

# Three Published Books of Sermons delivered in Malta between 1694 and 1754

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**Abstract:** *The identification of texts of sermons delivered in Malta during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would make possible a study of the oratorical styles, themes treated, and languages used in their delivery. This, in turn, would enable a better understanding of the impact that such an important albeit ignored means of verbal communication had on its contemporary audience. In the present short study three unrecorded published books containing sermons are described and briefly discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Sermons, preaching, panegyrics, verbal communication, printed works, Bull of the Crusade, melitensia, Malta.*

## Introduction

Predication in early modern Malta constitutes yet another crucial area in the field of communicating beliefs and values to the wide spectrum of the population that has received only limited scholarly attention. The heavy use of this generally verbal medium of communication by the different Catholic establishments on the island, comprising the parishes, the regular Orders, the ever increasing number of religious confraternities, and other associations, as well as by foreign visiting preachers, often of considerable renown, is well documented.<sup>1</sup> Besides what may be described as the 'Maltese' ecclesiastical setup, the Order of St John had its own distinct priestly establishment, made up of the conventual chaplains and headed by the Grand Prior. The financial and human resources available to the latter, together with their contacts with mainland Catholic Europe made possible the annual invitation to Malta of highly regarded preachers for the Order's service, mostly to deliver sermons in St John's Church. Thus, practically throughout the eighteenth century, the Order procured the services of such preachers for Lent. Besides members of the Order, these sermons were attended by large numbers of Maltese, as is confirmed by contemporary

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<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of oral channels of communication in early modern Malta, cf. W. Zammit, 'The Dissemination of Unorthodoxy and New Ideas in Malta, 1700–1798', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Department of History, University of Malta, 2001, vol. 1, pp. 4–49.

descriptions.<sup>2</sup> The latter at times also provide insights as to the oratorical abilities of the preacher and the reactions of the audience.<sup>3</sup> Occasionally, when the services of a foreign preacher could not be procured, the Order had little choice but to ask a Maltese to preach in St John's. Renowned Maltese clergy, including Francesco Wzzino and Giuseppe Vella were among those asked, in such circumstances, to provide their services at St John's. The former was responsible for the first published translation of the Catholic catechism in Maltese (1752). Vella, a parish priest of Qormi, was eventually to be imposed upon ailing Bishop Rull as his vicar by Rome, replacing the turbulent Gian Maria Azopardi Castelletti in what was one of the most difficult periods of the Maltese diocese during the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

A not inconsiderable number of texts of sermons delivered for various occasions and in different settings, mentioned above, have been known, if not actually studied, for quite some years. This material is mostly to be found in the National Library of Malta's library manuscript collection and in other public collections on the island. Some of the known surviving texts consist of sermons delivered in Maltese and these, understandably, have been the ones attracting most academic interest.<sup>5</sup> Besides such texts, the practice of delivering sermons in Maltese is documented in quite a number

<sup>2</sup> Thus, for example, A[rchivio] S[egreto] V[aticano] S[egreteria di] S[tato] Malta, 72, f. 434r-v, Inquisitor Serbelloni–Secretariat of State, dated 24.12.1729, 'Il predicatore Padre Lucchese de Predicatori di Maria ... predica in San Giovanni con tant'applauso, che chi non va per tempo a prender posto, non vi trova più luogo, benche sia molto grande la detta Chiesa.'

<sup>3</sup> ASV SS Malta, 113, f. 36, Inquisitor Passionei–Secretariat of State, dated 12.2.1746, 'Il famoso Padre Tolotti, Teatino, predicatore quaresimale in quest'anno in presenza di Gran Croci e moltissimi cavalieri, oltre il popolo che a gran folla vi concorre. Il Sacro oratore anziche serviosi dello stile panegirico, si e espresso di predicare da Missionario, come ha fatto con grandissima commozione dell'uditorio, discorrendo delli morti improviste complettando non men le corporali, cioè quelle cagionate dagli accidenti apoletici, ma molto più diffondendosi in quelle spirituali cagionate dalla reiterazione de' peccati.'

