Fr Matthew Sultana (1918 - 1986)

Fr Matthew Sultana was born on 5 August 1918 in Xaghra, Gozo, to Matthew and Mary née Sultana.

He was baptized Vincenzo in the parish of his native village. A week later, his parents returned home to Kalkara in Malta and soon after, in 1920, the family moved to Zabbar, where Vincenzo began attending government school. Three years following his grandfather’s death, in 1931, Fr Manwel, a family friend, encouraged Vincenzo to join the Capuchin Friars so he had a great admiration for the Capuchin Order. On 6 December 1934, he became a novice and here took a new name ‘Fra Mattew’ as was the tradition of the time. He was a diligent student and studied Latin, Italian, literature, philosophy and theology. He was ordained at the height of World War II on 25 July 1942, in the Cathedral of St Mary in Gozo by Bishop Mgr Michael Gonzi.

For 17 years Fra Mattew worked tirelessly in hospitals. He was also Chaplain at the Blue Sisters Hospital, today known as Zammit Clapp. He was a well known teacher, in the Government Technical Institute and in the Serafik school where he taught Maltese, Italian and Latin. Throughout his career he had the opportunity to meet the Maltese poet Ruiar Briffa, whose poetical works he was very fond of. Fra Mattew also used to work with his brother Fortunato in his shop, where he would bead rosaries. In his free time, he wrote hymns and poems. He also became a Member of the Maltese Academy.

Among the poems he wrote, he wrote many dedicated to Our Lady of Grace of Zabbar and related to this titular feast. One of his poems is ‘Tnehida ta’ Zphazahu’ (Sigh of Youth), which is about a young boy who is about to die, where he urges his girlfriend to pray for him. In the poem ‘Lill- Musbieh il-lelj’ (To the oil lamp of the night), the poet urges the lamp to turn itself off, because it’s unlucky in finding love. He writes that there aren’t many high hopes for people with luck like the ‘oil lamps’ – ‘M’hemm takniemit sbob ghal min hu xortih bhal tnejek Musbieh il-lelj, jekk ghandek tafsir ma’sbithek id-dinja kf ddar.’

Fr Sultana wrote the hymn Our Lady of Grace, ‘B- Madonna tal-Grazzja.’ The music was composed by Maestro Joseph Abela Scorto (1910 - 1970) and was played by the band Maria Mater Grazzja. Over a period of 25 years he wrote a number of sonnets both for a historical event that took place in Zabbar and for the feast of Our Lady of Grace. He wrote about historical events that occurred in our life time like ‘Tlugh fil-Qimar’ (The trip to the moon), ‘Il-Qill ta’ John F. Kennedy’ (The Murder of John F. Kennedy) and even a reply to the astronaut Yuri A. Gagarin, who said that in space, he did not meet God. So Fra Mattew wrote: ‘Jekk qod inhoss fija ghazla bhal din, kif nista’ ma nhoss l’Alla, ghd Gagarin?’ (If inside me I am feeling an urge like this, how can I not feel God, tell me Gagarin?)

On 24 May 1985 in an interview with Tonio Bonello, Fra Matthew Sultana believed that he was born a poet. He wrote his first poem ‘Lill-Warda’ (To the Rose) when he was thirteen years old. It was shown to the poet/politician Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici, and he encouraged him to continue writing in this genre, and thus Fra Mattew became one of our best poets. He also wrote well-known novel ‘Fate of love’, where he used proverbs and Maltese idioms in a skillful manner. This was read on a local radio station and issued the second publication in 1976. He also wrote a song dedicated to Xaghra, the town where he was born.

Sultana was one of the romantic poets who understood that Christian faith plays a role in our identity as a people. He availed himself of poems to inspire us to love our country and live our faith and to value the gospel and virtue. These are some of his other publications:

1951 - Il- Haja tal- Patrijarka San Francisco Assisi
1955 - Hisieb u Hajja - verses
1958 - Il-fugur ta’ Censa Kristu u l-legenda tal-ghaxjar - verses
1959 - Destin ta’ Mbbba - novel
1970 - Wersaj u Mars - verses
1970 - Tilt Chamjiet
1975 - In- Seba kemiet ta’ Kristu fiug- In Salib u l-uzzati ta’ Hamas tc- Xikra

Fra Matthew died on Monday, 17 February 1986 at the age of 67. His funeral was held at the Capuchin church in Kalkara concelebrated by the Capuchin Bishop Mgr Pawl Darmanin and about 40 other priests.

May he be of inspiration to others and rest in Peace.