

# MIKIEL ANTON VASSALLI

## A Preliminary Survey

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It was Ninu Cremona who brought to life Mikiel Anton Vassalli<sup>1</sup> from the dustbin of history where his detractors had dumped him. His was not a complete biography, by any means; and various scholars, especially in recent years, have painstakingly filled many of the *lacunae* in this pioneer work.

On June 15, 1761 Gabriele Vassallo married Catarina Magro, both of Zebbug;<sup>2</sup> and three years later, on March 5, 1764 the Rev. Francesco Grima<sup>3</sup> baptised their child Michele Antonio, who had been born that same day.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, two years later Gabriele fell sick and disposed of his wealth the best way he could to provide for his wife and three young children, the eldest of whom, Marcella, was only 4½ years old.<sup>5</sup> On April 28, 1766 he sold a black mule for 95 scudi to Giuseppe Debono of Casal Attard.<sup>6</sup> On May 8, two fields, one sown with corn, the other with cotton, were leased to Paolo Faenza for 70 scudi and 10 tari,<sup>7</sup> while another field of cotton at Hal Mula went to Salvatore Sciriha for 9 scudi.<sup>8</sup>

The next day were leased to Giovanni Magro, his brother-in-law, a holding with a stockyard in the same region, as well as another plot *ta' Wzzino*. A condition was attached to this lease: if he recovered his health before the cotton in it was gathered, Gabriele would get back this property after paying any expenses incurred by the tenants.<sup>9</sup> On May 11 were drawn the last deeds. Giacobbo Camilleri paid 26 scudi for the

1. The popular impression that Mikiel Anton started writing his surname in the genitive with the publication of his Maltese Grammar in 1791 must now be abandoned. In 1788 he was already using this form. See *A(rchiepiscopal) A(rchives, M(alta), Corr(ispondenza) XX*, f. 112r.
2. *P(arish) A(rchives, Zebbug, Lib(er) Matr(imoniorum)*, Vol. 111 (1711-1762), f. 612v.
3. A. Cremona, inaccurately, states that this was the Parish Priest, who, in fact, was Fr Felice Borg (1762-1799). A. Cremona, *Vassalli and His Times* (Malta, 1940), p.5.
4. *PA (Zebbug), Lib. Bapt(izatorum)*, Vol. VII (1756-1786), p. 161
5. She was born on December 21, 1761. *Ibid.*, p.102. The youngest was Saverio, born on November 26, 1765. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
6. *N(otarial) A(rchives, V(alletta), R 21*. Vol. 10, f. 391v.
7. *Ibid.*, ff. 411v-412r.
8. *Ibid.*, f.413r.
9. *Ibid.*, ff. 414v-416r.

plot at tal-Flas,<sup>10</sup> while Giuseppe Sammut of Siggiewi bought for 250 scudi<sup>11</sup> the house Catarina had brought as dowry.<sup>12</sup>

Gabriele died that same year,<sup>13</sup> when Mikiel Anton was only two years old.<sup>14</sup> In 1770 Catarina married another farmer, Gaetano Mifsud,<sup>15</sup> who brought with him a cow, two calves, and a black horse – besides 50 scudi and two suits.<sup>16</sup>

On May 8, 1774 the young Vassalli received the Sacrament of Confirmation from the hands of Bishop Pellerano<sup>17</sup> during a Pastoral Visitation.<sup>18</sup> In 1785 his parents were living in the vicinity of the parish priest's residence, but he was not living with them.<sup>19</sup>

He was now 21 years of age, and a student of Fr. Giuseppe Calleja, of Casal Tarxien, the master of the School of Arabic in Valletta.<sup>20</sup> School lasted from October till August; and exams, which consisted in reading and explaining the text, were held twice a year – following the February and the August semesters. The worthiest student received 22 scudi, 4 tari, and 10 grani, the equivalent of 10 Roman scudi. Owing to lack of students no exams were held in August 1783; and the school remained closed even for the scholastic year October 1783 / August 1784. Hence, on May 11, 1785 there were 40 Roman scudi available, which were distributed to the best four students.<sup>21</sup> Michele Antonio was one of them.<sup>22</sup>

10. *Ibid.*, f. 418r.

11. *Ibid.*, f. 419r.

