

A WARM WELCOME TO ALL VISITORS TO SLIEMA “EN FETE”!

Fr. Norbert Ellul Vincenti O.F.M., M.A.(Oxon)

A warm welcome to you all to our Parish Church in Sliema, dedicated to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, and also to the Sliema Band Club just in front of the church, which is the musical arm of the Parish people!

Perched on the crest of the hill that rises steeply from the beautiful blue and placid waters of Marsamxett harbour, the proud sanctuary of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart of Jesus projects her motherly care over the flat-roofed houses of Sliema. The solidness of the stone fabric, the pride with which the twin-towered facade thrusts its massive masonry into the air, seem to indicate a material presence as old as hills. And yet the church is not old, as neither the town is old. Both have grown together since that magic moment in the latter part of the last century when the order to increase and multiply was fluttered abroad.

Sliema itself had been but sparsely populated before. The Knights of Malta thought of it only as a quiet place by the sea, even though the Great Siege of 1565 brought the Janissaries' boots and the dreaded Dragut's presence. The French were somewhat interested in the few buildings across the harbour from Valletta, the English built their forts and residential quarters here.

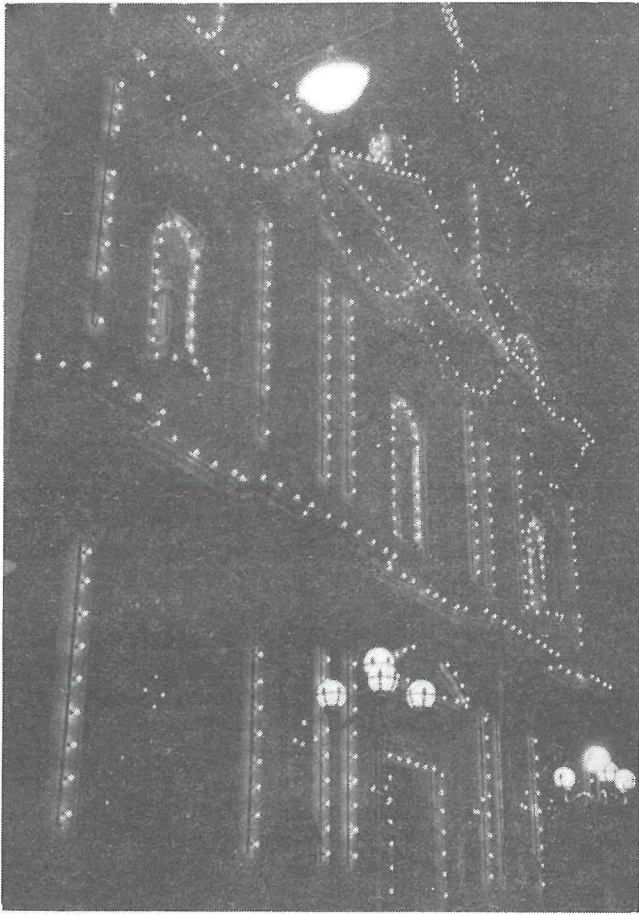
It was to be expected that someone would want to build a place of worship for the growing population. The turn of our sanctuary came in 1877 when Fr. Paul Vella, a devout priest from Valletta, decided to lay the foundation stone. When in 1881, he found that his health was preventing him from carrying out his duties, he passed the church on to the Franciscan Fathers, those followers of St. Francis of Assisi, who have served the population since that time without a break. They have even given their lives to serve their flock, not only because many of them have lived and died here, but also because when the church was hit during a German Luftwaffe raide during the last war, two of them were buried beneath the rubble. Not only was the church repaired and enlarged after the war, but the facade itself was embellished long before that, in 1936.

One of the main events in the history of the Sanctuary was the arrival of the Statue of B.V. Mary dedicated to a new devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, becoming very popular in France at the time, as well as all over Europe.

The statue is not only one of the most beautiful on the island, but it is the subject of a devout cult. It is brought



Sanctuary of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, Sliema



out in procession once a year on the first Sunday of July, when thousands of people from all over Malta are joined by hundreds of tourists from all over the world to celebrate the feast.

The church has undergone a continual process of embellishment. It has several paintings by the doyen of Maltese painters Giuseppe Cali, as well as other fine works by well-known artists, like Francesco Zahra, Lazzaro Pisani, Oscar Testa and others. It has fine recent paintings by Paul Camilleri Cauchi, remarkable silver utensils, historic vestments, altars, marbles, mosaic, sculpture and several beautiful wood engravings.

Visitors to the Parish Church of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, after having been round this sacred edifice, are advised to find a quiet corner in the church and enter into a sincere dialogue with the Lord and listen to His voice in the depth of their hearts. Such a dialogue will enable the visitors to find happiness of spirit as well as relaxation and rest in the mental and physical sense during their stay here.

N.B. A beautifully illustrated booklet purporting to be a pictorial guide to the history, and some of the wealth, of this sanctuary, published by Fr. Josphe Vella OFM, is on sale from the church.

The Church facade lit by night, on Festa Day.

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