<sup>4</sup> ASV SS Malta 111, f. 273r-v, Inquisitor Passionei–Secretariat of State, dated 28.11.1744, 'Arrivato il tempo d'Avvento e non essendo qua per anche giunto il Predicatore della quaresima, cui si da anche la Predica dell'Avvento, ha Sua Eminenza fatto soccombere alle Prediche del presente Avvento al Sig. D. Giosepe Vella, paroco di un casale di quest'Isola, ancorche altre volte servito per supplemento nel Pulpito di questa Chiesa Conventuale della Religione con applauso universale attesa la sua virtù, e buona maniera nell'arte oratoria, predicando con zelo, e con frutto.'

<sup>5</sup> Notably the Maltese sermons composed by the renowned Maltese man of letters Ignazio Saverio Mifsud (1722–73) and preserved in his manuscript volumes in the National Library of Malta collection. For the most comprehensive and recent study of these cf. J. Zammit-Ciantar, 'Il-Priedki bil-Malti ta' Ignazio Saverio Mifsud: Edizzjoni kkumentata bi Studju Kritiku', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Department of Maltese, University of Malta, 2005. Besides his own Maltese-language sermons, Mifsud also gives a number of other sermons in Italian and by various preachers, as well as information regarding the arrival of preachers from abroad and the preaching of sermons in various localities on the island. Thus cf. NLM Libr. Ms. 10, pp. 440–1, consisting of a list of preachers at St John's between 1732 and 1762.

of sources.<sup>6</sup> The area indeed offers what is possibly one of the most promising and exciting possibilities for augmenting the limited known specimens of early written Maltese.

The study of the content itself, irrespective really of the language utilized, would undoubtedly provide the historian with an important source for understanding the mechanics for communicating religious orthodoxy and compliance in early modern Malta. A comparative study of the themes treated and the oratorical techniques used with those in other Catholic states would, moreover, be possible. Undoubtedly, many texts still await discovery in private collections and in the archives or unsorted material pertaining to religious institutions.

### Three published collections of sermons<sup>7</sup>

Besides the ever-increasing amount of traced manuscript texts, a number of sermons delivered locally ended up being printed. This short paper will refer to three such works, all of which were published outside Malta. While other printed sermons delivered on the island are known, these three do not seem to be known to researchers; indeed they are not listed in any standard bibliography of Malta or of the Order of St John.<sup>8</sup> In all three cases, the traced copies come from local ecclesiastical libraries and no copy appears to be found in Maltese public collections. The intention of this brief paper is to record and describe these publications. A detailed analysis of their style and content, while beyond the scope of the present study, may be undertaken within the wider context of other traced sermons whether printed or in manuscript format.

### Fra Carlo Mariano's *Panegirici Sacri*

The earliest of the three publications discussed here was published in 1694 and is thus one of the earliest known of its nature. The book is in duodecimo format and contains 450 pages. Its title page is inscribed as follows:

PANEGIRICI / SACRI / *Del Molto Rev. Padre* / F. CARLO MARIANO / DI S. MICHELE / Carmelitano Scalzo della Pro- / uincia di Lombardia, Letto- / re di Sagra Teologia, e / Consultore del S. Officio / in Malta / *Dedicati* / *All' Illustrissimo*,

<sup>6</sup>Thus, to give one such example ASV SS 110, f. 303v, Inquisitor Gualtieri–Secretariat of State, dated 8.9.1743; f. 333r-v, dated 10.10.1743, 'In occasione del Giubileo ... Monsignor Vescovo darà le Missioni anche in lingua Maltese del Padre Costanzo, Minore Osservante, per intelligenza di quelli, che per non capire l'Italiano, non anno potuto approfittarsi di quelle date da Padre Rossignoli.'

<sup>7</sup>The first two publications here discussed are to be found in the Wignacourt Museum Library, Rabat, Malta, while the third is at the Cathedral Archives, Imdina. A word of thanks is due to the respective curators of the collections.

