

## A SAINT OR AN IMPOSTOR? THE CASE OF FRANCESCA PROTOPSALTI DURING THE PLAGUE OF 1676

Kenneth Gambin \*

Following the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church attempted to limit widespread beliefs on sainthood. Yet, even though by the late seventeenth century ecclesiastical control proved to be largely successful, in a society where the local clergy actively participated and shared traditional beliefs, the reforms ushered in by the Tridentine Council were slow to penetrate. Access to sacred power over natural misfortunes and calamities which saints provided through prayer, pilgrimage and relics were unceasing. This often led local populations into conflict with the central authorities of the Church as they continually proposed new holy people and miraculous events to meet the demand. It was the duty of the Inquisition Tribunal to examine people suspected of questionable sanctity while they were still alive and decide whether it was a true or simulated saintliness.<sup>1</sup> Some of them were accepted as genuine by the Catholic Church, but others were rejected as false. Yet all of these manifestations in some way expressed the meaning and role of sanctity in early modern society. Here we shall attempt to discuss the models of sanctity in early modern Malta with a special emphasis on a local saint as well as the personalisation of the sacred and the function of relics.

The confine between sacred and profane has never been clear in the Catholic faith. This was more so in medieval and early modern times, when because of lack of any other explanation, the supernatural was believed to have continuous presence and relevance in everyday life. Saints represented a fundamental part of the life of Christians who had to keep saintly images in their homes. Catherina de Riva declared that she had 'some pictures with images of saints', besides a crucifix with some relics in her one-roomed house.<sup>2</sup> Giuseppe lo Rosso even had a relic tied around his neck.<sup>3</sup>

---

\* Kenneth Gambin is a B.A. Honours graduate in History and President of the M.U.H.S.

1. D. Gentilcore, *From bishop to witch. The system of the sacred in early modern Terra d'Otranto* (Manchester, 1992), p. 177.

2. 'alcuni quadri con imagini di santi'. A.I.M. Proc. Crim., vol. 79, case 1, fol. 70.

3. Ibid., case 48, fol. 338.

Saints, however, even made an essential part of the vocabulary of swearers such as Gio' Angelo Paci, accused of swearing by St John.<sup>4</sup> Other more general offences such as 'may the saint of your saint be burnt' were commonly used.<sup>5</sup> Others like Joseph Gioiello simply vented their anger on 'some holy images which I have at home'.<sup>6</sup> Besides, reaction to the disease and misfortune often entailed recourse to the saints. Popular healers frequently accompanied their cures with invocations to one or more saints. The same Catherina de Riva, for instance, advised one of her clients to 'buy an image of a saint and say in front of it a number of Our Father and Hail Mary and to fast on bread and vinegar on some occasions in honour of St Anthony'.<sup>7</sup>

When even bones, blood and bits of clothing were advertised as having supernatural power, the difference between devotion and magic became obscure. The levitation of saints could be taken as a sign of holiness, but even witches defied the laws of gravity when they flew to their 'satanic' meetings. The witch made a pact with the devil so as to be able to inflict harm on her enemies, while the saint asked heaven for consolation.<sup>8</sup> Both invoked supernatural power for help against misfortune and there was not much difference between the two. This hazy line inevitably also included imposture, pretended saintliness and false ecstasies as the saint was someone who overturned physical laws, who lives in another dimension full of incredible phenomena, who has the ability of prophecy, who masters the occult world and has privileged relations with the divine. Even his body seemed to obey impossible or miraculous physiological rules.<sup>9</sup> These properties were hardly recognisable from negative ones classified within the world of magic.

However this classification depended first and foremost on who was writing and also on the society and particular circumstances in which these episodes took place, precisely because sanctity is a social-cultural value and one is never a saint except for other people; first to those around him and then to those who officially confirmed his sanctity.<sup>10</sup>

4. 'malavaggia San Gioè'. *Ibid.*, case 65, fol. 389.

5. 'che sia bruggiato il santo del tuo santo'. *Ibid.*, case 20, fol. 232.

