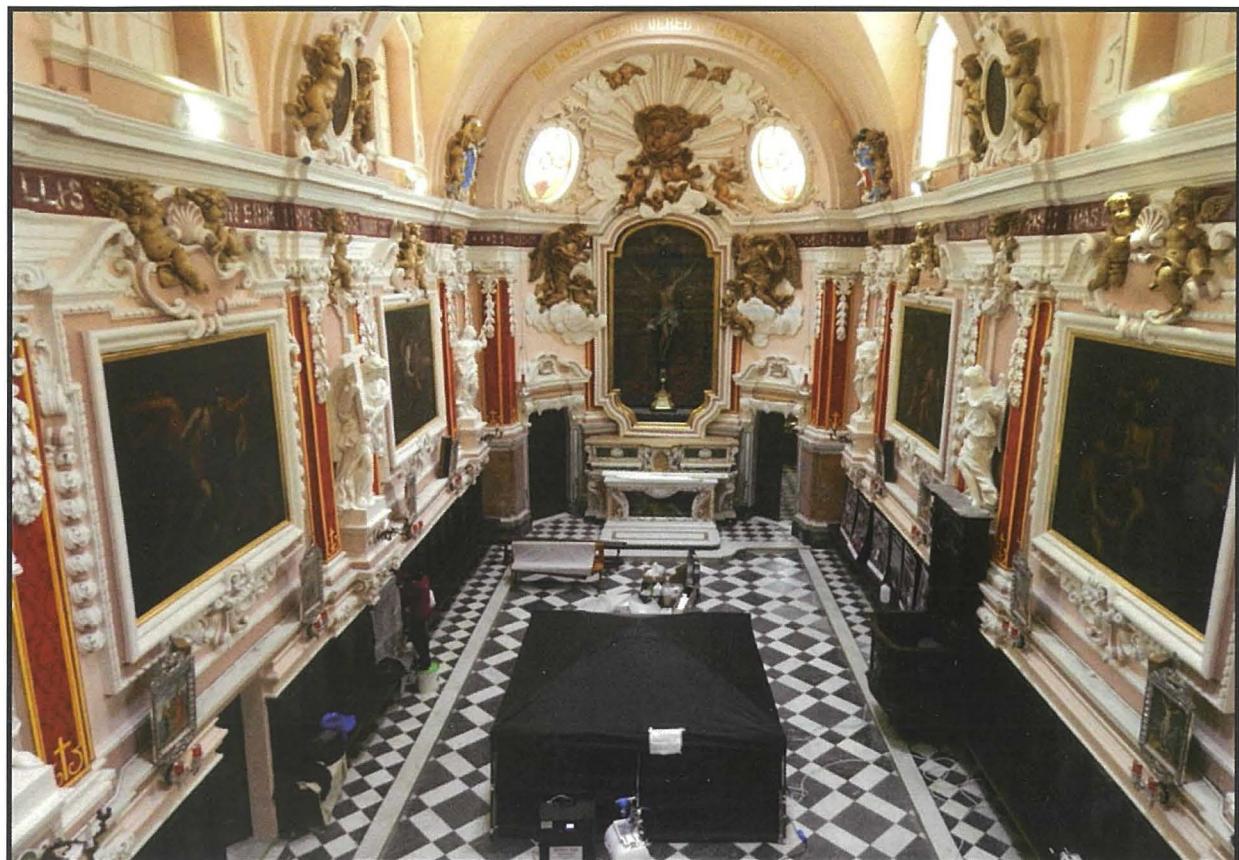


The four canvas paintings representing the stages of the Passion of Christ

The Flagellation, the Agony in the Garden, the Crowning with Thorns and Falling with the Cross (painted in the mid-18th century by Francesco Zahra).

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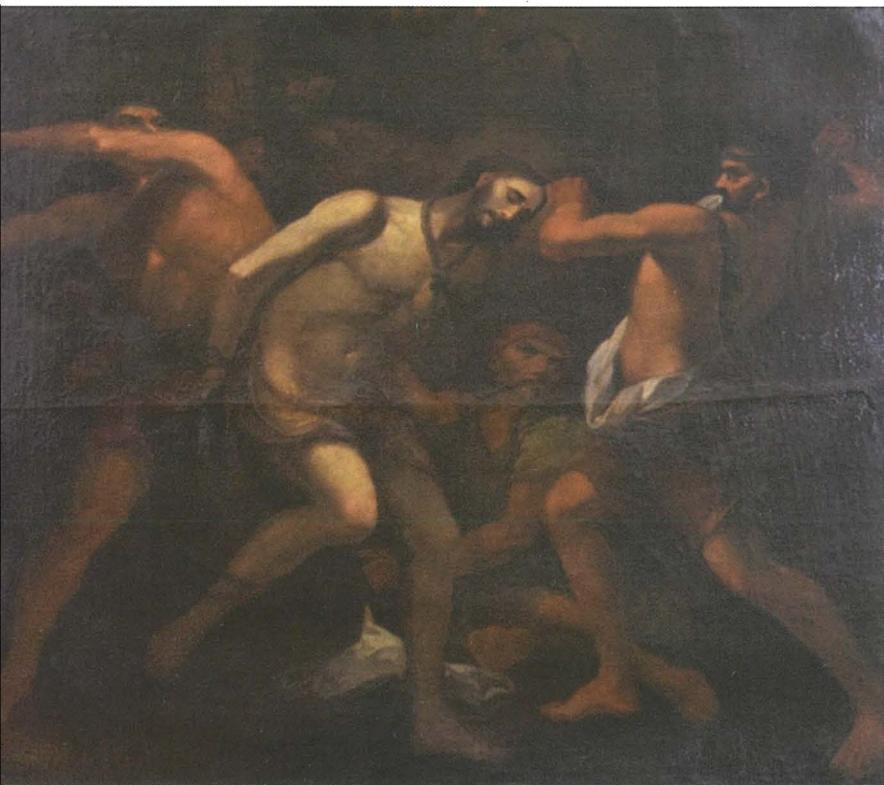


