was the one made for the main altar; however, it eventually started being used for the altar of the Holy Crucifix in the annexed oratory. This was made in 1864. Next in line was that for the altar of the Holy Trinity, designed by Francesco Bonnici and manufactured by Roberto Cannataci in 1880. Towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, a number of the silver antependia were then designed by Gioacchino Galea (Our Lady of the Rosary, St Joseph, and Our Lady of the Sacred Heart of Jesus made in 1895) and Michele DeGiovanni (the Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of Shackles, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and the Assumption made in 1902). The last altar to obtain its silver antependium was that of St Francis of Paola (Francesco Cassar, 1959).



The Chapter's silver mace, made in 1913. (Photo: Gino Parnis)



### **The Oratory of the Holy Crucifix and the Good Friday Procession**

There is yet another gem associated with the basilica: the Oratory of the Holy Crucifix where the revered statue of Christ the Redeemer is found. Apart from being a place of great devotion, the oratory is itself another masterpiece of architecture and sculpture.

One of the foremost confraternities in Senglea, which is that of the Holy Crucifix, was founded in 1715. Within 10 years, the number of members had grown so much that they needed their own premises to meet for prayers. The building of the oratory was commenced in 1727. It was decorated by three Senglean artists: the sculptor Paolo Zahra, his son the artist Francesco, and the architect Claudio Duranti. In 1736, the larger-than-life crucifix on its main altar was brought from Rome. By 1739, the oratory looked as it does today, with the six great stone angels made by Paolo Zahra in 1738 and the four paintings with episodes from the Passion made by his son in the same period. In 1754, a small painting of Our Lady of Sorrows was placed at the foot of the crucifix and immediately attracted a lot of devotion. This painting is now in the passageway between the basilica and the oratory.

The set of statues carried in procession on Good Friday, amongst which there is the beloved effigy of Christ the Redeemer, are kept here. The original set of *Misteri* were mannequins manufactured between 1716 and 1719, together with two stucco statues (the Scourging of Christ and Christ Crowned with Thorns) procured in 1716. Towards 1722, a statue of the dead Christ was purchased, and an elaborate urn for it was sculpted in 1723. Eventually, the mannequins were substituted with papier-mâché statues made by Saverio Laferla between 1742 and 1744. In 1802, the original statue of Christ Crowned with Thorns was replaced with the present statue, which was bought from Spain, while about a century later

the Scourging of Christ at the Pillar, and Laferla's Veronica and the two Marys under the Cross were substituted with new statues made by Carlo Darmanin. In 1921, Laferla's statue of Our Lady of Sorrows was exchanged for one made by Carmelo Mallia. In the sacristy of the oratory, one can also see the dismantled tableau of the Veneration of the Cross (*Santu Kruċ*), with two sets of angels, the first set made by Aristide Bonnici in the 19th century and the second set made by Giuseppe Cilia in 1909. Nowadays, the latter are used as angels adoring baby Jesus on Christmas.

The statue of Christ the Redeemer is displayed all year round in a niche found in this oratory. This niche was made towards the year 1805 when devotion toward this statue was on the rise. The feast of the Redeemer, which is celebrated a week after Corpus Christi, was founded in 1802, and the annual procession with the statue started after the deliverance from the plague of 1813. The marble altar in front of the niche was constructed towards 1855, and the silver antependium that is placed in front of it during the feast of the Nativity of Mary was designed by Antonio Sciortino in 1938 but ordered after the war in 1946. The façade of the niche was covered in marble in 1957–1958.

### The Two Other Churches in Senglea

We have already made reference to the small church dedicated to St Julian, originally constructed in 1539, and the Church of Our Lady of Safe Haven, locally known as *il-Portu Salvu* or *San Filippu*.

The church of St Julian, albeit being always a filial church, had an important role in the social history of the city. Apart from serving the first inhabitants their spiritual needs, and serving as a vice-parish for some time, in 1668 it housed the first public school in Senglea, led by a priest. In 1699 a new titular painting was executed by Raimondo di Domenico. Even though the church was demolished



The Oratory of the Holy Crucifix. (Photo: Gino Parnis)

soon after, a large part of this painting still exists in the sacristy of the new church which was completed in 1712 according to the design of architect Lorenzo Gafa. Later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, from 1769 onwards, this church was used daily for catechism classes for children. Nowadays mass is celebrated at St Julian's on special occasions and the church is open every day for private prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament. Here one can find statues representing St Julian, St Anthony of Padua, St Rita of Cascia, St Joseph, the Pietà and the Immaculate Conception. The two side altars are dedicated to St Vincent de Paule and the Pietà.

