

Book Review:

**Il santuario nazionale di
Nostra Signora Ta' Pinu a Gozo (Malta):
Storia – Teologia – Devozioni
(Rome: Aracne, 2002), 536 p.**

I have been asked to briefly present the publication of Samuel Grech, *Il Santuario Nazionale di Nostra Signora Ta' Pinu a Gozo (Malta): Storia – Teologia – Devozioni*, Presentation of S. M. Perrella (Rome: Aracne, 2021), 536 pp.

The publication of Rev. Samuel Grech has as its privileged object the story of Ta' Pinu, which in its historical, theological and pastoral value has Mariological and Marian implications that cannot be ignored, owing to the internal locutions that from 1883 the Blessed Virgin entrusted to Karmni Grima and Frangisk Portelli in Ta' Pinu, on the island of Gozo, not without the providential and mysterious plan of God.

Before he entered into this topic, Rev. Grech treated in detail the delicate question of the origin and the meaning of “Marian manifestations” (apparitions, mariophanies, locutions etc.) of supernatural nature. As the Church teaches in its magisterium and her pastoral experience, these are witnesses of the divine “presence” in the complex human reality, always in need of conversion, pardon and salvation. In this regard, the Mother of the Redeemer was sent by God to recall humanity to accept the Gospel of life and not to forget and/or underestimate the eschatological reality which awaits us. As clergy and lay people involved in evangelisation and catechesis, we believe that it is important to know how these phenomena should be tackled, interpreted and acclaimed, without falling into sentimentalism or superstition; or on the other hand, in the presumption of thinking that possible events like these cannot form part of the “politics of Heaven,” which is mysterious and all goodness! It was therefore needed that one

stops on the juridical and theological instrument with which the Church, in its rigorous process of discernment, investigates and, if it deems fit, judges these phenomena: the Norms of the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, prepared *sub secreto* in 1978 and rendered officially public in 2011.¹

After this essential hermeneutic and methodological presentation, in light of the dictates and orientations of the Norms, Rev. Grech tackles the historical and theological question of the singular and – from many aspects – new event of the Gozitan mariophany of Ta' Pinu. Along his formidable and reflective study, Rev. Grech presents also a historical excursus of how the Church, along its journey, arrived with solemn magisterium expressed by Pope Pacelli in 1950, to the dogmatic definition of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven.

Regarding this doctrinal truth, one cannot leave aside the contribution given by the genuine apocryphal tradition, which is practically unanimous in the affirmation of the death of Mary and her assumption into Heaven. In connection with this rich tradition, examined by the Magisterium and the theology of both East and West, the author takes due account of the witness and of what was handed down to us by several saints (mystics in particular) regarding the last days of the Mother of God.² In the history of Marian dogma, we know that the theme of the death of Mary was discussed by theologians with different views, totally opposite to each other: some expressed themselves in favour of the death of Mary, as a frail human creature, while others were totally against, affirming her immortality because of her complete holiness stemming out from her immaculate conception. In this context, the opinion of John Paul II is of particular importance. He was the first pope, after the dogmatic definition of 1950, to state publicly the “probability” of the death of the Mother of God! In this context, Rev. Grech could not refrain from entering into the ever new problematic of the human death, from the perspective of experience, culture and theology. From this point of view, in deepening the interdisciplinary mystery-event of the death and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus, which has paschal and eschatological effects on every creature, it appears clearly that death enriched the person of the Virgin Mary, united as she is with her Lord.

¹ See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Norme sul modo di procedere nel giudicare presunte apparizioni e rivelazioni,” in *Enchiridion Vaticanum*, vol. 27, nn. 1335-1361, pp. 920-933; Charles J. Scicluna, “Criteri e norme della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede nel discernimento delle apparizioni Mariane,” *Marianum* 74 (2012): 229-281.

² See Angelo Gila, *Maria nelle origini cristiane. Profilo storico della mariologia patristica* (Milano: Paoline, 2017).