Conservation and restoration projects inside the Basilica of Our Lady of Victories in Senglea have been ongoing. The Basilica is instilled with a message from the past, its works of art are significant historical documents, which remain to the present day living witnesses of our past. Throughout these years the parish therefore recognized the common responsibility to safeguard its works of art for the future generations. Throughout last year after the completion of the important conservation

project of the statue of Christ the Redeemer the parish felt the need to move to the conservation of the beautiful works of art adoring the Oratory. The Oratory of the Crucifix in Senglea is considered to be of great historical importance as it is considered to be the most representative of eighteenth century oratories dedicated to the passion of the Christ on the island. The Oratory and its wall decoration is in itself a great ouvre, but more so as it houses several works of art of great historical and spiritual importance, as



is the the Miraculous sculpture of Christ the Redeemer. Construction of the Oratory of the Crucifix adjacent to the parish church started in 1731, as the Confraternity of the Crucifix had gained popularity in Senglea. The Architect Francesco Zerafa supervised the building construction whilst the sculptural decoration was carried out by the artist Pietro Paulo Zahra, Father to the painter Francesco Zahra.



The construction and decoration of the Oratory was completed in 1733. The sculptural decoration of the Oratory included highly decorated, framed compartments that frame the series of paintings depicting the Passion of the Christ. The four paintings were executed by the artist Francesco Zahra (1710-1773) in the mid-1730s. The paintings represent the stages of the passion of Christ, namely The Flagellation, the Agony in the Garden, the Crowning with Thorns and Falling with the Cross. Also adorning the Oratory walls are two painting listed among the work of the Bottega of Mattia Preti (1613-1699). These two paintings represent Christ holding

the cross and the Virgin of Sorrows.

During World War II the Oratory was heavily damaged by consecutive air raids in the month of April 1942. On the 9th of April 1942, a bomb directly hit the oratory, damaging the ceiling as well as breaking through the oratory floors. During these attacks all the paintings, together with several other artworks present in the oratory, also suffered from several damages. Following the damages incurred, the paintings were extensively restored and overpainted. Most probably the paintings have undergone more than one intervention throughout their past, as the aesthetical integrity of the artworks has been altered significantly. Currently the paintings present within the oratory are in a poor state of conservation. Several interventions carried out on the paintings together with the effects of ageing have altered the paintings' appearance whilst also posing risks upon the paintings' constituent materials.





It was decided to focus first on the conservation of all four of Francesco Zahra's paintings which represent the stages of the passion of Christ and are all suffering from similar deteriorating factors. Various layers of over-painting are obstructing the original aesthetical properties of the paintings. Many additions made have oxidized and altered with time and on close inspection were easily distinguished from the original paint layer. Some of the overpainting made was poorly executed and was applied directly onto a detached and cracked paint layer.

A horizontal seam running across the canvas is visible in all four of the paintings. The indentations present on the paint surface, relating to the seams present, suggest that the paintings were previously lined and ironed. During a lining procedure the painting

is ironed onto an additional lining canvas. If a painting is ironed excessively, especially along a seam, a protrusion is created on the surface of the painting. This creates a deformation as well as cracks and detachments of the paint layer.

It was also noted that an oxidized varnish coating is present on the paintings. The varnish has yellowed with time and has, together with the overpainting present, darkened the overall appearance of the paintings. A cleaning test carried out in-situ on the painting Falling with the cross revealed the extent of overpainting present. Once the oxidized varnish and overpainting was removed, considerable lacunae of the paint layer were revealed.

The professional conservation interventions will allow for the paintings' original aesthetical qualities to be conserved, whilst preventing





further deterioration from occurring upon the paintings. This will require for the cleaning of the extensive overpaintings present and oxidized varnish coating, so as to reveal the paintings' original composition and colour scheme. A number of conservation interventions will be carried out on the canvas support such as the repair of tears and the consolidation of the canvas support as well as that of the paint layer. Finally the re-integration of the lacunae present will be carried out using reversible colours. All conservation and restoration treatments will be

performed in accordance with the ethical principles for the protection and preservation of a work of art. We are grateful to the Parish of Senglea for the continuous support and trust in our work.



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The paintings are listed as works carried out by the Bottega of Mattia Preti.