

# Monsignor Archdeacon Luigi Vella – 90 years from his demise

JOE ATTARD

One of the renowned Gozitan authors whose works were instrumental in the promotion and development of Maltese literature as we know it today was undoubtedly Monsignor Archdeacon Luigi Vella. The 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his demise will be commemorated later this year.

Monsignor Vella was born in Victoria, Gozo on the 17 December 1859. At the age of twelve he started his secondary education at the State Secondary School and after five years he entered the Gozo Seminary, at that time run by the Jesuits, to further his studies. He terminated his studies ten years

later and was ordained to the priesthood on the 19 December 1882. When he left the Seminary, after having served as Prefect and Headmaster for some years, he fully dedicated himself to his priestly work. Regularly in the evening he used to gather boys, youngsters and adult men, most of whom showed reluctance in practicing their faith, at the church dedicated to St Sabina, where he brought them closer to the Holy Sacraments through Catechism.

In 1887 he was assigned the responsibilities of Chaplain at the Civil Hospital in Victoria in which role he served for about twelve years. Seventeen years from his ordination to priesthood Fr Luigi was given the title of Canon at the Gozo Cathedral following a competitive exam. In 1900 Monsignor Vella graduated in Theology following further studies and examinations. Nine years later he was appointed to occupy the chair of Dogmatic Theology at the Gozo Seminary where he served as a Professor in this science for eighteen years.

Monsignor Vella did not only carry out his ministerial duties as a Preacher and Professor. He was also the Spiritual Director of the Communities of Dominican and Franciscan Sisters and a much sought-after Confessor for over forty years.

He implemented significant projects and works at the church dedicated to St Sabina in Victoria. In 1902 he started the rebuilding of the old church. These works were finalised on the 29 April 1923, when the Papal Legate, Cardinal Testaferrata, inaugurated it as the



Church for Perpetual Adoration. One notes with satisfaction that this church has steadfastly served this function up to this day, its doors open all through the day, the whole year round, not only for the local faithful who regularly spend time of adoration in front of the Holy Sacrament but also for many foreigners who choose to pay a visit during their day trip to Gozo. Currently this Church for Perpetual Adoration is being directed by the Reverend Monsignor Joseph Gauci, who although in his elderly years has taken over these duties from his late brother the Archdeacon Mgr Giovanni Bosco Gauci, both close relatives of Monsignor Luigi Vella. Bishop Camilleri had appointed Monsignor Luigi Vella as its first Rector. For his outstanding endeavours, Pope Pius XI decorated Mgr Vella with the 'Benemerenti Medal' whilst Pope Leo XIII endowed him with the decoration 'Pro ecclesia et Pontefice'. The now St Pius X, wanted to appoint him as Coadjutor to Bishop Pietro Pace of Malta – an honour and a great responsibility that in his humbleness, Mgr Vella was afraid to accept. On the 12 March 1923, he was appointed by the Vatican as Archdeacon of the Gozo Cathedral.

However Mgr Luigi Vella will not only be remembered for his services as Rector and Canon of the Gozo Cathedral, but also for his contribution as one of the best Gozitan authors who strongly endeavoured to promote Maltese as a written language during his times. Vella wrote several works in Maltese, spiritual books used for Meditation and Adoration, writings on the lives of martyrs and on religious faith, historical books recounting the history of the island of Gozo. For many years he was the Director of the periodical 'The Eucharist – Preacher of the Blessed Sacrament'. Before starting this work he had also published the monthly 'The Marian Devotee'. Without any doubt we can easily extract a clear and authentic picture of Monsignor Vella from the numerous books he left as his legacy. Today, ninety years from his death, their might not be any living Gozitans who remember him, as they would have been able to witness his qualities as a person and about his views upon the problems and values of life.