12. NAV, R 21. Vol. 8, f. 178r.

13. PA (Zebbug), *Lib. Defunctorum* IV, p. 115.

14. Cp. A. Cremona, *op. cit.*, p. 8: "Vassalli lost his father when he was about six years old".

15. PA (Zebbug), *Lib. Matr.* IV, pp. 103-104

16. NAV, 962/3A, ff. 59r-60r.

17. His godfather was Dominus Michael Apap. His brother, Saverio, was confirmed two days later. PA (Zebbug), *Libro dei Confermati (1686-1829)*, unnumbered.

18. AAM, *Visitatio Pastoralis XXXVIII*, f. 432r.

19. *C(uriae) E(piscopalis) M(elitensae), S(tatus) A(nimarum)*, Vol. 19, f. 6r.

20. This was first revealed by the present author in a short note entitled "M.A. Vassalli wins a prize for Arabic" which he published in *The Sunday Times*, June 19, 1983, p. 12.

21. F. Ciappara, "The School of Arabic in Malta (1772-1795)", *The Sunday Times*, July 3, 1983, p. 9.

22. *A(rchives of the) I(nquisition), M(alta), R(egistrum) A(ctorum) C(iviliium, Sancti Officii), C7 (1782-1787)*, ff. 174r-v. See also AIM, *Corr.* 96, f. 399v.

One of the most difficult riddles to solve has always been whether Vassalli studied for the priesthood. Cremona suggests that he had, but bases his assertion only on hearsay, and brings no documentary evidence.<sup>23</sup> This was not the only reason which led me to peruse the *Liber Status Animarum* of Mdina. The School of Arabic was especially open to seminarians.<sup>24</sup> But my high hopes of tracing his name among them proved to no avail.<sup>25</sup> My luck, however, struck at the Notarial Archives, in Valletta, where I came across his Sacred Patrimony.<sup>26</sup>

As in the manuscript relating to his prize for Arabic, Vassalli's second name is put down as *Angelo*. But internal evidence, and the similarity of his signature in this patrimonial title to other examples of his handwriting in other documents,<sup>27</sup> prove beyond any shadow of doubt that he is the worthy Mikiel Anton. Besides, it does not seem that this name had much importance. It could even be left out,<sup>28</sup> or added only later.<sup>29</sup>

The Council of Trent had decreed that no cleric was to receive Holy Orders unless he had the necessary means to live according to his station.<sup>30</sup> This was confirmed by the diocesan Synod of Bishop Cocco Palmieri in 1703, which established the sum of 45 scudi.<sup>31</sup> Pius VI, then by his *Motu Proprio* of June 25, 1777 nearly doubled it to 80 scudi.<sup>32</sup>

On April 17, 1785 two deeds were drawn up by notary Giuseppe Bonavita at Qormi, which constituted the Patrimonial Title of Vassalli. Mikiel Anton assigned to himself the plot of land called *ta' Ħarram*,

23. A Cremona, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

24. AIM, RAC, C6, F. 25v.

25. See CEM, SA, Vol. 17, No. 9, f. 5r; Vol. 18, No. 5, ff. 5v-6r; Vol. 19, No. 5, pp. 7-8; Vol. 20, No. 9, ff. 5v-6r.

26. NAV, 579/5, ff. 441r-444v.

27. CEM, *Acta Originalia*, March 1822, unnumbered. AAM, *Corr.* XX, f. 112r

28. PA (Zebbuġ), *Libro dei Confermati* (1686-1829), May 8, 1774, unnumbered.

29. NAV, 579/5, f. 442r. For the writing of his name as Michel'Angelo see also NLM, Arch. 2063, C4.1.1792, f. 8v, item 45. I am grateful to Prof. S. Fiorini for pointing out to me this reference.

30. *Concilium Tridentinum, sess. XXIX, de reform, cap. 11*

31. *Synodus dioecesisana Ab Illustris, et Reverendiss. Domino Fratre Davide Cocco Palmerio Episcopo Melitensi, 1703* (Malta, 1842), p. 42, parag. V.

