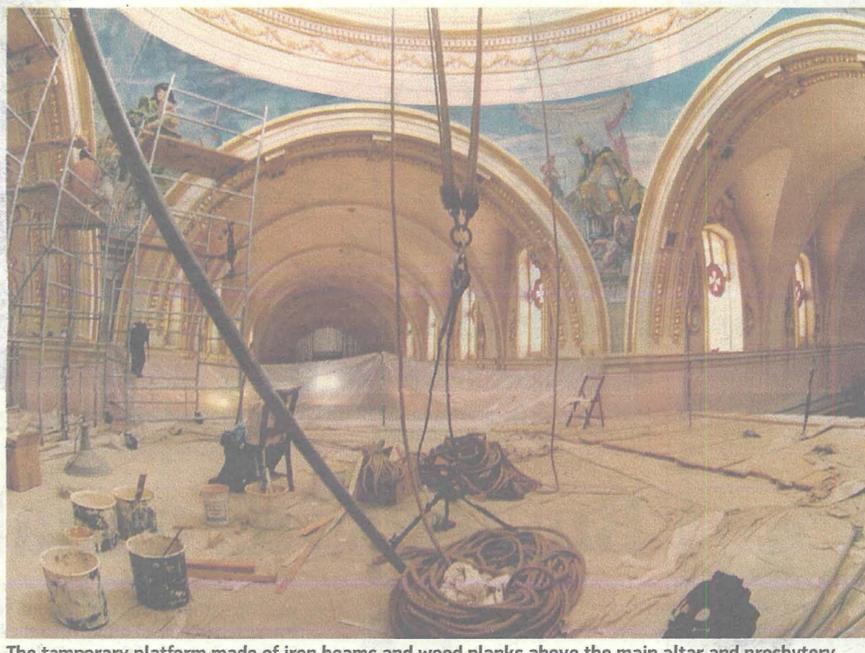


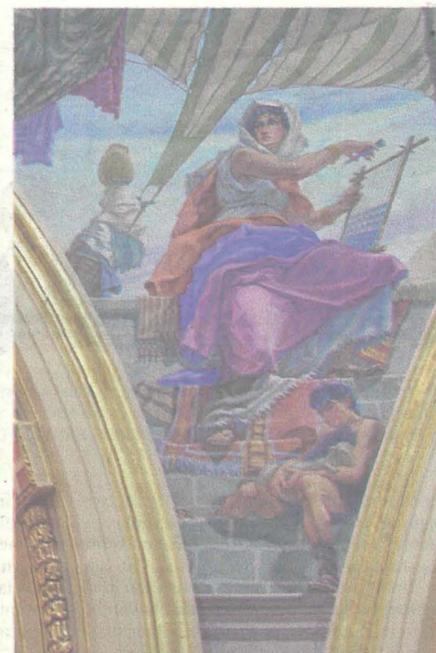
LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY



The temporary platform made of iron beams and wood planks above the main altar and presbytery while work on the pendentives and arches was going on.



The dome and the pendentives



Sarah



The artist painting in situ on the canvas depicting Deborah.

Frank Portelli's pendentives at the Senglea basilica



FABIAN MANGION

The *bozzetti* of these Senglea dome panels and pendentives were approved as one combined project by the Church Sacred Art Commission on July 6, 1990. Detailed technical calculations, including the light factor, were followed by the painting on canvas by the artist before they were eventually glued onto the stonework, a technique which is better known as *marouflage*. Understandably, Portelli also painted *in situ*.

On first looking at Portelli's massive paintings in Senglea, anyone familiar with the artist's compositions may be surprised. A degree of compromise was necessary in such a context. In spite of his use of certain baroque mannerisms, as in the dramatic *sotto in su* poses, the artist retained some elements of his renowned characteristic style, such as the use of bright colours. The pendentives confirm his scrupulous attention to historical detail and lucid iconography.