6. 'alcuni imagini di santi che ho in casa'. *Ibid.*, case 75, fol. 415.

7. 'comprare un imagine di un santo ed inanzi a quello dire alcun numero di Pater et Ave e digiunare alcune volte in pane et aceto in honore di Sant' Antonio'. *Ibid.*, case 1, fol. 66.

8. D. Weinstein and R.M. Bell, *Saints and society* (Chicago, 1982), p. 94.

9. P. Camporesi, *The incorruptible flesh* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 36.

10. P. Delooz, 'Towards a sociological study of canonized sainthood in the Catholic Church', in *Saints and their cults*, (ed.) S. Wilson (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 193 - 194.

## Devotion to Saints and the Plague of 1676

Malta in 1676 was surely not a nice place to live in. Plague had once more struck the Maltese Islands, and it was to be the worst visitation on record. No effective cure was known. All that medical knowledge could advise was to purge the body from 'bad humours' by blood-letting or intensive sweating, and as the Maltese doctor L. Axiac wrote, the first cause of the plague was thought to be the punishing wrath of God.<sup>11</sup>

As the plague spread all over the Island, it brought havoc in every village, bringing life to a standstill. Once news of the presence of the malady had been spread, all coasts and ports of the Papal states were given strict orders not to give pratique to any type of ship coming from Malta. This spelt ruin for Malta as it totally depended on supplies from Sicily. The shortage of basic commodities like grain was immediately felt to the extent that Cotoner even threatened to let Turkish vessels bring over the needed supplies.<sup>12</sup>

Everyone lived with the ever present fear of discovering the symptoms of the deadly disease on himself or else on some member of his family, who could be suddenly carried away by the malady, leaving one to fend for himself without any familial support. These hard conditions clearly left their mark on the Maltese population. The majority, in their helplessness, turned to prayers, vows and penances to try and placate God's anger. Some saints, particularly St Roque, were invoked for help. The Holy Eucharist was exposed in all churches and a venerated image of Our Lady and the relics of St John the Baptist and St Sebastian were carried in procession. Others, such as Domenico Mamo from Birkirkara, made vows in the hope of not being infected.<sup>13</sup> Grand Master Cotoner himself added to the fervour of devotion when he proposed that St Michael Archangel, St Sebastian, St Roque and St Rosolea be declared as patrons of Malta. He even made a vow to rebuild the old church of Sarria at Floriana once the plague had abated.<sup>14</sup> God's punishment had to be dealt with by public solemn processions and religious ceremonies.

It was in this kind of environment that the cult of Francesca Protopsalti prospered. In these conditions people would gladly grasp to any sort of possibility which could give

11. P. Cassar, *Medical history of Malta* (London, 1964), p. 173.

12. J. Micallef, *The plague of 1676: 11,300 deaths* (Malta, 1985), p. 57.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

14. C. Galea Scannura, *Aspects of social life in Malta as seen through the proceedings of Mgr. Ranuccio Pallavicino, Inquisitor of Malta, 1672 - 1676* (Unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Malta, 1978), p. 269.

them a chance of a better life, and not finding it, they might as well create it themselves in their attempt to 'distort the negative' and obtain from it some positive and reassuring sign.<sup>15</sup> This could be the reason why Francesca had such a following.

### The process of Canonisation

The Church did not look favourably upon these initiatives especially when 'miracles' were involved and particularly so when the persons in question were women. Such local popular initiatives threatened to divide and not unite Christendom, and not only for the fact of not following the official theological teaching of the Church which depicted the saint only as an agent of God, rather than as a fountain of immediate power. The Church also had practical reasons for bringing the veneration of saints under control. These 'beatas', in fact, were revolutionary in more than one sense. The fact of attributing power to the saint meant bypassing normal orthodox channels like the sacraments, and this was seen as a threat to traditional hierarchical religious authority by popular religious leaders.<sup>16</sup> It was a threat not only to simple people but even to the clergy. The distinction between clergy and laity, as in many other aspects of life, was not very clear when it came to recognise a saint's power. Moreover, leaders were often women, who were discouraged from aspiring to autonomous, much less public roles, by the Council of Trent itself. Even their poverty could mean disorder and be considered as a criticism of wealth; and their ascetic heroism could be contrasted with the human frailties of the clergy.<sup>17</sup> No wonder that the inquisitors had instructions to proceed with 'much more vigour than usual' and to punish even the relatives and close friends of the accused if they were involved in such cases.<sup>18</sup>