In this regard, the author of this book presented also a theological-pastoral reflection of certain popular practices which are typically Gozitan, as they stem from the mariophanic experience of Ta' Pinu: the "three Hail Mary" which Our Lady of Ta' Pinu has asked Karmni Grima to recite, in which we ask our mother Mary to intercede for us and help us in the hour of our death. In the devotion of the Gozitan people, the themes of the death and glorious Assumption of Mary into Heaven, thanks to the event of Ta' Pinu, have taken a surprising centrality, not directly justified according to the premises and the religious traditions of that time. The actuality of the "message" of Ta' Pinu to this day still surpasses the specific timeframe and the context in which it happened, as it brings to mind the most crucial event of life and of our theological and eschatological belief: that of our death on this earth that leads us – thanks to the redemption brought to us by Christ who died and resurrected, therefore with *pura Gratia* – to live for ever in God, as the Virgin Mary is doing now in Heaven, a sure sign of consolation and hope for the people of God, pilgrim in the expectation of the Parousia (see *Lumen Gentium* 58 and 68). For mankind in this day and age, often lost in materialism and without eschatological knowledge, suffocated by various difficulties and fearful of death, this message brings hope because it is founded on the seriousness and reliability of the eschatological promises of Jesus.³ It would be sad if after death everything comes to an end. On the contrary, after death, according to the promises of Christ, a new, eternal, life begins.

In his message on the link between the event of Ta' Pinu and the Christian identity, Bishop Nikol Ġ. Cauchi stated that orientation to eternity is a fundamental aspect of the Christian identity.⁴ Driven by these considerations and popular ecclesiastic traditions, Rev. Grech also made a brief analysis of how Gozitan popular devotion acclaimed and re-expressed the fact of the death of the Mother of God in the "holy devotions" linked to the events lived by Karmni Grima and Frangisk Portelli, with the aim that these guarantee the "memory in prayer," known as "the fifteen Wednesdays."

The Shrine today, which is also in itself an "aesthetical-iconological memory" of the 1883 events, stands amidst the tranquillity and the beauty of the Gozitan countryside as a "synthetic" witness of the Marian devotion which for centuries characterised the people of Malta and Gozo. The dedication of this shrine and the crowning of the altarpiece of Our Lady of Ta' Pinu were special moments, of which their Mariological-Marian importance is still felt today. Thanks to the

³ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 668-682.

⁴ See Nikol G. Cauchi, "Il-Messaġġ Ta' Pinu u l-identità Nisranija," in *Il-Kelma tar-Raġħaj* (Gozo: Lumen Christi, 1989), 5:115-116.

event of Ta' Pinu, the spiritual life of the people of Malta and Gozo continued to grow and flourish. In the beautiful artistic shrine of Ta' Pinu, many people find peace and tranquillity. It is like a pause from the fast pace of today's life, an opportunity for an encounter with God of Our Lord Jesus Christ, together with the most sublime fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit: Mary of Nazareth. It is for a reason that this shrine has been described by Rev. Michael Attard, a Gozitan saintly priest, as an "oasis of peace."⁵ Also, the same *dormitio Mariae*, that is her death in union with Christ, take us back to the theological dynamism of the death and resurrection by means and thanks to the faith and for the hope in Jesus Christ.

The Church and the artists of all time have come to know and still read the "hand of God" in the *Tota Pulchra* and during the years they transmitted this to us and exposed it with their genius, expressed in their works; even in Ta' Pinu, this *way of beauty* is proposed from its beginning and this is well documented with photos in the sixth chapter of this publication of Rev. Samuel Grech, with the emblematic title: *The shrine of Ta' Pinu and the way of beauty* (pp. 431-501)! In front of so much authentic and holy beauty, which by divine will stems from the Mother of the Lord, the people of God, by their own will, venerate her, celebrate her and pray to her, both in the Liturgy of the Church and also in popular piety. In this chapter Rev. Samuel Grech documents and tells how, in the past few years, several imposing works of art have been executed in the Gozitan shrine, among others, works of art which helped to make of the shrine of Ta' Pinu a way that leads to the mystery of God and of Mary, through the "way of beauty"! We can see pictures of high quality of the first works inside the majestic and elegant shrine, which has become more and more a treasure of art and of Marian piety that says a lot on the link of the people, not only of Gozo, with the Mother of the Lord, beloved and invoked as a heavenly patroness, and therefore merits to be given as a gift a home which is beautiful, not only because it is convenient for the highest of creatures (Dante Alighieri), but also as a source of inspiration and catechetical illustration of the Christian mystery which sees her present and cooperative with Christ for us. As we have been saying, in the past years, thanks to the competence, zeal and passion of Rev. Gerard Buhagiar, the National Shrine of Ta' Pinu dedicated to the beloved Mother of Gozo and Malta, gradually continued to be enriched with religious art which is beautiful, significant, expressive and illustrative of the mysteries of our faith, in particular

