

COMMENTS AND LETTERS

Dar l-Emigrant at 50

CHARLES BUTTIGIEG

Former Refugee Commissioner



February 10, 2021, marked the 50th anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone of *Dar l-Emigrant*, Castille Place, Valletta.

The building was erected as a permanent symbol of this country's tribute to Maltese emigrants and a monument witnessing Malta's bond with them.

Its foundation stone was laid by Prime Minister George Borg Olivier and blessed by Archbishop Mgr Michael Gonzi.

This special anniversary is a very timely opportunity to express appreciation to all those who have always had the best interests of Maltese emigrants and their families at heart, primarily Mgr Philip Calleja, the indefatigable former leader of the Emigrants' Commission.

Mgr Calleja dedicated his life to uprooted people, first as the champion of post-war Maltese migrants and their families and then as the leading pioneer defender of refugees seeking protection and help in Malta.

Up to March 2020, at the venerable age of 91, Mgr Calleja was still regularly making himself available at *Dar l-Emigrant* to help whoever knocked on his door seeking his advice or assistance. It was only the COVID-19 pandemic and the indispensable precautions that had to be taken that kept him away from *Dar l-Emigrant* and what is most dear to him: helping others.

The late very able researcher and historian Fr Lawrence Attard OP, writing in the *Times of Malta* on June 24, 1975, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Emigrants' Commission, had this to say:

"The history of migration from these islands, especially post-war migration, is now to a great extent the history of the Emigrants' Commission. That commission was providentially fortunate in that, since 1953, it has had as its



Laying the foundation stone of *Dar l-Emigrant* in 1971: standing on the right are Archbishop Michael Gonzi, Prime Minister George Borg Olivier and Governor General Sir Maurice Dorman. Sitting on the left of Mgr Philip Calleja (at the microphone) is Mgr Emmanuel Gerada, who, at the time, was Archbishop Coadjutor and Employment Minister Vincent Tabone. Broadcaster Charles Arrigo, who was delivering a live commentary for Rediffusion, is standing next to Tabone.

driving force Mgr Philip Calleja, who, since then, has dedicated his priestly life to migrants and to all people whose life has been affected by emigration.

"The enthusiasm of Mgr Calleja has inspired a dedi-

“
Mgr Philip Calleja was the champion of post-war Maltese migrants and their families as well as of refugees seeking protection and help in Malta

cated group of people who willingly offer their services to prospective migrants, to their dependants and to Maltese living abroad. These services are given to all who seek the help of the commission; no fees are charged, no irrelevant questions asked and the whole procedure is conducted by experienced priests and lay people in total privacy."

Mgr Calleja enjoys various international and local recognitions for his lifelong sterling work for Maltese emigrants and asylum seekers reaching Malta.

On March, 16, 2010, Stephen Gatt, president of the Federation of Maltese Abroad, presented to Mgr Calleja a plaque which states as follows: "In recognition of a lifetime of service, labour and travail well in excess of the call of duty in the inter-

ests of Maltese migrants across the diaspora."

Mgr Calleja was also granted certification by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on September 23, 2004 "in appreciation for years of dedicated service and close collaboration".

The Emigrants' Commission was the UNHCR's operational partner in Malta from 1987 to 2004, when the UN agency's role in the island had taken a new form in the light of Malta's Refugees Act.

On November 1, 2019, Mgr Calleja was also honoured by the University of Malta, acclaiming him "a meritorious candidate for the degree of Master of Letters (*Honoris Causa*) of this *Alma Mater*".

In its motivation, the university recognised "the significant contribution made by Philip Calleja to the social well-being of our communi-

ties, especially through his persevering commitment to the welfare of migrants and his contribution to the process of relocation; through his role as founder of the Emigrants' Commission and of *Dar l-Emigrant* to serve as a hub to meet the holistic needs of migrants; and a person who had the foresight to act in favour of immigrants and to create services out of sheer altruism and love for humanity".

Dar l-Emigrant today also houses a digital Migration Museum, which was intended to be officially opened in 2020 but the event had to be postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fifty years on, the edifice is a fitting tribute not only to Maltese emigrants but also to its founder: Mgr Calleja, who became known as 'The Emigrants' Priest' and 'The Refugees' Samaritan'.