<sup>8</sup>Notably those by F. de Hellwald (1885), E. Rossi (1924) and J. Mizzi (1970).

*e Reuerendiss. / Signore, Monsignor / D. FRANCESCO / ACQVAVIVA / D'ARAGONA / Già Inquisitore, e Dele- / gato Apostolico nell' / Isola di Malta, / Ed ora / CHERICO DI CAMERA / della Santità di N. S. / INNOCENZO XII. / In Palermo per Adamo 1694. / Imp. Termini V.G. Impr. Scoma P.*

The book contains twelve panegyrics, seven of which were delivered in Malta. These are described in Table I, below:

**Table I**  
**Fra Carlo Mariano's Malta panegyrics (c.1694)**

LA/MAGIA/CELESTE / *PANEGIRICO PRIMO* / Per la Conuersione di S. / PAOLO Apostolo, / Protettore di / Malta / Recitato nella Cattedrale della / Citta notabile nell' Isola / istessa. [pages 1 to 37]

L'APELLE / EVANGELICO / *PANEGIRICO SECONDO* / Per S. FRANCESCO d' Assisi / Recitato in Malta nella Chie- / sa de' PP. Minori Con- / uentuali. [pages 39 to 77]

L'ANGELO / CVSTODE / Della Fede / *PANEGIRICO TERZO* / PER S. PIETRO MARTIRE / Del Sacro Ordine de Pre- / dicatori. / *Recitato in Malta nella Chiesa / dell' Annunziata nel Sollenni- / zarsi dal Tribunale del / S. Officio la di lui / Festa.* [pages 79 to 119]

LA VOCE / DEL CIELO / *PANEGIRICO QVARTO* / PER S. NICCOLÒ DA Tolentino / Recitato nella Chiesa de / PP. Agostiniani / in Malta. [pages 120 to 149]

L'VOMO / DIVINO / *PANEGIRICO QVINTO* / Per il Patriarca San / Giuseppe / Recitato in Malta nella Chiesa / de Carmelitani / Scalzi. [pages 150 to 183]

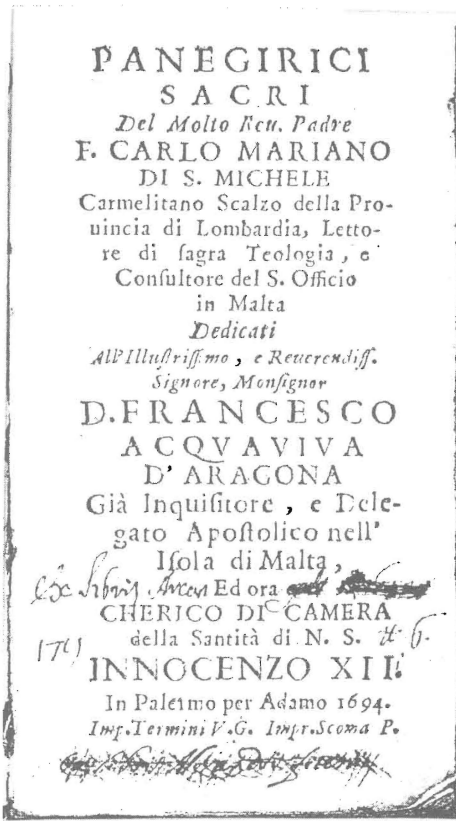
IL CACCIATORE / *PANEGIRICO SETTIMO* / PER / S. FILIPPO / NERI / Recitato nella sua Chiesa / in Malta. [pages 216 to 250]

LA /FIAMMA / *PANEGIRICO OTTAVO* / Per la Serafica Vergine / S. Teresa / Recitato in Malta nella Chiesa / de' Carmelitani Scalzi. [pages 251 to 291]

Carlo Mariano's connection with Malta was that he was in the service of the local Inquisitorial tribunal, hence the dedication of his book to Francesco Acquaviva, who was Inquisitor in Malta between 1691 and 1694. References to Carlo Mariano in the Maltese Inquisitorial records abound. It is for instance recorded that the Discalced Carmelite had, on 8 July 1705, managed to obtain from the Congregation of the Holy Office the required licence to read and retain prohibited reading matter.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Reproduced in Zammit, following p. 220.





