

## ANNIVERSARY FEATURE

Coronation of the statue of Our Lady of Victories in Senglea

## Three 'new' documents unveiled

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Since the 13th century, May was regarded by Christians as 'the month of Mary'. May of 1920 turned out to be a Marian month like no other in the maritime city of Senglea. The reason was that during that month the city got wind that the request made by the Collegiate Chapter to have the miraculous and cherished statue of Our Lady of Victories, locally known as *Il-Bambina*, solemnly crowned had been granted by Pope Benedict XV.

The most detailed history of the city was compiled and published in three volumes by Fr Alexander Bonnici between 1981 and 1991, and in them, surely enough, we find some details related to this milestone. However, the books make no mention of three fundamental documents, of which there seems to have not been a copy in the parish archive when Bonnici was writing.

The importance of these documents is that they fill in the picture of this glorious episode in the city's history.

The documents in question are the dossier prepared by Mgr Francesco Marengo, the petition made by the Archpriest Rev. Can. Joseph Adami to Bishop Mauro Caruana and the plea made by the bishop to the pope, asking for the beloved statue of Our Lady to be crowned with the Holy See's approval.

All three documents were written between November 1919 and the end of March 1920.

Mgr Marengo's dossier was the first one to be compiled. Marengo was then 68 years old and the love he cherished for his native city and its *Bambina* are clearly spelled out in the dossier he prepared to be sent to Rome with the bishop's request. In it we read the history of the devotion towards the effigy in question that lit the hearts of the inhabitants of Senglea from the day it had been donated by the captain of an Austrian ship in the early years of the 17th century. Marengo dutifully copied some extracts relating the most important episodes of the history of the statue that are documented in a manuscript belonging to the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception of Senglea.

Among the most interesting details found in the manuscript, there feature some miracles attributed to the statue of Our Lady of Victories, miracles that were of benefit to the whole nation, not only to private individuals.

The first of these to be mentioned by Marengo happened on April 3, 1718. Malta had been hit by a severe drought for months, so on April 1, Bishop Canaves ordered that penitential pilgrimages had to be organised in each parish.

Senglea's parish priest, Fr Fortunato Vella, who led the parish from 1717 till 1778, decided to make a pilgrimage from

the parish church to the wayside chapel of Our Lady tal-Ħlas in Qormi, carrying the *Bambina* shoulder high all the way.

When the pilgrims were on their way back to their town, a heavy downpour started, and this was immediately interpreted as Mary's favourable answer to their petition. Twenty-four years later, there was another drought, so Fr Vella organised a similar pilgrimage, this time to the closer church of Our Lady of Graces in Żabbar.

When the statue was on its way back to Senglea, a woman living in the outskirts of Żabbar, who had been in excruciating labour pain for three days, asked the blessed Virgin, whose effigy was being carried in close proximity of her house, to have mercy on her and, soon after, she gave birth to a healthy baby. Eventually, when the pilgrimage returned to Senglea, rain started pouring soon after the statue was back in the church.

### "A curious case, which is rarely mentioned, happened in 1757"

A curious case, which is rarely mentioned, happened in 1757. Malta was ravaged by strong winds and thunderstorms which damaged several buildings and polluted the air for many days.

Fr Vella organised a small-scale pilgrimage with the statue from the parish church to the church of Our Lady of Safe Haven built on the promontory of the furthest tip of Senglea. Marengo states that the grace was granted because no similar tempests hit Malta again.

The most renowned miraculous episode is the vow made by the collegiate Chapter, the priests and the people of Senglea in 1813.

Malta was on its knees because of the plague epidemic and a pledge was made by Archpriest Vincenzo Cachia that if Senglea remained unscathed, a one-time procession would be organised transporting the statues of Our Lady, the Redeemer and St Roque from Senglea to the Dominican church of the Annunciazione in Vittoriosa.

Apart from this, a promise was made that every year, the statue of the *Bambina* would be carried in procession on September 8.

Marengo's dossier closes with a heartfelt assertion that these miracles, together with innumerable other private ones, performed during the 300-year-old devotion should be considered as valid reasons to have the *Bambina* solemnly crowned.

The other two documents are the petitions made by the archpriest, dated March 1, 1920, and by the Bishop, dated March 31, 1920. In these, the miracles of the drought and the plague are mentioned but without getting into too many



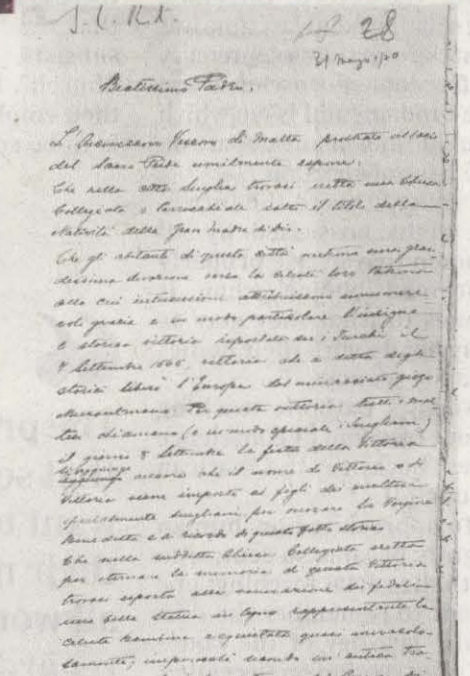
The beloved statue of Our Lady of Victories which was crowned on September 4, 1921. The papal decree for the statue's coronation was received a hundred years ago, on May 7, 1920.

details. The bishop's petition includes his own approval to the request, stating that such an event would surely help to increase the devotion towards Our Lady, who is the principal patron of Malta.

The information contained in these documents turned out to be sufficient and on April 25, 1920, the Vatican Chapter approved the crowning.

A letter by the bishop's chancellor testifies his surprise that the decision was taken in such a short time. The news reached the city in mid-May and the decree was publicly read on May 23.

The coronation ceremony was then carried out on September 4, 1921, making Senglea's *Bambina* the first statue in Malta to be solemnly crowned with special permission by the Holy See.



The plea made by bishop Mauro Caruana to Pope Benedict XV, asking for the statue of Our Lady to be crowned with the Holy See's approval.