The Maltese Inquisition abided with these rules and acted with seriousness and urgency. As soon as the first deposition was made, letters were sent to Rome and the forthcoming instructions were to proceed decidedly against the wrongdoers, who were imprisoned in the Inquisitor's Palace. Francesca Protopsalti, the 'beata' concerned, was not presented as a witch, as that would have meant recognizing special powers, but only as an exalted poor woman suffering from mental lapses. This case is more significant as Francesca was pictured as such even after her death. The Holy Office sought to put the situation back to normality first of all by the procedure in front of the Inquisitor himself, which meant that everyone had to subdue to the official authority.<sup>19</sup>

15. E. de Martino, *Sud e magia* (Milan, 1966), pp. 95-97.

16. M.E. Perry, 'Beatas and the Inquisition in early modern Seville', in *Inquisition and society in early modern Europe*, ed. S. Haliczzer (London, 1987), p. 148.

17. D. Weinstein and R.M. Bell, *Saints and society*, p. 185.

18. A.I.M. Misc., 2, *Pratica per procedere nelle cause del Sant' Ufficio*, pp. 8-9.

19. M.E. Perry, 'Beatas and the Inquisition', p.

The next step was to reduce her to oblivion and 'abolish her memory' by gathering all the relics which were still in circulation, burning all writings about her, and burying her in a burial place meant for ordinary people. In this way, traditional authority and order, were able to control the situation.

It has been said by Peter Burke that saints were often perceived in a stereotyped manner and one was liable to become one if he or she fell within five broad conditions: a founder of a religious order, a missionary, a pastor, through charitable activity or by being a mystic subject to ecstasies.<sup>20</sup> Other factors, like being male rather than female, being close to Rome or else forming part of a religious order must have surely helped. The cult of saints became more popular after that the Council of Trent had confirmed the usefulness of invoking saints. A whole judicial structure was set up by the decrees of Urban VIII in 1634, making the canonisation process much more difficult than before, and in any case giving the papacy absolute control in determining who was or was not a saint. Thus canonisation served the purposes of the Church as a means of rallying Catholic popular sentiment and so also to serve hierarchical purposes by making it less accessible to popular local enthusiasm and bringing it under control.<sup>21</sup> In this case, in fact, Francesca Protopsalti's sainthood was rejected. Being only a tertiary nun gave her scant institutional protection to back up her claims in a society where the institutional role 'represented a form of self-defence and reassurance for others'.<sup>22</sup>

### Who was Francesca Protopsalti?

But what about Francesca herself? She was a lay member of the Third Order of the Franciscans and this is already indicative. Tertiaries, in fact, like widows, were by no means looked upon benevolently by their families, as unmarried women were thought incapable of living a righteous life and immediately created suspicion. They were a threat to the family's honour.<sup>23</sup> The individual's need for spiritual expression went directly against the family's need to perpetuate itself. This became even more central in the cases of women saints for whom virginity was fundamental, especially when Christian culture believed that while the body was a hindrance to the spirit, nothing polluted the body more than sex. Even the Council of Trent emphasised clerical celibacy. Women's task of resisting the temptations of the flesh, however, was seen as

20. P. Burke, 'How to be a counter-reformation saint', in *Historical anthropology of early modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 55 - 56.

