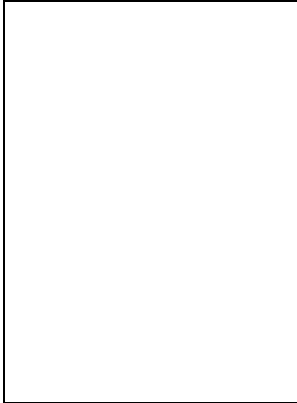


HERBA MARIAN SANCTUARY

The Marian Sanctuary commonly referred to as “tal-Herba” at Birkirkara Malta, dedicated to the Nativity of Our Lady, is very popular all over the Maltese Islands.

Many maltese emigrants in different parts of the world still keep at heart the childhood devotion to the “Madonna tal-Herba”



Since the early years of Christianity, Marian Cult is believed to have been introduced in our island. Among those, who with St. Paul and the other 275 persons on board the ship bound to Rome, in the year 60 A.D., was Luke the Evangelist. His Gospel gives us details about the Annunciation and Christ’s birth as well as his childhood, events that he had connection most probably from Christ’s mother. Luke did not hesitate to put in writing the welcome our forefathers gave to those unlucky passengers on board, being shipwrecked on our shores. (Acts 28, 1). During Paul’s three month stay in Malta, the Apostle of the Gentiles, besides the miracles as was the case of Publius’ father, also preached Christ who was “born of a

woman in the fullness of time”. It was no surprise that the inhabitants gave the passengers everything they needed to continue their voyage to Rome.

Over the years, the inhabitants venerated Our Lady, the Mother of Christ, whom Paul preached in Malta. A particular wall painting in a Sanctuary at Mellieha (Malta) several bishops returning home from the Council, in which Mary was declared Mother of God (Teotokos) are seen kneeling in prayer, venerating the effigy of the Blessed Virgin. In the rural parts of Malta and Gozo, the sister island, several chapels of different shapes and sizes were built in her honour. The inhabitants used these places for worship. Over the years, these were dilapidated or demolished and reconstructed. Wayside niches and stone statues reminded the inhabitants of their devotion to the Mother of God and other saints.

After the coming of Count Roger of Altavilla in 1090, after long years of Arab domination, the Christian Religion regained a sense of freedom of worship. Chapels in ruins were reconstructed, others were built in different sites for the spiritual needs of those practising christian faith. Among those being restored, was the chapel dedicated to the Nativity of Our Lady at Birkirkara. The site seems to have been in an uncultivated spot of this village. In the year 1402, the large area of Birkirkara was already considered by the ecclesiastic authorities as a parish. The rather strange name given to this Marian Chapel “tal-Herba” might have connection with the site where it was built. The translated word corresponding to Herba is Ruins, because it might have been the case of the reconstruction of the chapel, which at that time was in ruins.

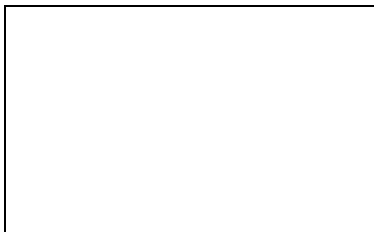
This chapel became widely known on account of the miraculous cure of a paralytic who happened to be in the vicinity and heard a bell from the belfry of the chapel to inform the inhabitants that a Mass would be celebrated. With difficulty the paralytic managed to reach the Chapel; and with great faith implored the Blessed Virgin to be healed. This lucky disabled visitor felt a new strength invading his limbs. He could stand up without using the walking aids. With tears in his eyes he gave thanks to the Blessed Virgin for this extraordinary grace. This fact became known all over the island. People from all walks of life visited this particular chapel to venerate this special effigy. They eagerly prayed for her intercession. Sick people were brought here, others troubled by doubts, pains, depressions and fears prayed Mary for her maternal help. People in peril, on land and over the seas lifted their mind to the heavenly mother to keep them sound and safe. Graces of all kinds are mentioned. We have several documentary evidence in the so called “ex voti” now kept in an adjacent hall. Evidently the chapel was becoming too small to accommodate numerous visitors. So in the year 1640, the chapel was enlarged and decorated. The facade including the portico and the present belfry are dated 1797. Today the Sanctuary has the form of a latin cross with the cupola. These



are an addition to the original chapel which were built in the early twenties.