32. N(ational) L(ibrary), M(alta), Misc. 226: *Moto Proprio della Santità di Nostro Signore Pio VI* (Malta, 1782), p. 5.

which he had inherited from his father,<sup>33</sup> and which was leased for 9 scudi and 3 tari. Saverio Camilleri, his paternal aunt's husband<sup>34</sup> gave him 20 scudi, part of the lease of the field *ta' Tellu* in the region of San Rocco. Another relation of his, Maria Delicata, his father's step-sister,<sup>35</sup> donated to him the plot of land *tal-Hacba*, leased for 51 scudi. Their bequest was made "out of the sincere love and affection" they had for him, so that he could be tonsured and become a secular priest. Two conditions were attached to these donations. If Mikiel Anton became a regular priest, or a Conventual Chaplain, they were to become null and void; while after his death they were to revert to the donors, or to their heirs.

A week later, on April 23, Vassalli presented this notarised act in the Bishop's Curia, so that formal proceedings could start, and statements contained in it verified. That same day, the Curia's Chancellor, Ignazio Saverio Bonavita, asked notary Giuseppe Bonavita to examine the witnesses Vassalli was to produce. On April 29, Francesco Saliba, Salvatore Xiriha, and Filippo Abela, all of Zebbug, testified to the quality, capacity, and value of each plot of land. Saverio Camilleri was childless, while 60-year-old Maria was a spinster and past her child-bearing years. Moreover, both had enough property left for their maintenance.

On May 10, two agricultural experts, Petruzzo Xerri and Petruzzo Callus, drew up a report under oath of the three holdings. On June 2 the Rev. Michele Camilleri, the *Promotor Fiscale Generale*, recommended that Mikiel Anton's application be accepted, as he had the necessary 80 scudi. On July 7, Bishop Labini issued his sentence' .....*dicimus et declaramus supradictum Michaellem Angelum Vassallo ex Civitate Rohan sufficiens habere patrimonium sub cuius titolo prima clericali tonsura initiari possit, et successive ab Sacros Ordines promoveri valeat.....*<sup>36</sup>

33. NAV, R 21, Vol. 8, f. 179v.

34. Saverio's wife, Grazia, was Mikiel Anton's father's sister. They were married on January 24, 1761, that is nine days after Grabiell's wedding to Catarina. PA (Zebbug), *Lib. Matr.* III, ff. 612v, 613v-614r.

35. Maria was the daughter of Baldassare Delicata and Domenica. PA (Zebbug), *Lib. Bapt.* VI, p. 504. When her husband died on August 23, 1726 (PA, Zebbug, *Lib. Def.* III, p. 216), Domenica married Michele, Vassalli's grandfather. PA (Zebbug), *Lib. Matr.* III, pp. 337-338.

36. AAM, *Patrimonio Sacro*, Vol. 69A, No. 3.

Vassalli, hence, was intended for the priesthood – “*desideroso d’iniziarsi nello stato ecclesiastico*”. But he was not admitted to the Seminary as a day student; and he was unable to pay 120 scudi annually as a boarder. It was then that he decided to go to Rome, with the understanding that the Bishop send him the dimissorials.<sup>37</sup> In July 1785 he was already in that city.<sup>38</sup> Three years later, in 1788, he applied to lecture on Oriental Liturgy and Syro-Chaldaic at the University of the Sapienza. The interview was to be held in July in the presence of the Chancellor and the *Signori Avvocati Concistoriali*. But he had one great obstacle to surmount, since only an ecclesiastic could get the appointment. So on April 30, he wrote a pathetic letter to Bishop Labini to “have mercy on me”, and send him the letters dimissory to have conferred first tonsure and Minor Orders. Otherwise, if successful, as he hoped he would be, he would still not be eligible.<sup>39</sup>

Bishop Labini answered that the applicant lacked one important qualification – which had been laid down by Pius VI’s *Motu Proprio*<sup>40</sup> – to have served in a church for three years. Hence, in November, Mikiel Anton addressed a memorial to the Pope for a dispensation. The *Sacra Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari*, as usual, referred this petition to the Bishop for his comments.<sup>41</sup>

Did Mgr Labini send the required documents? Unfortunately, all correspondence after this entry relating to Vassalli comes to an abrupt end. But circumstantial evidence comes to our help. As present research now stands, it was only in 1792 that he was first called an *Abbate*.<sup>42</sup> What does this term signify? Fr. C. F. Schlienzy, a friend of his, affirmed that he had taken the “four first Orders”.<sup>43</sup> Giovanni Fava of Gharghur was also known by that name, which, in his own words, meant *un Chierico in minoribus*.<sup>44</sup> Are we to conclude, then, that Vassalli, unlike other applicants,<sup>45</sup> had first to conform to the requirements of the *Motu Proprio*?