In order to structure his historical novels, Archdeacon Luigi Vella frequently needed to

conduct his research at the Archives in Sicily. Very often he had to compare what had been written by the Arab and Sicilian writers with that written by the Maltese authors, in order that he could extract concrete and historical facts that were true and faithful to what had in fact happened. He gave a much worthy helping hand to Mr Alfonz Maria Galea in his writings of 'Mogħdija taż-Żmien' (*Passing the time*). Issue numbers: 63,69,70, and 125 of this collection were all written by the Gozitan historian Mgr. Luigi Vella. Amongst his works one may find the historical novel 'Nikol Abdul' or rather 'The Last Years of Arab Rule in our Islands'. The author was assigned with the proof reading of this work by *Klabb Kotba Maltin* in order that it could be re-published and for some years it was also included as a textbook used by students studying for their Maltese Matriculation Certificate. Together with this book, Mgr Vella also wrote the novels: "Bint il-Ħakem" (The Ruler's Daughter), "Ferdinandu Montanier" – a story from Gozo, "Bernardo De Puo" – a tale from Gozo during the rule of Grand Master D'Omedes, "Eufrosina", "Il-General Ruman" (The Roman General), "San Mamante" – a tale of the 3rd century, "Isolda" – a tale from Malta, as well as "Abdullah Għaxrif", which Mons Vella wrote as a commemoration of the Eucharistic Congress held in Malta in 1913.

Albeit the Maltese Orthography has changed drastically since the times when Archdeacon Luigi Vella wrote his works, the fact still remains that this cleric was one of the main authors who provided our people with numerous books be they of a religious or historical themes as well as those of a lighter nature. He possessed eloquent and expressive writing skills that included the use of articulate and idiomatic language. Proof of this is given in the following excerpt taken from his historical novel "Nikol Abdul" with which we also conclude this profile that comes in commemoration of his death which occurred on the 17 July 1928.

***Nikola ta' Abdul, jew kif kienu jsibuh l-Gharab, 'Halif', kien Ghawdxi. Imrobbi tajjeb minn ommu fir-religjon nisranija u mbağhad minn Patri Gawdenz, mill-Kunvent tal-Madonna tal-Ferħ jew ta' Gajdoru, li dak iż-żmien l-Agostinjani kellhom fir-Ramla, f'żgħożitu, niesu***

*baghtuh Sqallija jitghallem f'Paliermu, fejn sar jaf lil Tarik, u dahal fil-Milizia, f'rigment li kellu bi Kmandant tieghu lill-istess Tarik. Mibghut dan ir-Rigment f'Ghawdex mill-Emir ta' Sqallija, Nikol gie wkoll mieghu taht l-istess Kmandant. Ghalkemm Nikol kien jinsab qalb l-Gharab Missilmin, b'tigrib kbir ghal ruhu, huwa baqa' dejjem shih fil-Ligi Nisranija u habib ta' Patri Gawdenz.*



The monument which was unveiled in Savina Square, Victoria in honour of Mgr. Luigi Vella. [Photo courtesy: <http://www.gozonews.com>]

*Barra minn ommu u missieru, Nikol kellu wkoll ohtu li kien jisimha Marija, xebba li fit-tjubija taghha kienet ahjar minnu; bhalu mzejna bil-ghaqal u ghall-almu taghha hadd ma kien jehodha. Sabiha u helwa, izda ffit sewdenija, Marija kienet mahbuba minn kull min kien jafha.*

*Nicholas of Abdul, or rather 'Halif', as the Arabs knew him, was a Gozitan. Well reared by his mother within the Christian faith and subsequently by Brother Gawdenz, from the Convent of Our Lady of Joy also known as Ta' Gajdoru, that in those days the Agostinians had in Ramla, when he was in his young age his relatives sent him to Sicily to study in Palermo, where he got to know Tarik, and he enrolled in the militia, in a regiment whose Commander was the same Tarik. When this regiment was dispatched to Gozo by the Sicilian Governor, Nicholas also came with it under the same Commander. Although Nicholas found himself amidst the Muslim Arabs, with great risk for his soul, he always steadfastly abided by the Rules of the Christian faith and remained a friend to Brother Gawdenz.*

*Besides his parents, Nicholas also had a sister called Maria, a spinster who surpassed him in gentleness, was gifted with wisdom as much as him and noone questioned her skills. Beautiful and sweet, but somewhat dark-skinned, Maria was loved by all those who knew her.*

Chev. Joe M Attard is the Secretary of the Gozitan Journalists Association which post he has occupied since the Association's inception in 1960. Mr Attard is a prolific writer of prose and poetry mostly related with Gozitan history, religion, literature and culture and he has published two books. For the past 25 years he has also been an avid broadcaster. Mr Attard worked as a Maltese Language teacher, Assistant Head and Acting Head of the 6th Form in Gozo. In 1984 he was appointed Knight of the Unione Cavalleria Cristiana Internazionale (UCCI).