

Books

An account dedicated to holy Pauline places



PAUL'S CHURCHES AND CHAPELS ON MALTA AND GOZO

Victor Mallia-Milanes; Introduction by Mgr Alfred Xuereb (Secretariat of Pope Benedict XVI)
 Libreria Editrice Vaticana pp153
 ISBN 978-88-209-8395-5

Simon Mercieca

Victor Mallia-Milanes's latest publication is a book about churches and chapels in Malta and Gozo dedicated to St Paul.

At a local level, the book represents an excursus of the principal shrines dedicated to St Paul. More importantly, this is the first publication to have put the local cult of St Paul on an international pedestal. The Vatican has now sealed the perennial question whether St Paul was shipwrecked off the coast of Malta or somewhere else in the Mediterranean. For Prof. Mallia-Milanes, there is no doubt (and rightly so) that historically this shipwreck did take place off the shores of our islands.

Prof. Mallia-Milanes discusses the shrines linked in popular memory with the saint's stay in Malta.

The first two were at Rabat and Mdina respectively, with the most important being the cathedral which is dedicated to this saint and reputedly built on the house of the *Protos* Publius. The

other shrine is the grotto, which competed with the cathedral as the place of Pauline importance. But while the presumed house of Publius became the centre of devotion, the grotto was and remained a place of historical curiosity even after the Order's arrival. The author then refers to the mediaeval chapel dedicated to St Paul at the *Cala di San Paolo*. Already as far back as late mediaeval times, this area was linked with the shipwreck of St Paul.

Prof. Mallia-Milanes also quotes Achille Ferris who mentions the existence of a chapel dedicated to the saint on Sciberas Hill.

While there are historical records about the presence of a chapel in this area prior to the Great Siege, it seems that it had a different dedication. Therefore, if a chapel dedicated to St Paul existed within the harbour area, it was situated somewhere else. Recently, Stanley Fiorini seems to have given the answer as he mentions the existence of a mediaeval chapel dedicated to St Paul in the parameters of Vittoriosa.

Most probably, this chapel was situated in the area where the chapel of St Paul at Cospicua stands today, as in mediaeval times, this area was part of Vittoriosa. Was there any association in the collective memory of the late mediaeval man with the presence of such a chapel and the departure of St Paul from Malta?

Malta can boast six main churches dedicated to St Paul. As already explained, the foremost is the Mdina Cathedral. Rabat too built another big church to this saint next to the grotto. Once a new city was built, the first parish church was dedicated explicitly to the shipwreck of the saint in Malta. Then, three villages decided to have their main parish church dedicated to the saint. Hal Safi was the first in 1592. Next, the village of Nadur decided to change the main dedication from that to the Virgin Mary to the Martyrdom of St Peter and St Paul. Closer to our times, the village of Munxar decided to have its parish church called after this saint.

The third and last chapter is dedicated to six chapels and three

wayside chapels of St Paul, the foremost of which is that known as San Pawl tal-Huggiega at St Paul's Bay.

The other chapels that are discussed are those of Burmarrad, Cospicua, Marsalforn, San Pawl tal-Targa and Birkirkara. The three wayside chapels are San Pawl tal-Qlejgha in the limits of Mosta, St Paul of Qassati in the limits of Attard and the third lies at Xrobb l-Ghagin.

The author took the opportunity to discuss in detail the leit-motif and serendipity of the main *pala d'altare* of each and every church and chapel dedicated to this St Paul.

Thanks to this work, both the locals and tourists are being offered a book which, while being of a high academic content, can serve them as a guide in the footsteps of the Pauline cult in Malta and Gozo.

Furthermore, the local reader is offered a translation into Maltese of the English text while the specialised reader has an extensive bibliography of the main works published on this topic as well as a good index.

One man's freedom is another man's prison



FREEDOM

Jonathan Franzen
 Fourth Estate pp562
 ISBN 978-0-00-731852-0

Stanley Borg

If Jonathan Franzen were to scribble a shopping list, I would want to read it. And that's because, if I had to ask myself the shallow (even though, what's wrong with that?) question of who my favourite author is, it would have to be Mr Franzen.

The only problem is that Mr Franzen's writing entails a lot of waiting — just consider that nine years separate his latest novel *Freedom* from the previous one, *The Corrections*.

Yet when he does, Mr Franzen writes heavyweights with the kind of wordcount that harks back to the 19th-century novel and which tackle the big themes in life.

The Corrections weighs in at 672 pages, *Strong Motion* at 528 pages while *The Twenty-Seventh City* is 517 dense pages long. Even his collected essays in *How to Be Alone* are endless musings. His slimmest work is *The Discomfort Zone* at 192 pages, yet it is such a beautiful book that you have to give it a second, third and fourth reading — you do the maths.

Mr Franzen is frequently hailed as the foremost literary figure of our generation; the author with the potential to write that holy grail of literature — the great American novel. Last August, he even appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, a rare accolade for a living novelist.