37. *AAM, Corr. XX*, f. 112r.

38. *AAM, Corr. XXI*, f. 289r.

39. *Ibid.*, ff. 290r-291r.

40. *NLM, Arch. 273*, f. 161v. See also Ph. Callus, *The Rising of the Priests* (Malta, 1961), p. 109.

41. *AAM, Corr. XX*, f. IIIr.

42. *NLM, Arch. 2063*, f. 8v.

43. C. Sant, “L-Aħħar Jiem u l-Mewt ta’ Vassalli”, *Sijon*, Vol. 7, Nos. 3-4 (1975), p. 85.

44. *CEM, Acta Originalia 672*, f. 25r.

45. *AAM, Corr. XX*, ff. 403r-403Av.

And did he get the appointment in 1788? The interview was to be held in July; but in his appeal to the Holy See in November he makes no mention of it. Moreover, that same year he registered as a student at the University, where he remained till 1790.<sup>46</sup> That year he was called a Professor of Oriental Languages.<sup>47</sup> Was it now that he got the job? And, if he did, what position did he occupy at the Sapienza? His subjects were the same as those taught by A.S. Assemani.

Vassalli's was a late vocation. To enter the Seminary boys had to be about 12 years old, of legitimate birth, of honest parents, and of good moral character, while a schoolmaster had to testify to their academic ability.<sup>48</sup> Mikiel Anton could not fulfil this last condition at that early age, since, till he was 17, he understood and spoke only Maltese.<sup>49</sup> He was refused entry not because he was past his boyhood, but because *essendo pieni tutti i posti*.<sup>50</sup> This must mean that other applicants had better qualifications than he – *piu atti ed idonei* – which is not surprising at all in his case. The Bishop would have liked to admit a greater number of students, proportional to the needs of the diocese; but the Seminary lacked the necessary funds to provide for their schooling.<sup>51</sup>

If Vassalli could not afford to pay for his expenses at the Seminary, how did he find the means to maintain himself at Rome? Can it be that he was sent by the Propaganda, as a promising student, to further his studies at the *Collegio Urbano*? This seems to be the most plausible answer. Otherwise, where could he have studied Dogmatic and Moral Theology, Canon Law, and Holy Scriptures, for the better understanding of which he applied himself to the three principal Oriental languages – Hebrew, Arabic and Syriac? This was before he entered the University.

His relation with the Propaganda must have been intimate. It was its Rector who counselled him to go as a Missionary in the East, in case

46. C. Sant, "M.A. Vassalli's Sojourn in Rome (1788-1790)", *The Sunday Times*, April 3, 1983, p.9.

47. M.A. Vassalli, *Mylsen Phoenico-Punicum Sive Grammatica Melitensis* (Romae, 1791), pp. 54-55.

48. *AAM, Editti* Vol.12, ff. 24r-v.

49. M.A. Vassalli, *Ktyb yl Klym Malti mfysser byl-Latin u Byt-Taljan – Lexicon Melitense-Latino-Italum* (Romae, 1796), p. XIV.

50. *AAM, Corr.* XX, f. 112r.

51. *AAM, Corr.* XXIII, f. 2r.

he did not get the appointment at the Sapienza. Mikiel Anton, who had even joined the *Congregazione dei Chierici* at the *Casa della Missione*, refused the suggestion, but he made it a point to offer his services as an interpreter of Oriental languages.<sup>52</sup> Besides, it was at the Propaganda that he printed his works.

His course at the *Collegio Urbano* must be another reason why Vassalli registered at the fifth class of Arabic at the Sapienza. His presence at this University, where he studied *materie sacre, filosofia, e lingue* was first revealed, though unobtrusively, in 1941 by Domenico Spadoni. The article was entitled "*Maltesi nell' ateneo Romano dalla fine del '600 alla meta dell'800*", which he published in the *Archivio Storico di Malta*.<sup>53</sup> But it was just a name in a list, which escaped the attention of scholars. It was only Mgr Prof. C. Sant who resuscitated it from this limbo and brought it forcefully, among other seminal information, to our attention.

