

Stella Maris Parish Church, Sliema

TITULAR Painting

Author Unknown, Our Lady of Porto Salvo (16th C)

Oil on canvas, approximately 347x240cm

In the course of church enlargement, the altar situated in the choir was dedicated to Stella Maris; The Star of the Sea. The occasion is inscribed in Latin on a marble in the Gospel side column. The inscription summarizes the initiative of the devoted towards the erection of this altar in 1892.

The first titular painting was by Raphael Caruana, donated to the Church by Girolamo Tagliaferro. The work, an oil on canvas, represents the Virgin and Child elevated on a cloud against the background of a star situated in the upper half of the picture. The Virgin, flanked by several *putti*, sheds light on a galley with hoisted sails and an erected Maltese flag, enclosed by Tigne Point and Valletta Point with Fort St. Elmo. Thus, the first altarpiece - presently in the sacristy - develops the representation of *Stella Maris* as the Patroness of Sailors. However, the size of the painting was not sufficient in proportion and a larger painting was to be commissioned to the artist Gagliardi; although there was no execution of the commissioned work.

In the period of December 1980, the mendicants of St. Dominic decided to substitute their titular painting, since in stylistic terms, it did not blend properly when compared to the newly commissioned work done by Peter Paul Caruana - who was the father of Raphael Caruana. The titular painting, concerning the Porto Salvo was the largest and perhaps the oldest work in the Church of St. Dominic, Valletta. The commission of the substituted work went to P.P. Caruana, who had already executed the apse painting. Instead of the former painting, Caruana painted the Virgin visiting St. Elizabeth. Yet although the new work was greatly appreciated, the Order became conscious of their mistake in removing the former titular painting from its place. One of the major reasons was that in the Papal Edict, Pope Pius V had chosen the day *Porto Salvo* as a day of feast and for this reason, they were also given special indulgences. Furthermore, Pope Gregory XIII had attributed the feast to Virgin Mary's Day of Birth; *festivitate Nativitatis B. Mariae Virginis de Mense Septembris celebrari*.

The painting remained in the Dominican's crypt exposed to humid conditions until it was discovered by a doctor, Sir Ferdinand Inglott, M.D., G.C.M.G. who bought the mistreated work. Inglott restored the work himself, since he was fond of restoration. Apparently a number of hidden instances were uncovered and it was soon realized that the work was indeed valuable. In his records on the restoration, Philip Mallia O.P. notifies the re-appearance of the port with galleys, and a kneeling knight, together with the original colour scheme. Monsieur Fouchard, a French Consul showed his interest in the work by offering the sum of 400 pounds to Sir Inglott; while Antonio dei Conti Preziosi expressed similar remarks. However Sir Ferdinand Inglott - who used to spend the summer months in Sliema - was aware of the alterations taking place in the new Church. Therefore, he donated the work to the Vicar-Curate of Stella Maris, Rev. Carm Gerada. The Dominicans expressed their feeling in retaining back the painting but Inglott refused this proposal. Thus, he asserted a condition which holds that if the work is removed from the altar in the choir of Stella Maris, then the Dominicans have the right to the painting once again.

Despite the difficulty in attributing the work, several hypothetical attributions have been brought forward. The historian, Professor Andrew P. Vella, says that the work was executed by Marc Antonio in 1583. However, until recently it was very much popular to attribute the work to Filippo Paladini. Such remarks originate from a speculation by Father Philip Mallia who says that Paladini might have done the work since he used to work in Malta. Yet when one compares Paladini's style to the actual titular painting, immediately he is provided with the necessary means to refuse this hypothesis.

The painting represents the Lady of Porto Salvo with the Child Jesus on her lap. They are placed upon a cloud, surrounded by four youthful angels. Below the Virgin's feet appears a *putto* with his head and wings showing, and similarly, four *putti* appear; two in each upper corner. Moreover, above the Virgin's head, two more *putti* fully appear while they culminate the Virgin. Below the celestial scene, the port is depicted, characterized by Fort Manoel and Fortina with the old Church. The port hosts two galleys that belong to the Order of St. John. Below the clouds, on the left, St. Dominic appears holding a white lily in one hand and a book in the other. The saint is in his Order's tunic, while at his feet, a dog who holds a flaming torch in his mouth is depicted. On the right hand side of the picture, St. Thomas Aquinas raises an Eucharistic Monstrance and carries a book. Between the two saints, Knight Caraffa de Aquino, Prior of Hungary and Capua appears in a kneeling position.