His novels are a publishing event — his spate with Oprah was widely publicised, President Obama read *Freedom* while on holiday, and Mr Franzen had his spectacles stolen during the launch of *Freedom* in London.

The curiosity that Mr Franzen fuels in his readers is not only through his work, but also through his persona. Glossies frequently report on the quasi-monastic discipline he inflicts upon himself — he spends years

working on a novel, and is reported to have written *The Corrections* wearing earplugs, earmuffs and a blindfold in order to avoid any distractions.

Despite his commercial success — *The Corrections* sold three million copies worldwide — Mr Franzen continues to write for a small audience. Or rather, for himself. Yet he speaks to every reader.

Like *The Corrections*, *Freedom* is an expansive, multi-generational epic that focuses on a family which, from the outside, has everything yet is inwardly sad. The Berglunds, baby-bommer Patty and Walter, are the golden couple of the neighbourhood. They are financially stable and have two gifted children. Yet, as the neighbours wonder, "There had always been something not quite right about the Berglunds".

When the novel begins, the Berglunds have already moved away, yet Mr Franzen starts with their arrival in the gentrified Ramsey Hill, as seen through their neighbours' perspective. Walter is an earnest, calm man while athletic Patty is very much into her children, gifted Jessica and the precocious prodigal son Joey.

When Joey starts sleeping with Connie, the neighbour's daughter, it is the shocking act which scratches at Patty's surface and reveals what the reader had long suspected — that her niceness was just a terministic screen. She starts drinking and becomes distressed while Walter seeks consolation in his work.

After Walter is offered a job in Washington, they move away, without Joey. However, the real story in *Freedom* is the three-way relationship between Walter, Patty and Richard, Walter's college roommate.

The narrative structure bears the weight of the novel. Apart from the authorial voice, there is Patty's confessional autobiogra-

phy, entitled *Mistakes Were Made* written at her therapist's suggestion, and which uncovers Patty's unhappy childhood and rape.

The memoir leads on to confessionals by Richard, Walter and Joey. The narrative structure may sound confusing, but it isn't. Rather, it allows the reader to read an event from multiple perspectives.

Set in the century's first decade, *Freedom* cannot ignore Iraq — Joey is embroiled in a scheme to sell parts to the military in Iraq. For Mr Franzen, Iraq is an "odd sort of war in which, within a rounding error, the only casualties were on the other side".

Freedom is not about freedom, that word which has had such an influence on American history. Rather, it is about the problem of being free when in a relationship, and how one's freedom necessarily threatens that of others.

In fact, throughout the novel, Mr Franzen uses sex as a metaphor of one liberty feeding off another.

Most of the main characters in the novel all spend long periods of time on their own, but they are unable to survive. Walter and Patty cannot live together, but they cannot bear the suffering of being apart.

Every sentence in *Freedom* is written with the skill and confidence of a great author. The dialogue is superb and Mr Franzen directs his sharp sense of humour at his characters — the Berglunds' neighbour Merrie Paulsen, writes Mr Franzen, "was 10 years older than Patty and looked every year of it". Yet despite his frequent scathing attacks on his characters, Mr Franzen loves his characters for their flaws.

Just like the Lamberts in *The Corrections*, the Berglunds encapsulate a whole culture, society, and everything that makes us human.

Shelf life

Malta Book Fair

The 26th edition of the National Book Fair is being held at the Mediterranean Conference Centre, between tomorrow and Sunday. This annual event is organised by the National Book Council in collaboration with the Department of Libraries.

Book launches include:

Today
 Philip Chireop: *Abstract Expressions* by Joseph Paul Cassar at the Hotel Excelsior at 7.30 p.m.

Tomorrow
 Bronk Productions' *Staqsir Rih* by Salva Sammut at the Sir Temi Zammit Hall, MCC at 7.30 p.m.

Thursday
 Il-Lojja tal-Irgulija by Sergio Grech at 7.15 p.m.

Friday
 Merlin Library presents *Penumbra* by Trevor Zahra at 7.30 p.m.

Saturday
 Librerija Preca presents its new titles at 4.30 p.m.

Merlin Library presents *Tset-sikat* at 8.30 p.m.

Sunday
 Franny Jo Publications and Kotoner Media present *Manwel Dimech-Il Kliemi* by Mark F. Montebello at 10.30 a.m.

Sierra Distributors presents Dorianne Farrugia's *Sar il-Hin* at 5 p.m.

Librerija Preca presents *Perichoresis — A Meditation on the Icon of Our Lady of Damascus* by Peter Serracino Inglott at 6 p.m.

Book Fair opening hours:

Tomorrow: From 9 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. and 5 to 9 p.m.; Thursday: 9 a.m. to 1.30 p.m., 5 to 9 p.m.; Friday: 9 a.m. to 1.30 p.m., 5 to 10 p.m.; Saturday: 9 a.m. to 12.30 p.m., 4 to 10 p.m. and Sunday 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

A shuttle bus service will operate from Valletta bus terminus to MCC and vice versa at a nominal charge. More information can be obtained by e-mail: info@ktieb.org.mt.