

ANOTHER CLUE TO VASSALLI'S AUTHORSHIP OF  
*RECHERCHES*

In his provocative, interesting contribution (*The Sunday Times*, September 6), Dr Giovanni Bonello tried to solve the riddle of the authorship of the book *Recherches Historiques et Politiques sur Malte*, published anonymously in Paris in 1799.

Dr Bonello brought valid arguments to discredit the attribution to Mgr. Onorato Bres and to propound the theory, apparently for the first time ever, that the *Recherches* were written by none other than Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764–1829).

There is a passage in the book that might give added weight to Dr Bonello's attribution. The anonymous author wrote (p. 64): *Effectivement, étant à Rome en 1790, le prince Lambertini me pria de lui le procurer une certaine quantité de cette terre (de Saint-Paul)*. Vassalli was effectively in Rome in 1790 as a student of "materie sacre, filosofia e lingue": the scholastic year 1789–1790 was his second term at the Università (also known as Archiginnasio) della Sapienza.

Domenico Spadoni included Vassalli's name in the article *Maltesi nell'Ateneo Romano dalla fine del '600 alla metà dell'800*, published in Rome 1941 in a very rare number of the *Archivio Storico di Malta* (Rome). Further details of Vassalli's studies at the *Sapientia* were given by Mgr. Karm Sant in *The Sunday Times* of April 3, 1983.

Commenting on the presence of several Maltese at the University, Spadoni wrote thus: "*Però è caratteristico che essi trovansi solo nelle cosiddette classi di legge civile e canonica, di teologia e di filosofia e di lingue, il che fa supporre che questi Maltesi fossero per la più gran parte avviati alla carriera ecclesiastica*". (It is, however, significant that their names are only to be found in the so-called classes of civil and canon law, of theology, of philosophy, and of languages: this makes one think that the greater part of these Maltese intended to take up an ecclesiastical career). That is perhaps why Davalos (quoted by Dr Bonello) referred to Mikiel Anton as "l'Abbé Vassallo".

The author of the book, whoever he might be, professed his love for the Maltese nation to which he was proud to belong. But on no account can I endorse his view that the French government had the right to transfer our art treasures to France just because Malta had become by conquest an integral part of that country.

Incidentally, the book contains a rare map of Malta compiled, engraved and disseminated by Louis Capitaine, *Premier Ingenieur et Associé de la Carte generale de la France*. It was printed in 1798 (An VI), the year before the publication of the book, and an exemplar of the map is extant printed in a different format, perhaps in proof state.