21. D. Gentilcore, *From bishop to witch*, p. 178.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

23. C. Cassar, 'Popular perceptions and values in Hospitaller Malta', in *Hospitaller Malta, studies on early modern Malta and the Order of St John of Jerusalem*, (ed.) V. Mallia Milanes (Malta, 1993), pp. 462 - 463.

much more difficult than that of men, as women were perceived as the weaker and lustful sex, and as such were the subject of gossip and male ridicule. And sexual temptation was the chief weapon which the devil used against the faithful, as Francesca herself experienced when the devil appeared to her in the form of a handsome youth. The theologian Don Thomas Vella had no doubts on the matter. When asked for his opinion on Francesca, he clearly stated that in these matters, he did not believe women at all.<sup>24</sup>

For those women who did not want to marry and retain their honour, the only possible solution besides that of being shunned by society, was the convent, even though it was suspect.<sup>25</sup> The status of tertiary, or 'beata' was a middle way between the two. This career as a mystic, in fact, could have been chosen as a way out of providing dowries, either for marriage, or even for convents.<sup>26</sup> It has also been said that the absolute majority of these 'mystics' were women, who used this method as a means of self-expression against social prejudices which disqualified them from authority and most ceremonies of public life. Its underlying themes were deprivation, confinement and frustration.<sup>27</sup> The only means by which this gap could be filled was by becoming a 'mystic'. Visions, signs, prophecies and struggles with demons, which are distinguished by their private character, were almost exclusively a woman's world as through them she finally became the centre of attention. Men did not need to operate these methods. The Tridentine reforms had categorically excluded women from the clergy. Not even the career as a missionary could be embarked upon as a missionary had to face arduous journeys and great personal dangers which the 'weaker' sex was not thought able to endure.<sup>28</sup> Among the very few options which remained open, mysticism and ecstatic religion were the most popular.

In reality to be a 'mystic' also involved certain advantages. Hand in hand with suffering from ecstasies was the belief of being able to prophesize.<sup>29</sup> Francesca herself, among other things, prophesized the date of her death, and this was seen as an acceptance of mortality and happy anticipation of meeting God.<sup>30</sup> Becoming a 'beata' was also a way with which to avoid the rigid ecclesiastical hierarchy and strict

24. A.I.M. Proc. Crim. vol. 80, case 14, fols. 134 - 135.

25. C. Cassar, 'Popular perceptions', p. 463.

26. M.E. Perry, 'Beatas and the Inquisition', p. 147.

27. I.M. Lewis, *Religion in context, cults and charisma* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 30.

28. D. Weinstein and R.M. Bell, *Saints and society*, p. 147.

29. *Ibid.*, 227.

30. A. Rivera, *Il mago, il santo, la morte, la festa* (Bari, 1988), p. 311.

enclosure of convents. Francesca lived in her own house together with some of her friends.<sup>31</sup> The status of 'beata' even freed one of many worldly concerns such as costume and wealth, since she wore a very simple habit which gave her an aura of spiritual concern.

Francesca really did seem to enjoy the unusual importance given to her and at times sought to enhance it herself. She distributed some of her things to be held in veneration by others, went around warning the other tertiaries to observe the rules, and even wrote some of her 'feats' herself and gave them to Don Ghimes to elaborate upon. Francesca even tried to copy the methods by which other people such as Maria Maddalena de Pazzi - whose life not coincidentally was filled with ecstasies and demonic temptations - had been confirmed saints, like being 'tested' with an unconsecrated host to see if it left any physical consequences on her.<sup>32</sup> This practise of modelling oneself on established saints was not particular to Francesca, however, and was commonly practiced throughout Europe.<sup>33</sup>

### **Francesca Protopsalti: A failed saint**

On 21 October 1677, Maria de Domenico, a tertiary member of the Carmelite Order, appeared before Inquisitor Visconti to denounce her cousin Francesca Protopsalti, a Franciscan tertiary from Valletta, of 'pretended sainthood'.<sup>34</sup> She even accused Don Giò Maria Ghimes and Don Thomas Vella of writing a biography of Francesca and of having distributed some of her possessions which were being held as relics especially by Maria known as 'delli macarroni' and Maria di Neino, who were spreading a lot of fictitious stories about her after she had died from plague the previous year. The deponent went on to declare that as a cousin of Francesca and having known her intimately, she considered these stories as 'false and fabulous'.<sup>35</sup>

The stories that circulated on Francesca Protopsalti were incredible to say the least. Some people stated that she had been seen in ecstasy with baby Jesus in her arms; that after she had died her corpse had appeared in kneeling position with the stigmata, sweating and surrounded with stars; that she had reached a stage when she could sin no more; that she had liberated souls from purgatory, and that she had freed the wife

---

31. A.I.M. Proc. Crim. vol. 80, case 14, fol. 128.

32. *Ibid.*

33. P. Burke, 'How to be a counter-reformation saint', p. 57.

34. 'fingendosi santa'. A.I.M. Proc. Crim. vol. 80, case 14, fol. 112.