Devotion to Our Lady is a common factor in the lives of all saints. This implies striving to imitate her way of life, her virtues as well as her commitment to do the will of God by word and deed. Church going is not excluded and it is no wonder that this particular chapel was visited by people in authority like Grand Masters of the Order of St John, e.g. Jean Parisot de la Vallette (1557-1568), Fra Emanuel de Rohan Polduc (1775-1797) as well as Church Dignitaries as Cardinal Luigi Traglia (July 1960), diocesan bishops during their periodical Pastoral Visits. Popes granted special favours to the devotees of Our Lady, venerating her in this particular Sanctuary. Pope Clement XIV (1769-1774) and Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) granted special indulgencies. Pope Pius VI declared the marble altar with its peculiar “turrus eucharistica” a privileged one. Bishop Fra Vincenzo Labini (1780-1807) solemnly consecrated “tal-Herba Sanctuary” including the main altar, where he put in a solemn rite the relics of the martyrs Innocenzo, Vincenzo, Urbano and Faustus. Pope Sarto, namely St Pius X, issued the decree whereby the Holy Image of Our Lady with Child Jesus be adorned with a golden crown. (This solemn ceremony took place on the 7th August 1910 by the diocesan Archbishop Pietro Pace and the Bishop of Gozo Fra Giovanni M. Camilleri. The decree issued in Latin signed by H.E. Cardinal Rampolla on the 13th February 1910, gives interesting information about the chapel and its history).

The Knights of the Order of St John made special donations to this chapel. The original altarpiece, nowadays kept on a white marble altar in the original chapel, was donated by Chev De Pierre. Romualdo Doz was the benefactor of the silver front covering the mensa of the main altar. His coat of arms can be seen embossed on the silver adorned with red velvet. De Rohan donated an artistic silver chalice and a complete aspersorium for holy water. Wignacourt donated a hanging silver altar lamp. La Vallette offered a precious ganutill bouquet. In the middle there are two small stauettes viz. a maltese with a flag in his hand, holding a turk captive under his foot.



The crowned altarpiece, which on broad lines may be considered a facsimile of the original one gives us a picture of the Blessed Virgin on a cloud, holding baby Jesus with her left hand. With her other hand, Our Lady points to the Holy Souls imploring further prayers, yet shortly to be freed from Purgatory.. The figure of a Guardian Angel accompanying a child and that of St John the Baptist, Patron of the Order, are on either side of the altarpiece



The artistic marble main altar was moved from under the cupola in the early nineties and placed in front of the altarpiece in the Choir space. This is the **second** time of the altar changed place. The first change took place in the early twenties, where it was situated at the remote part of the aisle. It had to change place when the chapel was given the shape of a latin cross, Under the cupola, at present there is a marble altar mensa, and a marble ambone and chair for the celebrant during mass facing the congregation. The main pillars of the Sanctuary were recently covered with “rosso di Verona” and “giallo di Siena” marble. Benefactors are proud to see this sacred spot embellished as much as possible.

Artistic stone sculpture on the two lateral doors of the aisle, the one on the left, leading to a devout oratory where the corpo santo of Santa Vittoria and a holy crucifix, while the other on the right leading to the original chapel where the first altarpiece on a white marble altar and two stone statues of the virtue of faith and hope, is really beautiful. This sculpture here is complimentary to that on the doors leading to this small primitive chapel.

The Birkirkara born artist Joseph Briffa showed his talents in painting the vaults of the aisle, the transepts, the choir and the cupola. Of course Briffa had no choice but to develop the theme of the role Mary played in the mystery of salvation. In the cupola, Briffa chose to

paint Mary's prototypes in the old Testament as Judith, Esther, Abigail, Anna, Ruth etc. He chose the Annunciation, the presentation of Baby Jesus at the temple in the presence of Simon, Jesus remaining in the temple discussing with the wise doctors, the Pentecost and the glorification of Mary in heaven, for the rest of the paintings. His first works here were two lateral oil paintings on the walls of the choir.

In a special hall, which in the forties was the typical yard, we find a collection of "ex voti". The initials V.F.G.A. mean that the favour was obtained, after the vow was made. Here we find more than a documentary evidence of all kinds of favours granted to various persons who implored Our Lady for her intercession in their needs. These "ex voti" are important for their historical, artistic, medical, cultural and spiritual value. These merit a special mention and further study for their implication would be appreciated. Significant indeed are the walking aids, chains, pieces of ropes and other items which affected those persons who were in peril, in pain, in difficulty and in oppression. These persons mentioned by name come from different walks of life.



Conclusion

Devotion to Our Lady venerated here, is rooted in the hearts of many people who make it a point to come and visit her every Wednesday and Saturday, besides on other special occasion during the year. Several couples prefer this place to celebrate their canonical marriage. They



want Mary to be present at their marriage feast like the couple at Cana. Several mothers after giving birth to their child, visit the Sanctuary for thanksgiving and to offer their offspring to the Lord. Special services are held on the first Saturday of each month. These do not include particular or personal devotions. This place was also used to hold catechism classes and monthly meetings of the "Congregazione Mariana" the members of the Carmelite Third Order and the members of the "Fergħa Ewkaristika". Monthly recollections for members of the Catholic Action Movement are held here as well.. We would like to pass to the next generation the faith and devotion to Our Lady which was passed to us by our

predecessors. "Quod est in votis"

14th June 1998

Anthony Mallia Borg.

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The year 2010 will mark the first centenary of the crowning of the Madonna and Child in the altarpiece. It is expected that particular commemorative celebrations would be held