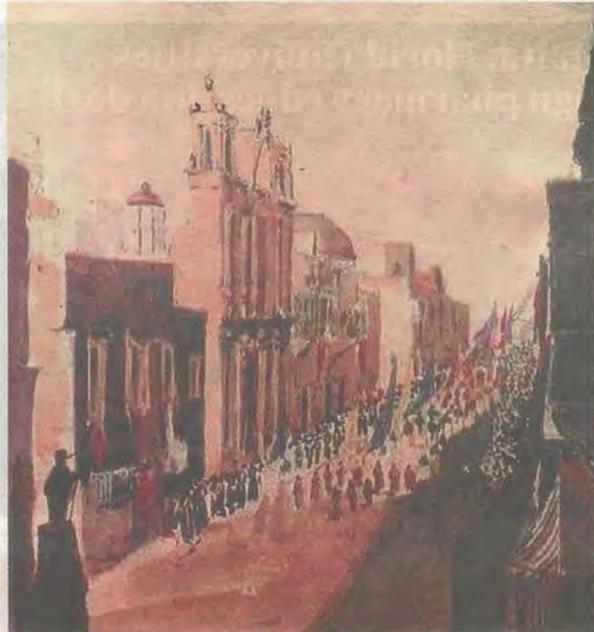


LIFE & WELLBEING HISTORY



An old image of the processional statue of St Paul venerated in Valletta.



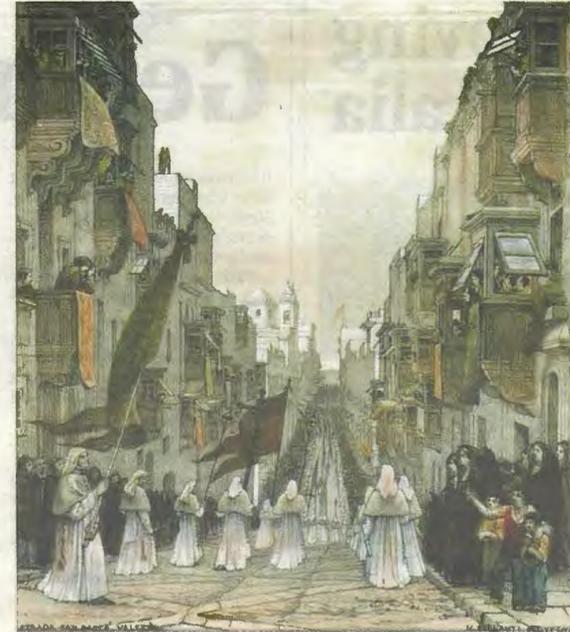
The procession of St Paul in Valletta, by Owen Stanley, 1831.



Religious procession in Valletta in the 19th century, by Girolamo Gianni. Private collection, Malta.



Grand procession down St Paul Street, Valletta, by Brocktorff and Schranz.



Procession, St Paul's feast, Valletta, by Michele Bellanti.

An 1840 procession of St Paul – devotion and scandal



GIOVANNI BONELLO

The years 1838 and 1839 started and ended in Malta as if winter had forgotten what its function really was. What little rain, what clouds beckoned, appeared more derisory than comforting. A sense of defeat, maybe desolation, riveted the people. Wells and cisterns yawned bone dry, the crops withered, farmers had more water in their eyes than in their fountains. Hope and anguish no longer alternating, the people were resigned to a lethal aridity. The torrid summer of 1840 passed, and still no rain-cloud weighted the horizon. A tragic third year introduced drought as the new normality.

Mgr Francesco Saverio Caruana then headed the Maltese diocese, a bishop few esteemed, except for the British, who cherished him as they believed, rightly or wrongly, that he owed them such a debt of gratitude for promoting him to a bishopric he did not deserve, that he would do their bidding whenever required. The provost of St Paul's church in Valletta and parish priest was Canon Feliciano Sarreo, appointed in March 1838. He and the bishop agreed that the people of Malta would be brought out to invoke the mercy of God, in a colossal penitential procession with the statue of St Paul, the patron of the island, an occasion which would witness the whole nation prostrate in collective prayer.

Sunday, November 22 was chosen as the day for the great event. The promoters expected every Maltese to take part, and the momentum of an intense organisational effort never flagged.