⁵ See Gerard Buhagiar, "Dun Mikiel Attard. L-imħabba lejn il-Madonna Ta' Pinu," *Il-ħajja f'Għawdex* 958 (2014): 24. For a biography of Rev. Michael Attard see, Nichol G. Cauchi, *Dun Mikiel Attard. Ħjiel fil-qosor dwar ħajtu 1933-2004* (Gozo: 2006).

those of the Holy Rosary. Artistic works of art that facilitate both the encounter with God of Jesus and with his holy Mother, and also the meditation and contemplation of the mysteries. For this aim, the same walk in the road “prepares” the pilgrim to meet and be guided by the love towards God and his neighbour in need, through the beautiful niches with frescoes by the Italian artist Sergio Favotto, which step by step lead you to the beauty of the *Domus Mariae*. Here one feels welcomed by the beauty of the embrace with mosaics portrayed by the theologian, priest and artist Marko I. Rupnik, who also designed and executed the installation of three mosaics on top of the front doors of the shrine. These represent the Virgin Mary with the child Jesus in her hand, St Paul and St John the Baptist. Another work of art worth mentioning is the Monument of the Pilgrim as one accesses the same road, executed by the Gozitan priest Roberto Gauci. Above all, the *via pulchritudinis* finds its climax in the shrine, where the pilgrim instantly feels stricken by the beauty of the sculptures and other works of art found inside; among them those of local artists Ġużeppi Briffa († 1987) and Emvin Cremona († 1987); and of Italian artist Mario Caffaro Rore († 2001).

Finally, the staff running the shrine and its pastoral operators should persuade believers that every *domus Mariae*, apart from being a place of genuine veneration, should always become a “place of culture” and “cenacle of artists.” It should leave a positive effect on the human, cultural, artistic and religious promotion of the territory and of those who live in it and benefit from it. In fact, the story, the tradition, the artistic expressions of every shrine, are witness of culture that reflects the reciprocal influx of the shrine and the life of the people on each other. A principal and natural activity has to be the theological, catechetical and Mariological formation of the faithful through means and proposals that enrich the pilgrims; above all, the service of the Word, conferences, courses of studies, library, artistic and poetic publications, sacred presentations, concerts, exhibitions and the rest. Here it must be said that in the name of sacred art the things produced and proposed, not only in the shrine and in churches, were not always exhilarating; it is enough to think that often we offered works that are more in accordance to the “tastes of the faithful” (*placita fidelium*) rather than according to the more genuine and challenging *via pulchritudinis*, and so we ended up promoting common images, if not also *kitsch* of the *Tota Pulchra*.⁶ It can be said that the main Marian shrine of Gozo is a place of manifest beauty, dignity and art, dedicated to the glory of God and to the Mother of Christ. It is also a

⁶ T. Amodei, *Signum Magnum. Perché la Madonna vuole apparire kitsch?* (Chianti: Edizioni Feeria-Comunità di San Leonino), 2009.

sign of great love given that the Christian people like to frequent it especially since therein they find spiritual rest, much needed in these tough and complex times. Above all, it facilitates the salutary encounter with Her who knows how to welcome us with the love of a Mother, Sister and Companion whom we can trust throughout the entire journey of our earthly life.

Salvatore M. Perrella, OSM
President of the Italian Interdisciplinary Mariological Association (AMI) – Rome
Pontifical Theological Faculty “Marianum”
Viale Trenta Aprile, 6
00153 Roma RM
Italy

salvatore.maria.perrella@gmail.com