35. 'false e favolose'. *Ibid.*, fols. 112 - 112v.

of Pontius Pilate from hell.<sup>36</sup> She even made a number of prophecies including the day and place of her death, and that on the feast of St John the Baptist of 1677, the Order would have a new Grand Master.<sup>37</sup> Some of her possessions, like the veil and the 'cordone', were cut into pieces and distributed to those who believed in her powers, and were 'held in great veneration'.<sup>38</sup>

Letters were at once sent to Rome and the answer received was clear even before the concerned witness had been consulted in court. The Inquisitor had to gather all the written information regarding Francesca and burn it, transfer her place of burial from a privileged to a normal one, suppress any revival of her memory and proceed against those who had promoted her cult.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, the new Inquisitor Cantelmo, summoned the witnesses to court and started proceedings.

The major suspect was Don Giò Maria Ghimes, who admitted having written three volumes on the life and prodigies of Protopsalti, and that when he had written them he considered them as true, especially after that he had consulted Don Thomas Vella on the matter. However he now considered them as 'false and hypocritical' since he had discovered that she had been telling him a lot of lies.<sup>40</sup>

In August 1678 the three volumes were brought in front of the Inquisitor and excerpts were read to Don Ghimes who had to comment on their veracity. In this way other 'feasts' of the supposed saint come to light.<sup>41</sup> She had enjoyed frequent visions of Jesus Christ who once told her that he had suffered 6,666 lashes during his passion. On Christmas day she was even led to the cave in Bethlem where she remained for three hours contemplating on the mystery of the birth of Christ. According to Don Ghimes, Protopsalti had not eaten anything for a number of months, living only on the Host and on sweet liquid which came out of Christ's side.<sup>42</sup> She even wanted to be tested in the way in which Saint Mary Magdalene de Pazzi and Saint Rose had been tested, that is by being communicated with a non-consecrated host to see if that had any effects on her.<sup>43</sup>

---

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., fol. 126.

38. 'tenuto come reliqua in gran venerazione'. Ibid., fol. 112v.

39. A.I.M. Corr., vol. 13, fols. 191, 204, 213 - 214.

40. A.I.M. Proc. Crim., vol. 80, case 14, fol. 113.

41. Ibid., fol. 117.

42. In some cases the translations from Latin as given by A. Bonnici in his *Storja ta' l-Inkwizzizzjoni ta' Malta*, ii (Malta, 1992), pp. 202 - 212, are used.

43. A.I.M. Proc. Crim., vol. 80, case 14, fol. 122v.



At the time of her death she had not touched any meat for six years and when she was forced to do so she could not resist it in her stomach even if it had been sprinkled over with blessed water. Sometimes the devil appeared to her in the form of a handsome youth to induce her into sin. Her heart had been pierced by a lance, her brain by three thorns, and sweet liquid gushed out from her wounds.<sup>44</sup>

The proceedings continued with the summoning of further witnesses, all from Valletta. Maria di Neino said that Francesca did great mortifications and at times the devil tried to disturb her in her prayers by appearing to her in the form of a fiery man who disappeared as soon as the Holy Virgin was invoked, or else in the form of St Paul who after disappearing left a very bad smell after him.<sup>45</sup> According to Maria Macarroni, once she tied a crucifix to her hair and started banging herself into walls with such a fury that no one could hold her. At one time, Christ, aged twelve years, appeared to her while she was washing the clothes and he pulled up some water from the well for her.<sup>46</sup> Don Thomas Vella, on the other hand, always refused any direct connection with the case and put all the responsibility on Don Ghimes.