Another point. How could Vassalli have applied to lecture at the Sapienza if he was not well-grounded in his subjects? His studies at the school of Arabic in Malta did not give him, for sure, the necessary credentials. Moreover, he was sure he would get the post, which implies he had the necessary backing. This must have been Assemani's. This great authority taught Arabic at the *Collegio Urbano*,<sup>54</sup> and he knew the candidate's mettle only too well.

In 1797 Vassalli was in Malta where he led the revolt against the government of the Order of St. John. An important source of information hitherto unknown<sup>55</sup> about this event is the report that Mgr Giulio Carpegna, the last Inquisitor, sent to the Papal Secretary of State. On May 18, 1797 he informed Cardinal Busca that eight persons had been arrested on Thursday night, the 11th of May.<sup>56</sup> This followed the

52. *AAM, Corr. XXI, f. 290v.*

53. Domenico Spadoni, "*Maltesi nell' Ateneo Romano dalla fine del '600 alla meta dell'800*", *Archivio Storico di Malta, Anno XII, Fasc. 1, Nuova Serie*, Gennaio-Aprile 1941, p.70.

54. M.A. Vassalli, *Mylsen Phoenico-Punicum, op. cit.*, p. 57.

55. It was A. Vella who first referred to this part of Carpegna's correspondence; but he did not give it the attention it deserves, and relegated it to a footnote. See A.P. Vella, *Malta And The Czars* (Malta, 1965), p. 42.

56. This date was ascertained by counting backwards from 22 February, 1796, which was a Monday. *AIM, Corr. 83, f. 26r.*

consultations the *Avvocato del Principato* had had with three Councillors of the *Supremo Magistrato di Giustizia* and the two *Fiscali* of the *Castellania*.

The Inquisitor sent this report to avoid any misunderstanding. He claimed that various other accounts of the event would be published, which could convey a picture of distorted facts. As these could give the impression that the public peace had been really in danger, and that there had been a fatal attempt against legitimate Sovereignty, it was better to send his own version. Indeed, there had immediately risen among the public the fear that even here some rebellion was being hatched. And the apprehension increased later in the following days as a result of the arrest of another four accomplices.<sup>57</sup>

In fact, Mgr Carpegna was ignorant of the facts, and did not imagine what the conspirators, whom he criticised harshly with his pen, had had in mind. No striking success, so he stated, was to be expected from these "low-class Maltese, without any means, and unknown for any remarkable talents" – *nazionali di basso ceto, di niuna fortuna; ne cogniti per alcuna singolarità di talenti*. They also included ill-bred and idle young ruffians, who were arrested because of their imprudent talking, whose significance they did not even understand. This was not only for their own punishment, but as well as to curb, with such a show of force, the temerity of many a worthless youth, who, presumptuously, did not use the necessary caution when referring to these disturbances.

Those of any note among the detained were two young sergeants of the *Corpo delle Galere*, another two low-ranked officers of the *Reggimento dei Cacciatori*, and one who lately had published a Grammar and a Dictionary of Maltese – *uno che ha ultimamente dato alla luce una Grammatica, ed un Dizionario di Lingua Maltese*. The rest were sons of small merchants. Imprisonment or exile was believed to be their lot; but the Inquisitor closed the letter by again emphasizing that the public peace was in no way affected.<sup>58</sup>

He realised the seriousness of the attempted rebellion only when he went to see the Grand Master. Some of the criminals arrested, so De

57. In the sentence of June 12, 1797 only ten were convicted. *NLM, Library 1020*, pp. 136-139.

58. *AIM, Corr.* 102, ff. 180r-v.



Rohan revealed to him, were indeed fomenting wicked designs; but they did not have the proportionate means to carry them out – *effettivamente taluni dei giovanastri arrestati fomentavano delle cattive intenzioni, ma senza alcun mezzo proporzionato a poterle realizzare*.<sup>59</sup>

Carpegna even sent to Cardinal Busca a copy of the sentence against Vassalli and his partners for plotting against the State. In case those exiled made their way to the Pontifical State, he would have a list of their names.<sup>60</sup> By July 18, 1797 these had already left Malta. The only exception concerned Salvatore Bartolo, and his brother, Angelo, who, at the instance of their father were to remain confined in one of the castles here.<sup>61</sup>