Sarah, wife of Abraham, was sterile. At the time of her barrenness, Abraham had a son, Ismael, from Hagar, her Egyptian slave. But God told him that this was not the son of the promise. Later, after returning from Egypt, in old age, Sarah gave birth to a son, Isaac. Sarah is presented as the mother of God's people in the Old Testament, and that as a result of her faith, she was made able to conceive in spite of her age.

There are great similarities between Sarah and Mary and their respective offspring. While Isaac was born to Sarah in her old age, Mary conceived and gave birth to Jesus, while conserving her virginity. Both Sarah and Mary became mothers because they believed.

In the painting, Sarah, who assumes an air of grandeur with her sudden turn, is seen loom-weaving in a hut near the oak of Mamre where Abraham lived awaiting the promised son. On the steps, Isaac is seen holding a lamb, alluding to the sacrifice God asked of him. In the upper part is Hagar, the Egyptian slave, leaving the hut after being banished by Sarah. The Egyptian connection is evidenced by the inclusion of the pyramids.

Deborah was God's chosen leader of his people when it was overcome by the enemy around the 13th century BC. Jabin, king of Canaan, struck the people of God through Sisera, commander of the army.

Deborah, who lived close to Rama and Bethel, called on Barak to take with him 10,000 men on Mount Tabor and struggle with Sisera. Barak accepted on condition that she goes with him.

The struggle ensued and the enemy was belittled, and Sisera fled and found refuge in the tent of Jael. While he was asleep, she took a tent-peg and, with a mallet, drove it into his temple right through to the ground. When Barak arrived, Jael showed him the dead Sisera.

So, thanks to Deborah's courage, the people of God were delivered from the enemy.

In Deborah, the Church sees a foreshadow of the Virgin Mary who, with maternal care, holy example, authoritative counsel, sweet consolation and fruitful prayers, nurtured the early Christians. She was, in very truth, the Mother of the Church.

On the canvas, Deborah, Lapidoth's wife and a judge, sits underneath the palm tree between Rama and Bethel. Looking yearningly upwards, she seeks heavenly inspiration, while holding the scroll inscribed with her canticle. Mount Tabor appears in the distance.

At her feet, with the peg wedged in his temple, lies sprawled General Sisera. He had oppressed the children of Israel for 20 years but eventually met his end at the hands of Jael. This gruesome killing is effectively portrayed by the artist without any exaggerated traces of the drama of the carnage. Barak also features in the scene, but is not given any importance since the victory was reached through Deborah.

Judith presents us with one of the best-known episodes in the Old Testament. This daring and beautiful widow of Manasseh, was upset with her Jewish countrymen for not trusting God to deliver them from their foreign conquerors. After prayer and penance, she goes with her loyal

maid to the camp of the enemy general, Holofernes, with whom she slowly ingratiates herself, promising him information on the Israelites.

Gaining his trust, she is allowed access to his tent. One night, as he lies in a drunken stupor, she decapitates him with his own scimitar and takes his head to her fearful countrymen in Bethulia. The Assyrians, having lost their leader, disperse, and Israel is saved.

"The figures appearing in these four compositions are true portraits of members of the artist's family"

The heroine's own words of praise to God: "And by me his handmaid he hath fulfilled his mercy, which he promised to the house of Israel: and he hath killed the enemy of his people by my hand this night" (Judith 13, 18), truly establish her position as one of the prefigurations of Christ's mother, Mary, the one filled with grace and blessed among women, bruised Satan's head and freed humanity from slavery. Bethulia prefigures the Church, struck by the

evil one, and released through Mary's succour.

The scene with the lamp and lit torches, as immortalised by Portelli, evokes the darkness of night in which Judith severed the enemy's head. Judith is seen just out of the tent, placing Holofernes' head in the maid's food bag.