During this entire procedure Don Ghimes, Don Thomas Vella, Maria di Neino and Maria Macarroni were held in the prison of the Inquisition until they were liberated in April 1679, after precise instructions from Rome by Cardinal Barberino.<sup>47</sup> Don Ghimes had to be instructed on his mistakes and if he was found guilty of talking again on Francesca Protopsalti, he could even be prohibited from the role of confessor. The others were warned on their errors. The three volumes on the 'false' saint were burnt on 20 April 1679. Francesca Protopsalti's claim at sainthood ended up in flames.

### **Official and Popular Beliefs**

The official theological teaching of the Church on saints maintained that it was God who was operating through the holy person, and in the saint's extraordinary actions one had to see the power of God and not of the saint himself. When saints died they had only the power to intercede with God on behalf of the living.<sup>48</sup> Saints represented the official bridge by which the barrier between heaven and earth could be broken.

---

44. *Ibid.*, fol. 128.

45. *Ibid.*, fol. 130.

46. *Ibid.*, fol. 129.

47. *Ibid.*, fol. 131v.

48. D. Weinstein and R.M. Bell, *Saints and society*, p. 249.

For the popular mind, however, this did not mean a lot. The person who in some degree or another was not bound by natural laws commanded respect, and was seen as an accessible and tangible source of immediate power.<sup>49</sup> It was not necessary to involve God in the matter if the saint alone was enough. Indeed God seemed much more remote than the saint who had lived a normal mortal life and thus would surely be more sympathizing with human needs. The fact that Francesca herself suffered the same fate as other normal humans, in fact, not only did not disturb her devotees but indeed strengthened their devotion, as holy people are always more efficacious dead rather than alive.<sup>50</sup>

These popular beliefs were accentuated in extremely abnormal situations like plague. In these cases something more personal, emotional, and above all more pragmatic and directly rewarding than cold official religion was desirable to deal with the impending needs. Devotion to a saint was an investment in the practical services he could render and the immediate human material benefits which could be derived from his power.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, ironically, whereas the saint had spent his life trying to resist the importunities of the world, after his death he was turned into a source of worldly favours.

Relics were one way through which devotion to a saint was shown and through which miracles were thought to happen. They had a threefold purpose: to suppress the fact of death by removing part of the dead from its place in the grave, to symbolize the abolition of space by carrying it around, and to express the paradox of linking the great heaven with the small earth by means of such a tiny object.<sup>52</sup> Relics, in fact, were prized possessions which expressed both protection and solidarity, especially when they were passed around.<sup>53</sup> It was publicly said that Francesca's relics could perform miracles and heal sickness.<sup>54</sup> They took it for granted that once the saint was shown respect through his relics, a beneficial answer was automatically guaranteed in a contractual way. The saint's response, however had to be induced or stimulated by devotion to his relics. Maria Macarroni put a 'cordone' of Protopsalti on a sick person and then afterwards gave it as protection to her son, a soldier on the galleys of the Order, during the epidemic.<sup>55</sup> What else could these poor people resort to when no effective cure to plague was known? Only 'horizontal' healing by appealing directly

49. A. Gurevich, *Medieval popular culture. Problems of belief and perception* (Cambridge 1988), p. 40.

50. P. Burke, 'How to be a counter-reformation saint', p. 49.

51. J. Devlin, *The superstitious mind. French peasants and the supernatural in the nineteenth century* (Yale, 1987), p. 12.

52. P. Brown, *The cult of the saints* (Chicago, 1981), p. 94.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 78

54. A.I.M. Proc. Crim., vol. 80, case 14, fol. 112 v.

55. *Ibid.*, fol. 115v.

to the divine was possible. Such excogitations were their only hope of survival.