The other church, dedicated to Our Lady of Safe Haven, is truly an architectural gem. It was originally built in 1596 on the hill at the furthest tip of Senglea, overlooking the Grand Harbour. In 1662 the newly founded Oratorians of St Philip Neri in Senglea were given permission to use this church for their spiritual duties. Soon



The Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament.  
(Photo: Gino Parnis)



the need for a larger church was felt, and thus the old church was demolished in 1670. The new church, which is the present one, was completed by 1690. It boasts of awesome stone carvings by Petruzzo Debono, together with many beautiful paintings, which include: the main altarpiece of Our Lady overlooking the Grand Harbour together with a number of saints (Stefano Erardi, c.1690), St John the Baptist (1743) and the Holy Crucifix (both Rocco Buhagiar), St Philip Neri (Pedro Nunez), Our Lady of Guadalupe (Tommaso Madiona), the Nativity of Christ (Pietro Paolo Caruana), St Michael (18th century) and Our Lady of Mount Carmel (Stefano Erardi, late 17th century). The other altar is dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes, but instead of a painting a monumental replica of the sacred grotto of the apparitions made by Antonio Agius is displayed. The vault of the choir and the dome were originally painted by Lazzaro Pisani but had to be retouched by Michael Farrugia due to losses caused by

humidity. The pendentives of the dome depict Sts Anne, Joachim, Zachary, and Elizabeth, and were painted by Ignatius Cortis. Other objects of interest found in this church include an original wax death mask of St Philip Neri; an elaborate 18th-century pulpit; two corpi santi; the organ gallery, which is all delicately carved in stone; and a magnificent Via Crucis cross intricately carved in wood with silver decorations. Here, one can find the beautiful statue of the *Madonna tal-Portu Salvu* (late 19th century); the statues of St Philip Neri and Christ carrying the cross, both made by Carlo Darmanin; and the statue of Our Lady of Sorrows. The exquisite niche of the latter was designed and sculpted by Francesco Camilleri. There is also a small wooden statue of the Immaculate Conception carved by Jose Eseve Bonet in 1764. One of Esteve's pupils was Mariano Gerada, reputed to be Malta's best sculptor. Apart from these, there are newer statues representing the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Our Lady Help of Christians.

In the sacristy, one can still see the 17th century altarpiece of St Andrew, which was formerly in the church instead of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and another painting of Our Lady of Sorrows (early 19th century). Apart from these, there are also the portraits of some important members of the Oratorian Congregation, which had a very important role in the service given to the people of Senglea and in its service to the local Church.

This church served as the seat of the parish after the basilica was bombed until it was rebuilt. The Oratorians stayed until they died out in 1928, then in 1958, the church was lent to the Jesuits, who stayed until 2008. A year later, the church was passed on to the care of the Salesians of Don Bosco. Led by these communities, the Church of Our Lady of Safe Haven has always been a true haven of great pastoral and social care for the people who live close to the harbour.

**Bibliography**

- Abela, Francesco. Tifkira Żgħejra ta' l-Inkurunazzjoni Sollenni ta' Marija Bambina li saret fl-Isla fl-4 ta' Settembru 1921. Malta: Lux Press, 1946.
- Bonnici, Alexander. *L-Isla fi ġrajjet il-Bażilka-Santwarju ta' Marija Bambina*. 3 vols. Malta: Parroċċa tal-Isla, 1981; 1986; 1991.
- Caruana, Mario & Mangion, Fabian. *Il-Ġimgħa l-Kbira fl-Isla*. Malta: Parroċċa tal-Isla, 2000.
- Farrugia, Jonathan, ed. *Ir-Redentur. History, Art, and Cult of the Miraculous Effigy of Christ the Redeemer at Senglea, Malta*. Malta: Midsea Books, 2019.
- Mangion, Fabian, ed. *Belt tal-Isbaħ Ġrajja*. Tifkira tal-450 sena mir-Rebħa tal-Assedju l-Kbir (1565-2015). Malta: Parroċċa Marija Bambina, 2015.
- Mangion, Fabian. *Xbihat Qaddisa fit-Toroq tal-Isla*. Malta: 2010.
- Vella, Horatio Caesar Roger. *Senglea Civitas Invicta. L-Iskrizzjonijiet li Jinsabu fit-Tliet Knejjes ta' Senglea*. Malta: 2008.
- Xuereb, Victor. *Il-Knisja ta' San Filippu Ta' l-Isla* (unpublished manuscript)