

## Book Review:

# DEFINITIVE CHURCH HISTORY

Joseph Bezzina, *L-istorja tal-Knisja f'Malta* (=Kullana Kulturali 42), Malta, PIN-Pubblikazzjoni Indipendenza, 2002, x+16+348 pp. : colour illustrated; portraits; 25cm. ISBN: 99932-41-22-9.

Father Bezzina's history of the Church in Malta fills a long felt void. There have in the past been attempts to write this history but not one of the publications have conformed to the strict critical, scientific mould required today. Monsignor Arturo Bonnici's three volume work *History of the Church in Malta* (published between 1967 and 1975) was a brave attempt by an accomplished writer. The *Storia ecclesiastica di Malta* by Achille Ferris (1877) lacks the scientific basis to give it a serious standing even though it was a useful publication in the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century.

It was time that some serious researcher sat down and wrote a modern work based on proven facts and free from the pious desiderata that have somehow worked their way into works masquerading as history. Many of these have been unmasked by modern scholarship, and yet they persist in some works.

Father Bezzina weaves the tapestry of the two thousand year-long history of the Church in Malta in a very simple and logical way, placing it in its historical context. The work is written in Maltese and addressed to a wide readership because it forms part of a popular encyclopedia. It is hoped that in due course Father Bezzina will give us a more amplified English version to reach an even wider audience.

The story is framed by episodes of saints who have influenced life in Malta. It starts with the coming of Saint Paul to this archipelago and ends with the beatification of the three holy Maltese persons by the Pope John Paul ii in 2001. He relies heavily on documents which are beyond reproach and shies away from myths and traditions of doubtful authenticity. As can be expected, the history of the Church in Malta up to Middle Ages is scarce and poorly documented, though Father Bezzina strives to piece together from the few extant documents a vague historical thread. It is hard to imagine a continuum particularly because of the two hundred years of Arab domination. Yet he mentions the first recorded bishop of Malta one Julianus who attended and signed a papal *Constitutum* at the General Council of Constantinople in 553. Following this he is on surer grounds quoting the three letters of Pope Gregory the Great that feature Malta towards at the turn of the sixth century.

Following the obscure Arab rule, it appears that the Church started flourishing again with the Norman conquest. Churches and chapels began to be built again in the years that followed, at first within the walls of the fortified castles of Mdina and the Cittadella in Gozo and later in the countryside. The Swabians, the Angevins,

and the Aragonese followed each other as rulers of Malta. It is during these times that we start to see a succession of Bishops of Malta. There follows the organization of the diocese, the coming of the first mendicant orders, and the setting up of parishes. With the coming of the Knights in 1530, and with their flair for documenting everything, we get a clearer and more reliable picture. Obviously the story is of greater substance and depth than before.

The most detailed and documented part is the fifth one which covers the period from the coming of the French to Independence. This coincides with Father Bezzina's period of specialization and therefore one can understand why he treats it so deeply and with so much scholarship. The last part reaches out to the year 2001 with the beatification of the first three Maltese persons. This period is not distant enough to be seen in its historical perspective. Yet Father Bezzina yielded to the temptation of including it for completeness' sake.

The book is handsomely produced, clearly printed and well illustrated. It carries three appendices and has a very useful Glossary. As befits a serious work, it gives an exhaustive list of sources and is also well indexed.

This is a work which sets a new standard in Maltese ecclesiastical history and, as stated above, it fills a long-felt void. The critical approach makes it one of the best publications this year not only in the *Kullana Kulturali* series but also generally.

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