Priests and laymen, men and women, old and young, convents, associations and confraternities were urged to gather in Valletta to take part. When the day arrived, thousands thronged the streets surrounding the church of St Paul's Shipwreck to be near the statue of the apostle. A truly national event, and two of the four newspapers then published in Malta gave it major prominence. The procession had to leave from St Paul's church and proceed toward the church of St Publius in Floriana, and once there, the statues of the two patron saints would remain exposed to the worship and prayers of the faithful.

Preparations proceeded smoothly, even encouragingly, until a dire scandal erupted that left everyone aghast. The old traditional rivalry between the two Valletta parishes, St Paul's and St Dominic's, suddenly offered more fuel to feed the flames. The friars of the convent of St Dominic publicly refused to take part in the procession with the statue of St Paul. "All the religious organisations accepted this invitation with great joy, except for the friars of St Dominic, who protested that their parish church was not to serve after anyone else" lamented *Il Mediterraneo - Gazzetta di Malta* in an editorial comment.

The paper added: "To the same extent that this spectacle was uplifting, the refusal of the Dominicans to be united with the devout faithful to beseech, with the intercession of the Apostle, the help of God, was scandalous. Ah! Must the friars, in matters so holy, pursue such ridiculous expectations, priorities so damaging? Must infantile tantrums, protocol, the vanities of the world prevail when the public welfare is at stake? Should these dominate in those from whom the people expect an example of peace, of concord and of unity? Are the Dominicans anxious to revive those scenes of anger of friar against friar, that rage that had started with one word and ended so fatally for the Catholic faith? And what is the bishop doing, if he fails to condemn them strongly and publicly? The faithful expect reparations for this public scandal."

At that time, the prior of the Dominicans in Valletta was Fr Giovanni Battista Balzan, who passed away in February 1853.

Il Mediterraneo, first published in 1838, was a very influential newspaper of its times. It became the voice of many of the Italian political exiles who had found refuge in Malta after the movement for the unification and liberation of Italy had taken off. The most illustrious Italian patriots wrote in it, as also those Maltese intellectuals who favoured the unification of the many fragmented Italian states, such as Zaccaria Roncali, later judge, Vincenzo Azzopardi and Evaristo Castaldi, who in time came to challenge the British colonial government for those political and constitutional liberties that eventually led to Malta's quest for independence.

The scandal of the self-love then displayed by the Dominicans would hardly count as an isolated incident. Those were days when pique, anxiety for prerogatives, precedence and privileges had gripped many entities, not sparing religious ones, with them elbowing for dignities, prizes and decorations, as if the redeeming faith in the

son of the carpenter depended on glitter, on honours and exterior vanities. There were the epic struggles of the canons of St Paul's in Valletta to obtain the prerogative of the mace and of the *mozzetta* lined in red silk, which the *monsignori* of the Cathedral valiantly resisted – a conflict that lasted not less than 33 years, and which attracted the attention and concern of popes, cardinals, governors and British ministers.

There was the struggle of the Dominicans to have their church recognised as a basilica, with all the honours and prerogatives deriving from that promotion. There was the conflict of the Carmelite friars for the *tinnabulum* (portable bell) and the liturgical umbrella, the fight by the church of St Publius to assert its independence from the matrix church of St Paul. And these are just a few of those clashes that come to mind at the moment. Everyone battling for more privileges, to appear shinier than the rest.

"The friars of the convent of St Dominic publicly refused to take part in the procession with the statue of St Paul"

The people had got used to these never-ending skirmishes for prestige and pre-eminence, fought in the name of religion, and participated fiercely on one side or the other. Many of these conflicts ended in the laps of the popes, who had enough real troubles to keep them busy without the poisoned piques renting the Maltese apart. Humility, obedience and submission was then making a spectacular exit from Christian virtues.

The other Maltese newspaper to record these events was the *Giornale Cattolico*, edited by the Rev. Leopoldo Fiteni (1789-1852), the parish priest of Senglea. More than a news journal, it had taken on the semblance of a propaganda paper for the dissemination of Catholic doctrine and happenings. The paper had five entire pages about what led to the procession of St Paul, but kept an ominous silence on the scandal of the boycott by the Dominicans. Fr Fiteni had started life as a Dominican himself, but quoting reasons of health, had left the convent and joined the regular clergy. In five long pages about this national event under the patronage of St Paul, he succeeded in not mentioning St Paul even once!