Vassalli was sentenced to life-imprisonment. But whether he escaped from gaol,<sup>62</sup> or – as Mr. J. Cassar Pullicino opines – he was set at liberty when the French conquered Malta<sup>63</sup> is still a bone of contention among historians. Only one thing we can be sure of. In December, 1797 various Maltese, including the cleric Giorgio Grugnet – who wore the French cockade in his hat – fled from the Island on two French frigates.<sup>64</sup> Vassalli may well have been one of these fugitives, in which case the phrase *la valeur française*<sup>65</sup> to which he owed his freedom (as he stated in his supplication for the Chair of Arabic) would refer to this incident, and not to the arrival of Napoleon in 1798.

Mikiel Anton was banished on January 15, 1801. He went to Tunis on board the brigantine *San Nicola* commanded by the Greek captain Angelo Patriccio.<sup>66</sup> According to Cremona<sup>67</sup> the first ray of light on the return to Malta of this “*uomo di lettere....ridotto ad una continua fame e nudita*”<sup>68</sup> is to be found in an advertisement in the *Malta Government Gazette* dated November 1, 1820. This notified that he was giving lessons

59. *Ibid.*, f. 181r.

60. *Ibid.*, f. 182r.

61. *Ibid.*, f. 185v.

62. G.A. Vassallo, *Storia di Malta Raccontata in Compendio* (Malta, 1854), p. 730.

63. J. Cassar Pullicino, “M.A. Vassalli in 1798-99”, *The Sunday Times*, 12.ii.1982, p.15.

64. *AIM, Corr.* 102, f. 203r.

65. *NLM, Arch.* 6524C, no. 337.

66. P(alace) A(rchives), V(alletta), *Gran Corte della Valletta. Registrum Patentarum*, 1800-1801, Vol.1, unnumbered.

67. A. Cremona, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

68. This is how he described himself in his petition of 1822 to Bishop Mattei. See J. Azzopardi, “5 Dokumenti Godda fuq Mikiel Anton Vassalli”. *Sagħtar*, No. 62 (March, 1979), pp. 18-19.

to “those gentlemen who are desirous of learning the French language grammatically.”<sup>69</sup> In fact, “*Antonio Vassallo nativo Maltese del Zebug*” had arrived much earlier, on June 19, on board the 129-ton English brigantine, the *Saint Francis*, after a journey of five days from Marseilles.<sup>70</sup> His wife, Catarina, together with their three children, returned on October 2, on the same ship.<sup>71</sup>

In 1828 Vassalli was residing at no. 2, *Strada Misida detta tal Guarda Manga, Pietà*, and was described by the parish priest of St. Paul's Valletta, as *sospetto*, and his house as *casa sospetta*.<sup>72</sup> What did this term signify? Mgr Prof. C. Sant, who unearthed this piece of much longed for information, at first believed it referred to his “irregular marriage”.<sup>73</sup> But that is not probable since if that is true the term used would have been *concubinato*.<sup>74</sup> There are instances, too, when only one of the partners is described by the term *sospetto*,<sup>75</sup> or *sospetta*,<sup>76</sup> which would not be the case if a couple were living in concubinage. Again, while the man is described as *sospetto*, his partner is *concubinata*.<sup>77</sup> Hence, the incumbent who drew such lists of inhabitants distinguished between the two terms, which could not be coterminous.

Can it refer to “non-practising persons”, as the same writer later made it out to be?<sup>78</sup> Internal evidence proves that this is not likely, either. In another document for 1822-1825, where the term *sospetto* is also used, non church-goers must be those who did not fulfil their Easter duties – *non hanno adempito il precetto*.<sup>79</sup> Vassalli's marriage must not have been religious,<sup>80</sup> nor did he frequent church, his place being “among

69. *Malta Government Gazette*, 1 Nov. 1820, No. 1635, p. 2421.

70. The other passengers were Mr Manley Porver; Colonel Balneavis, his wife, and son; Dr Hume; and Saverio Schembri. See PAV, *Arrivals XI*, unnumbered.

71. PAV, *Arrivals XII*, unnumbered.

72. PA (St. Paul's, Valletta); SA (1828), f. 115r.

73. C. Sant, “Tagħrif Ġdid fuq M.A. Vassalli”, *Lehen il-Malti* (1980), No. 22, p. 5.

74. PA (St. Paul's, Valletta), SA (1828), ff. 36r, 38r, 45r.

75. *Ibid.*, f. 28r.