Fra Carlo Mariano's Panegirici Sacri

The seven panegyrics delivered in various Maltese churches by Fra Carlo Mariano are characterized by the melodrama and rhetoric prevalent during the period. Quotes from the Scripture as well as from the writings of Church fathers abound, while the emphasis on the sufferings of hell feature in many of them. The only sermon out of the seven that makes any direct reference to Malta is – as is to be expected – the first one, treating the conversion of St Paul. The saint's life and activity on the island are eulogized within the context of a number of traditional and novel recounted by the author. Another published sermon in honour of St Paul was composed and delivered by the rector of the diocesan seminary of Malta, the Siense Enea Gaetano Melani. This was delivered in Malta and the text published in Siena in 1723.<sup>10</sup>

### Serafino da Vicenza's *Predica della Bolla della Crociata*

This printed work consists of a sermon delivered by the Capuchin Fra Serafino da Vicenza on the occasion of the publication of the *Bolla della Crociata*, or Indult of the Crusade, for the year 1747. The book, which is octavo format, contains 40 pages. The title page of the work is inscribed as follows:

PREDICA / DELLA BOLLA / DELLA CROCIATA / DETTA IN MALTA / IL DI  
XXIX. GENNAJO / L'ANNO MDCCXLVII. / nella maggior Chiesa Conventuale di  
San / Giovanni della Sacra Illustrissima / Religione Gerosolimitana, / Dal Padre Fra  
Serafino da Vicenza / Cappuccino. / IN VENEZIA, MDCCXLVII. / Per Gio: Battista  
Regozza, / CON LICENZA DE' SUPERIORI.

<sup>10</sup> ORAZIONE / IN LODE / DI / S. PAVOLO / COMPOSTA, E RECITATA IN MALTA / L'ANNO 1723. / DAL SACERDOTE / ENEA GAETANO MELANI / Cittadino Sanese, Rettore del Seminario / di d. Isola / ALL' EMINENTISS. E REVERENDISS. PRINCIPE / F.D. ANT. MANOEL / DE VILHENA / GRAN MAESTRO DELLA SACRA RELIGIONE / GEROSOLIMITANA. / In SIENA appresso il Bonetti nella Stamparia del Pubblico 1723. / CON LICENZA DE' SUPERIORI. The present author has only a photocopy of the title page of this publication, so no further details about it can be given here.

# PREDICA

DELLA BOLLA

DELLA CROCIATA

DETTA IN MALTA

IL DI XXIX. GENNAJO

L' ANNO MDCCLXVII.

nella maggior Chiesa Conventuale di San  
Giovanni della S. S. Illustrissima  
Religione Gerolomitana,

Dal Padre Fra Serafino da Vicenza  
Cappuccino.



*ad uso di  
Antonio  
feria de  
dominica  
e fra occalato  
al V. V. S. S.  
S. S. S. S. S.  
S. S. S. S. S.*

IN VENEZIA, MDCCLXVII.

Per Gio: Battista Regozza,  
CON LICENZA DE' SUPERIORI.

Fra Serafino da Vicenza's  
Predica della Bolla della  
Crociata

## PANEGIRICI, ED ORAZIONI

D I

NICCOLO MARIA BONA

CHERICO REGOLARE TEATINO

DEDICATI

ALL'ALTEZZA EMINENTISSIMA

D I

EMMANUELE PINTO

GRAN MAESTRO DELLA S. RELIGIONE GEROSOLIMITANA  
E PRINCIPE DELLE DUE ISOLE MALTA,  
E Gozzo ec.



IN VENEZIA, MDCCLIV.

Appresso Giovanni Tevernin.

All'Insegna della Provvidenza.