The composition of the painting develops on the theme of Porto Salvo; glorifying the celestial intervention that provides a safe haven, both to man (symbolized in the Knight) and to the galleys (which represent the entity of the Church). Although not depicted, the sea outside the port presents a number of difficulties that need to be surpassed and battled in order to arrive safely. The Knight inclines and expresses his gratitude and devotion towards the Patroness. The two saints, who manifest their contributions towards the Doctrine, emphasize his faith. On one side, St. Dominic holds 'The Gospel of Saint Matthew' which signifies his role in preaching; the *Ordinae Predicatorum*. Presumably the Saint is a manifestation of virtue; emphasized by the white lily which can be viewed as a symbol of chastity. Besides, the dog at his feet holds the flaming torch which signifies the *Lumen Ecclesiae*. On the other hand, the presence of St. Thomas Aquinas marks his intellectual contribution which is synthesized in the Medallion of the Sun he wears; a symbol of an enlightened mind. In his hand he holds the *Summa Theologiae* which is a synopsis of his works. The Eucharistic Monstrance symbolizes his contribution towards the Eucharist, since he compiled the Liturgical Office of Hours for the Solemnity of Corpus Domini.

In World War II, several paintings were destroyed or severely damaged when the church was bombed on the 1st March 1942. The titular painting was torn from the two running vertical sides and from the horizontal top.

On the basis of a communicative account, Mr. J.P. Vella - former organist of Stella Maris Parish Church - recounts that he was present in the church when the damage to the painting occurred and with the help of others transported the damaged canvas to the sacristy. Also, he guided the appointed restorer Giorgio Preca. Due to the several measures, which had to be taken in terms of church reconstruction, the canvas remained in the sacristy for a period of time. Presumably part of the canvas was taken away by an unknown. So far there is no recorded documentation which traces this particular instance, primarily because the necessary evidence is unavailable. Yet the integral missing part was impainted by Preca who had never seen the intact work before it was damaged and partially stolen. Thus, the restorer had to be guided by those who had previously seen the actual composition. Moreover, he constantly referred to a photograph that was taken on Rev. Vincenzo Manche's funeral in 1918. The photograph - taken from the western point towards the eastern axis of the church - portrays the funerary ceremony and vaguely features a substantial part of the painting, which reveals the original composition. The sources that helped Giorgio Preca in repainting the missing part of the work provide us with a close impression of the original formulation in terms of composition, technique and color-scheme. Yet if care-

fully examined, even from the viewer's position, Preca's retouches are brought forward. The inpainting initiates from the uppermost of the canvas allowing the two angles on the left to appear in their original state, since the vertical cut slightly touches the head of the second angel from the left. If his wing is followed downwards, the careful viewer can notice the horizontal line which indicates the difference between the original and the restored. The line divides in such a way that it shows that the lower half of the Virgin's body including the Child's feet, retain to the original while the upper half belongs to the restoration. Therefore, the *putti* holding the crown, parts of the surrounding angels and the Virgin's upper half, including the Child, are all reproduced in an attempt to conserve the painting's original format. The restoration - including a re-canvassing - required a period of eighteen months work and the sum of 150 *pounds*. The work was re-inaugurated on 21st August 1945, followed by several journalistic reports.

The painting is placed behind a series of candles (which stand out approximately half a meter from the canvas) and consequently the painted surface hosts wax drops which can be eliminated by restoration. The candles have recently been installed with electric light.

Moreover, the gallery-tone and cracks in the paint film require restoration in order to prevent paint loss. The retrieval of the warm palette, together with an amount of secluded details and highlights can only be attained through an appointed process of surface cleaning.

Dominique Ciano

SOURCES

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