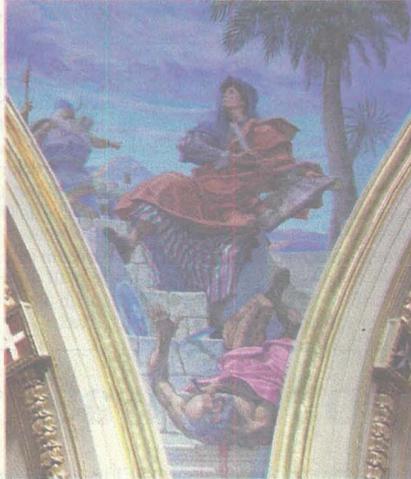
Her disdainful glance as she holds the severed head of Holofernes, and the turbulent sky with scudding clouds, confirm the human tragedy being enacted. All are depicted on the best lines of pathetic fallacy in painting.

Esther, on the other hand, presents us with a most dramatic Bible story. One day, King Ahasuerus held a banquet for his subjects. Once drunk, he ordered his wife, Queen Vashti, to display her beauty to him and his guests. The queen refused, and consequently, she was banished from the palace. After a beauty pageant, Ahasuerus chose Esther as his queen and married her. Mordecai, her uncle, advised her to keep her Jewish identity a secret.

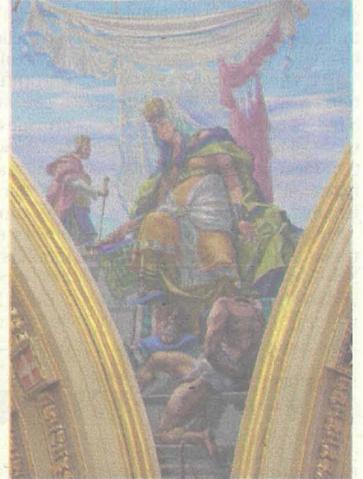
It happened that Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, the king's aide-de-camp. Haman got so angry that he wanted Mordecai and the Jewish people killed. Queen Esther knew she could prevent the massacre by telling the king that she was a Jew. And after inviting the king and Haman to two dinner parties, she finally worked up the courage to tell him. King Ahasuerus got very angry...



Judith



Deborah



Esther

at Haman! Haman was executed, the Jews were saved, and Esther became a hero to her people.

The virgin girl from Nazareth found grace in the eyes of the Lord. She not only merited the royal crown by the King of Glory and was declared Queen of Heaven and Earth, but also beseeched and obtained, through her son, humanity's salvation by the victory over the real Haman, the devil, the cruel and jealous enemy of mankind.

This last pendentive shows Queen Esther in her royal apparel sitting beneath a tent made

of rich, transparent material. At her feet lies the lifeless body of Haman, who was hung on the same gibbet that he had prepared for Mordecai.

Portelli depicted Sarah, Deborah, Judith and Esther, placed clockwise in historical chronological order, starting with the pendentive above the pilaster at the northeast end of the crossing.

A point of curiosity is that the figures appearing in these four compositions are true portraits of members of the artist's family: Sarah is his wife Rosa in her younger days; Deborah

reproduces the features of his daughter Sharonne; Judith is Marisa (wife of Henri, the artist's son); Esther is a true likeness of Simone (the artist's other daughter); while the young Isaac is a portrait of the son of Henri and Marisa.

This impressive set of paintings, together with the gilding by John Pace on designs by Portelli himself, now completed the visual link required by the congregation to take in better the decorated surface inside the dome. Certain elements, such as the stepped setting, are repeated so as to

provide not only continuity but also a visual extension of the upward progression of the eyes.

Portelli's pendentives, funded by Mgr Paolo Borg and the Cutajar, Meilak and Jaccarini families, added one more notch to Senglea's astounding basilica. This stunning project was accomplished through the committed professionalism of Portelli's approach, the zeal shown by Mgr Vincent Cachia, then Senglea's archpriest, and the enthusiasm of a crop of men from the locality who were always at hand to offer their voluntary assistance whenever needed.