

FLORIANA PARISH CHURCH

by Comm. E.G. Montanaro, K.M., K.C.S.G. O.St.J.

Before the Church of St Publius was built in 1733, the people of Floriana went to the small Church of Our Lady of Sorrows for their religious duties as the Sarria Church belonged to the Order of St John and the Capuchin Church of the Holy Cross was perhaps unfamiliar to them. There was a small Chapel dedicated to St Publius since 1699 adjacent to a windmill (according to register No 164 of Mgr. Inquisitor Serbelloni) but by 1733 these two landmarks had disappeared. In 1720 Grandmaster de Vilhena requested the Holy See to grant Sarria Church the status of a Parish Church for the fast growing population of the Suburb. The Pope left the matter to the local Bishop, Mgr. Gori Mancini, who suggested instead the building of a new Church. The matter was again raised in 1728 when the Holy See agreed with the Bishop's proposal and Vilhena made no further objections. Canon Giuseppe Giuccardi the Parish Priest of the Church of St Paul Shipwrecked of Valletta, lost no time and on the 2nd of August 1733, Bishop Paolo Alpheran de Bussan, blessed the foundation stone of the new Church and Canon Giuccardi intended to work for its recognition as the Vice-Parish Church of the Church of St Paul Shipwrecked of Valletta.

On the 20th of January 1767, the eve of the Feast of St Publius, fireworks were for the first time included in the festivities programme. On the 19th January 1768, a solemn procession from the Capuchin Church of the Holy Cross to the Vice Parish Church of St Publius brought the Reliquary of this Saint, which had been authenticated by Bishop Bernardino of Monte Alcino, and which was a gift on the part of the Capuchin Community to the new Vice-Parish. In those days there still existed a number of fortifications meant to hinder an enemy from assaulting Valletta but during peace-time, it made an entrance for wayfarers far from easy and at night time the different gates were closed and not opened before full daylight. Hence the people of Floriana started their long and, at times, bitter campaign to obtain the approval of the Holy See for the dismemberment of their Church from that of St Paul Shipwrecked of Valletta. The polemic started on the 9th of July 1770. In 1780, the Rev. Paolo Muscat, Treasurer of the St Paul Chapter of Canons offered a sum of money which together with the collections made in Floriana served to meet the expense for the erection of the Dome of the Church. In 1788 was opened the Crypt of the Church, at Government expense. It was much admired with its 400 graves and altars on two sides. On 28 May 1792 Bishop Labini consecrated the Vice-Parish Church of St Publius. In 1813, Bishop Ferdinando Mattei carried out the Pastoral Visit in the Church and in 1833, the Confraternity of St Publius Martyr was canonically set up in this Church.

In 1839, the Rev. Giuseppe Ellul, Vice Parish Priest of Floriana joined hands with the Rev. Filippo

Grech in raising once again the vexed question of the raising of the status of the Vice-Parish to that of a full Parish after its dismemberment from the Valletta Church of St Paul Shipwrecked. A Deputation was sent to Rome to lay the case before the Holy See in the right perspective, but nothing prevailed against the determined stand of the Chapter of Canons of the Church of St Paul Shipwrecked. Matters began to take an ugly turn in Floriana, Cool heads suggested prudence and diplomatic ways till finally in 1844, Pope Gregory XVI signed the relative Bull for the erection of the Church of St Publius to the status of a full Parish Church. The Decree to the Bishop of Malta bore the date: 5 March 1844. In the list of Parishes, Floriana then became the thirty-first. In 1854 the Feast of St Publius was held on the second Sunday after Easter for the first time. The Holy See had agreed to the change from the old date, the 21st of January, at the request of the people of Floriana as inclement weather often hampered the festivities in the month of January.

In 1885 the work for the enlargement of the Church by the addition of four side chapels on each side of the main aisle was completed and the new imposing facade, Corinthian in style was, and is still, much admired. With this wonderful setting, thousands of spectators gathered on the Granaries have witnessed so many unforgettable events in the History of the Church, namely; The Centenary of the Martyrdom of St Publius (125-1925); the Centenary of the Death of St Augustine (432-1931); the Crowning of the Icon of Our Lady of Damascus; and the Solemn Consecration of Malta to the Sacred Heart of Jesus by Cardinal Lepicier. These events have been recorded for posterity in the long rectangular Marble slabs with proper inscriptions that have been fixed to the walls under the Portico. Here must be struck a sad note. On the 28th April 1942, the Church, the Church was badly damaged by enemy bombs of the Luftwaffe. The Dome was shattered, the renowned Statue of St Publius, the masterpiece that Vincenzo Dimech produced in 1811 was also damaged whilst Cali's famous 'Crucifixion' was lost for ever. The slogan of the people of Floriana was "Resurgam" and indeed so it proved. Preparations were made for the first centenary of the Parish in 1944 but the date was transferred to the year 1945 so that it could be held on the same day as that of the Feast, the 15th April, whilst the repairs to the Church were in an advanced stage. The festivities on this occasion were indeed impressive. Since then, the Church has been further embellished by the renowned artist Emvin Cremona who painted the ceiling-panels representing episodes in the life of St. Publius and his association with St Paul. For the people of Floriana the Church of St Publius is their second home. Long may it prosper in their hearts and devotions for the Glory of God and to the honour of their beloved Patron Saint.