Besides sickness, one of the main preoccupations of men in early modern Europe was that of food and of relieving hunger. Some features of this case, like the importance given to a particular diet and the great power attributed to the Host, were very common and were strictly connected with each other. The life-giving bread, in fact, was believed to have the power to enable those who made virtuous use of it to stay alive and nourish the body without the trouble of having to eat anything else.<sup>56</sup> Thus stories of extreme fasts and clamorous abstinences which had been aided by the divine were often heard. Francesca Protopsalti inserted herself in this trend when Don Ghimes claimed that she had not eaten anything for months on end and of having refused to eat meat for six years.<sup>57</sup> Once, after having kissed the crucifix, she felt a 'great heat in her mouth and a sweet liquor that made her lose appetite for many days'.<sup>58</sup> This certainly appealed a lot to a community which was hard hit by the scarcity of food due to the trade ban imposed on Maltese ships. God had given Francesca the virtue of living without the daily toil of trying to find what to eat. What further proof of her sanctity could be demanded? This belief about sweet flavours also had a long tradition. Even odour had a part to play in this struggle between good and evil. While a good smell immediately indicated a benign presence, a bad smell was immediately associated with the devil.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, inevitably, when the devil who was tempting Francesca left her room, he left an 'intolerable fetor'.<sup>60</sup>

The remarkable fasts which saintly people resorted to also found some medical approbation. In fact, the human body was often seen as a miniature hell of frothing fleshy matter, full of relentless parasites which found there their favouring pasturing grounds, especially in women.<sup>61</sup> This, of course became more so in cases of epidemics like plague. Interesting, once the plague in Malta started abating, regulations began to be relaxed and permission was given to everyone 'except women' to leave their homes and go to church.<sup>62</sup>

---

56. P. Camporesi, *The fear of hell. Images of damnation and salvation in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 146 - 147.

57. Meat was very important in that it was very scarce, especially in the diet of the lower classes. cf. P. Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams* (Oxford, 1989).

58. 'intese calore in bocca, un liquore santo dolce e soave che per molti giorni non have a nessun appetito di mangiare'. A.I.M. Proc. Crim., vol. 80, case 14, fol. 122v.

59. P. Camporesi, *The incorruptible flesh*, p. 54.

60. 'un gran fetore'. A.I.M. Proc. Crim., vol. 80, case 14, fol. 130.

61. P. Camporesi, *The incorruptible flesh*, pp. 108 - 109.

62. W.L. Zammit, *Malta under the Cottoners 1660-1680* (unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Malta, 1974), p.314

Leeches were applied to the wounds caused by plague so as to suck out the malignant fluid present in the body. One way by which these could be avoided was physical abstinence and special diets. Moreover, mortification, besides being an effective cure against diseases, was a sure key to the kingdom of heaven. These stories certainly caught the imagination of people who had a difficult relationship with their existence, especially with their daily food. Not coincidentally, the saintly qualities of Francesca reflected precisely those things which were most needed by the Maltese community at the time: against illness and hunger.

### **Conclusion**

This curious episode throws some light on Maltese society of the late seventeenth century. Francesca Protopsalti, presumably because of financial incapability to provide a dowry or maybe in her attempt to live an unmarried life without becoming a nun, became a member of the Tertiary order of the Franciscans and gradually adopted ecstatic religion as a means of self-expression against a male-dominated society. But this 'normal' situation assumed 'gigantic' proportions with the advent of plague, against which the human body was completely defenceless and life depended on chance more than anything else. It was in these circumstances that the 'talents' of Francesca were used by those around her, even by priests, to approach God who had punished them for their sins by sending the plague. The saints seemed to be a testimony as well as a possibility for a better life besides that of the usual difficulties and suffering, the right to which was ensured by mortifications and abstaining from food, which in any way was scarce. And popular religiosity seemed to have no limits in accepting the most bizarre things and showing faith in the impossible when faced with this grim reality. Even official Church teachings were unwittingly broken in their attempt to create a virtual reality which gave them hope. The Tribunal, on the other hand, tried to suppress this cult in a definite way as it was perceived as a threat to traditional order in at least two ways: of a woman against the supremacy of males and their leadership role in society, and, much more seriously, because a popular religious leader was attributed power which officially belonged to the Church as the only rightful path to communicate with the divine.