The grand cortege of the Apostle was the culmination of a whole week of prayers in all the churches of Malta, litanies, exposition of the Eucharist for three consecutive days and regional processions in every parish of the island. Fr Fiteni argued that when the people, through their evil, provoke the ire of heaven, God uses water as a punishment: He either drowns the earth in endless rain, as in the Deluge, or he forsakes the wrongdoers parched for water, as was then happening in Malta.

On the appointed day, November 22, the people of Malta flocked by their thousands to join this penitential procession "the streets, the piazzas, the churches were thronged with enormous crowds; every Maltese was intently sobbing, pleading for forgiveness, begging for grace. Grieving, all the people raised their voice to the heavens, to implore from the giver of all goodness, the grace of rainfall".

The procession moved from St Paul's Street, Valletta, towards Floriana, but did not go through Porta Reale, as the gate designed by Tumas Dingli in the 17th century was too low for the statue to go through it, so the faithful had to detour the long way through Porta di Monte, or Marina Gate, as the entrance to Valletta from Grand Harbour was then known. (This was demolished in 1884 and in a realignment, the new Victoria Gate replaced it, designed by architect Luigi Galizia). According to press reports, such great masses gathered "that it was long since Malta had witnessed such a moving scene", though no crowd estimates are proposed. The children led the procession, extremely devoutly, then the monks and friars of every convent (except the Dominicans) the regular clergy, and finally the canons of St Paul closest to the statue.

When the procession finally reached the Floriana granaries, the statue of St Publius was carried out of the church "to greet the image of the Apostle. The meeting between those two glorious icons, in whom all the hope of the people rested, proved more moving than anything else". Then, Floriana still formed part of the parish of St Paul, and consequently the church of St Publius was not an autonomous parish, but only a dependent on the "mother" parish in Valletta.

The organisers chose Don Francesco Pace, a missionary priest, to deliver the homily! The press described Fr Pace as "renowned for his integrity, an honour to his native country". The contemporary media did not reproduce Fr Pace's words, but in a manuscript in a private collection, Rev. Giovanni Carmelo Gristi jotted

down notes of this speech, which I am transcribing. "In this sermon, Don Francesco Pace from Zurrieq stressed on how the vices which had become public and the rejection of the faith that had become fashionable, were the reason for this public punishment. And it was useless for the people to weep and to pray, unless they were determined to return to their original faith, to their ancient integrity. The crowd listened with great attention, and was greatly moved".

Though Fr Gristi does not specify, I believe the sermon was in Maltese. I am baffled how, before the invention of microphones and loudspeakers, it was possible to address enormous crowds that filled large open spaces like the Floriana granaries. Were voices then more powerful and far-reaching than today?

The event came to its conclusion smoothly and peacefully. "In these gatherings of thousands upon thousands of contrite Christians, not one loud noise, not one conflict or disorder. In other gatherings, not religious, even those far smaller in numbers, notwithstanding the presence of the police force and the watchfulness of the constables, almost always some fighting, disturbance, conflicts and violence occur. But not a trace of these in this general movement of all the towns and villages of Malta."

When the ceremony ended, the crowds dispersed and returned to their homes full of hope that the grace they prayed for would be granted. In fact, the following day, the heavens gave the signal that the patron saints had yielded to the prayers of the crowds, and it started raining. Not everyone believed this to be a miracle. In the *Giornale Cattolico*, the article took the shape of a dialogue between a convinced Christian and another person who has lost his faith, with the believer, not quite surprisingly, always winning the argument. Of course it rained, the cynic said, the procession was held when the barometer had predicted that the rains were just round the corner.

Fr Gristi's manuscript reveals many details about who took part in the extraordinary procession in honour of St Paul held in November 1840. As these details are not available elsewhere and the manuscript also contains an impressive list of the many confraternities then active in Malta, I believe it to be useful for me to copy and translate it.

The procession was made up in this order:

- A crucifix and two banners of the Christian Doctrine, under the Rev. Don Gio Batta Cauchi, director;
- The Pia Unione dei Giovani, of the venerable church of Santa Maria ta' Giesu, under a Minor Observant friar;
- The Confraternity of St Vincent Ferrer, under a Dominican friar;
- The Confraternity of St Francis de Paola, under Rev. Dr Don Ludovico Mifsud Tommasi (the poet);
- The Confraternity of Souls of the Cemetery, under the Rev. Don Alessandro Cordina;
- The Confraternity of Our Lord Jesus Resurrected, under the Rev. Don Gaetano Gatt;
- The Company of Jesus and Mary of the church of St Rocco, under the Rev. Don Giuseppe Carmelo Gristi (the author of the manuscript);
- The Company of the Souls in Purgatory, of the church of St Nicholas (tal-Erwieh) under the Rev. Don Emmanuele Speranza;
- The company, or brotherhood, of the Third Order of St Francis, of the church of Minor Observant Friars, under a friar of the same order;
- Then follow the companies "del sacco" – confraternities wearing the *xkora* or tunic:
- The arch-confraternity of the Illustrious Crucifix, under a Minor Observant friar;
- The Confraternity of St Publius of Floriana;
- The Confraternity of the Blessed Franco (of the Carmelite church);
- The Confraternity of St Agatha;
- The Confraternity of the Holy Martyrs Crispin and Crispinian;
- The Confraternity of St Homobonus;
- The Confraternity of the Guardian Angels;
- The Confraternity of St Joseph;
- The Confraternity of St Michael;
- The Confraternity of the Blessed Virgin of Carmel;
- The Confraternity *ta' Cintura*;
- The Confraternity of the Conception of Our Lady;
- The Confraternity of the Blessed Virgin of Charity;
- The Confraternity of the Most Holy Rosary of the Virgin Mary;
- The Confraternity of the Most Holy Sacrament of the church of the Most Reverend Dominican fathers;
- To follow, the friars:
- The cross and banner of the Reverend Capuchin fathers, with a large number of friars;
- The Reverend Minor Conventual fathers;
- The Reverend Carmelite fathers;
- The Reverend Augustinian fathers;
- The Reverend Minor Observant fathers.
- The regular clergy, who were very numerous, as were all the fathers, including an Augustinian *padre* maestro who happened to be in Malta with powers to act as Commissioner; to investigate and determine conflicts that had arisen within that Order in Malta.
- Behind these came canons of the Collegiate of St Paul. Crowning the event was the statue of St Paul, with six of the regular clergy wearing the surplice and holding candles with four wicks in their hands.
- The companies of the Most Holy Rosary and of the Most Holy Sacrament were under two Dominican friars, the Rev. Fr (blank) Dimech and Rev. Fr Vincenzo Thei.



A 19th century engraving of a religious procession in Malta.

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Fifty years ago November 19, 1967

STERLING DEVALUED
Late last night the British government announced that the rate of exchange between sterling and the US dollar had been brought down from \$2.80 to \$2.40 to the pound, a devaluation of 14.3 per cent. Public expenditure is being reduced by £400 million, including £100m in defence expenditure. The Department of Information announced last night that the Prime Minister called a meeting of the Cabinet at the Auberge d'Aragon.

LORD ROBENS ARRIVES
Lord Robens, the chairman of the Malta Steering Committee, arrived yesterday in Malta for the committee's first full meeting. The committee was appointed to supervise the carrying out of the Anglo-Maltese Joint Mission's plans to meet the economic effects of the British Forces run-down in Malta. Asked what will be done about the re-employment of redundant Service workers, Lord Robens said that Mr Woodhouse, a committee member, was an expert on educational training.

QUEEN'S MEMORABLE VISIT
"This week's visit to Malta of Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh has been superlatively successful. The four days, November 14-17, were a home-coming for the Queen and Prince Philip, who undertook a heavy programme of public engagements, mixing with people from all walks of life, all united in loyalty to the Sovereign." (Excerpt from editorial)

Ten years ago November 19, 2007

MAN DIES IN ROOF COLLAPSE
An 87-year-old man died tragically late on Saturday night when the roof of his bedroom caved in on him while he was asleep. The man, Giovanni Camilleri, died on the spot. The police, civil protection personnel and paramedics were on site in St Mary Street, Sliema, within minutes. The roof appears to have given way under the weight of rainwater which gathered at the centre as rain fell throughout the day and night. The rusty beam which spanned the room seems to have buckled under the pressure. The bedside clock, which was still on the floor amid the debris yesterday morning, read 11:25pm, probably, the moment of the collapse.

KITE SURFER KILLED BY WIND
A 29-year-old man was killed in an unfortunate kite surfing accident in a bay near Torri l-Abjad in Armeri yesterday. Police said the Bulgarian who lives in Malta was preparing to practise his sport at about 3pm when a gust of wind caught his kite and slammed him into a nearby tree. He barely had time to recover from that impact when he was picked up again by the wind and slammed onto the metal roof of a nearby room. An ambulance rushed to the site but he had lost a lot of blood in the accident. He underwent surgery immediately but died during the operation.