76. *Ibid.*, f. 78v.

77. *Ibid.*, f. 59r.

78. See the interview given by him to Prof. J. Aquilina in *The Sunday Times*, 15 July, 1984, p. 20 – “The house of Vassalli is marked as *casa sospetta*, a term which means either the house of two persons cohabiting together, or just non-practising persons”.

79. PA (St. Paul's, Valletta), SA (1822-1825), f. 15r.

80. See Rev. C.F. Schlienz's letter to the Secretary of the Church Missionary Society published in *Sijon*, Vol. 7 (1975), p. 83 – “Vassalli had never been legally married”.

the dishonest”<sup>81</sup> – as the parish priest, Rev. Canon Michele Cilia, put it when Vassalli died. Why was he not, then, described as such in the *Liber Status Animarum*?

The most plausible interpretation is that *sospetto*, which term is not used before the British period, marked out those suspected of being Protestants. The beginning of the 19th century was particularly aggressive on the part of Protestant propaganda,<sup>82</sup> and Catholic authorities were on the watch for any possible apostates. Vassalli, with his close association with these English missionaries, though he “never made profession of being a Protestant”, must have been particularly watched with suspicion.<sup>83</sup>

The points raised in this article, with all the queries left unanswered, are a demonstration of a healthy interest in this “unfortunate patriot”.<sup>84</sup> Gone are the days, for instance, of such gross prejudice as that exhibited by *PIDÌ*.<sup>85</sup> But those who wish to assess his personality and his achievements must build their historical houses on the bones of the dead, and not on those of unfounded impressions.<sup>86</sup>

81. *Ibid.*, p.83.

82. For a good book on this topic see C. Sant’s *It-traduzzjoni tal-Bibbja u l-Ilsien Malti, 1810-1850* (Malta, 1975). See Also Bianca Fiorentini, *Malta Rifugio Di Esuli E Focolare Ardente Di Cospirazione Durante Il Risorgimento Italiano* (Malta, 1966), pp. 89-92.

83. *Sijon*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

84. *NLM*, Arch. 6523C, p. 128.

85. See the invective signed *PIDÌ* addressed to Mgr Dun Karm Psaila – “*Lo sa, Monsignore, che il pioniere della parlata maltese – quello che voi tutti venerate, il Vassalli – era al soldo delle Società protestanti? Che fù uno dei fondatori di una Reformed Church of Malta e che morì fuori della Chiesa cattolica?*” – *Malta*, 29.ix.1934

86. Two works which appeared too late to be used in the present study are: C. Bonavia, “M.A. Vassalli’s Commercial Activity”, *The Sunday Times*, October 30, 1988, p. 35; and L. Cachia, *Mikiel Anton Vassalli* (Malta, 1988).

Bno Padre

112.

Michele Antonio Vassalli Malteze della Città di Mohar in età d'anni 25  
 è uno della S. V. spogliatamente espone, come desideroso d'iniziare  
 il suo studio Teologico: si presentò al suo Proprio Ordinario, pregando  
 che lo ammettesse nel suo Seminario. Ma quando per tutti i posti  
 di Curia, e non potendo l'Ordo ammettere tra i Conventuali, che pregano  
 per i suoi studi Maltezi in ogni anno, non potè conseguire il suo intento,  
 istò che il Patrimonio ecclesiastico dopo la morte del suo Genitore  
 si riducesse a soli suoi studi Maltezi ho, quasi sono spignono secondo  
 il Monasterio della S. di S. felicemente regnante in quella Città.  
 Considerando frattanto nell'età e nel desiderio di farsi sacerdote, di  
 consiglio del suo Ordinario, che promise di spedirgli le Dimissionali,  
 venne in Roma, dove ha proseguito i suoi studi, particolarmente per  
 nelle lingue Orientali. Scrisse da questa Città al suo Ordinario per le  
 promesse Dimissionali, ma gli fu risposto, che doveva prima servire tre  
 anni alla Chiesa. In questo stato di cose prega l'Ordo la S. V. a voler  
 si degnare di dispensarlo da questa legge del triennale servizio, onde  
 possa così esser consentito dal suo Ordinario. Che S.