CON LICENZA DE' SUPERIORI, E PRIVILEGIO:

*Per Gio: Salvatorij del. S. S. S. S. S.*

Niccolò Maria Bona's  
Panegirici, ed Orazioni

The Indult of the Crusade, or *Bolla della Santissima Crociata*, had been introduced to the island just before Lent of 1744 by Grand Master Pinto, following papal consent. The purchase of the indult allowed individuals to consume foodstuffs otherwise prohibited during Lent. The indult was printed in large single-sheet format, originally in Sicilian presses. However, following the setting up of the Order's own printing press in Malta, the indult was printed locally. The extent to which the *Bolla Crociata* proved to be a successful economic venture is confirmed by the number of copies printed. By 1762 some 20,000 copies of the *Bolla Crociata* were being printed annually; by 1776 the figure had reached 30,000. It topped 50,000 copies by 1781. In essence the whole exercise, carried out annually until 1798, constituted a highly lucrative undertaking, resulting in annual profits of thousands of *scudi*.

The promotion of the indult was carried out primarily through the preaching of sermons in churches throughout the Maltese islands. While not much is known about the content and style of these sermons outside Valletta, it is likely that at least some of them were delivered in Maltese. The main sermon inaugurating the annual launching of the indult was that delivered in the Order's Conventual Church of St John, invariably in Italian and by a renowned non-Maltese preacher. Fra Serafino's sermon constitutes one such example. A more familiar example of a published *Bolla Crociata* sermon was that for 1765, delivered by Alessio Maria Petroni from Lucca.<sup>11</sup> Petroni's oration was printed in Malta and hence it is available in a number of Maltese collections.

### Niccolò Maria Bona's *Panegirici, ed Orazioni*

As in the case of Carlo Mariano's *Panegirici Sacri*, Niccolò Maria Bona's book contains a number of sermons he preached in Malta and elsewhere. The book is in quarto format and contains 246 pages of sermon texts, followed by a number of prayers. The title page is inscribed as follows:

PANEGIRICI, / ED ORAZIONI / DI / NICCOLÒ MARIA BONA / CHERICO  
REGOLARE TEATINO / DEDICATI / ALL' ALTEZZA EMINENTISSIMA / DI /  
EMMANUELE PINTO / GRAN MAESTRO DELLA S. RELIGIONE

<sup>11</sup> ORAZIONE / PANEGIRICO-MORALE / Sopra la Bolla della Santissima Crociata / RECITATA / Nella Domenica di Settuaigesima dell'Anno MDCCLXV. / Dal Molto Reverendo Padre Maestro / ALESSIO M.a PETRONJ / Lucchese, dell'Ordine de' Servi di Maria, e predicatore at- / tuale nella  
Maggior Chiesa Conventual di S. Giovanni / DI / MALTA, / DEDICATA / ALL'ALTEZZA  
EMINENTISSIMA / Del Gran Maestro della Sacra / RELIGIONE GEROSOLIMITANA / FR. D.  
EMMANUELE / PINTO / Principe di Rodi, Malta, e Gozo, e Signore del / Reale Dominio di Tripoli &  
/ In Malta nel Palazzo, e Stamperia di S.A.S. 1765. / Per D. Niccolò Capaci suo Stampatore. *Con Licenza  
de' Sup.*

GEROSOLIMITANA / E PRINCIPE DELLE DUE ISOLE MALTA, / E GOZZO ec.  
/ IN VENEZIA, MDCCLIV. / Appresso Giovanni Tevernin. / All’Insegna della  
Provvidenza. / *CON LICENZA DE’ SUPERIORI, E PRIVILEGO.*

The published panegyrics delivered in Malta by Bona are as follows:

**Table II**  
**Niccolò Maria Bona’s Malta panegyrics (c.1754)**

PANEGIRICO / IN ONORE / *DELL’IMMACOLATA / CONCESSIONE / DI MARIA.*  
/ Recitato in Malta nella Chiesa Maggiore Conventuale / di S. Giovanni Batista.  
[pages 1 to 8]

PANEGIRICO / IN ONORE / *DEL NASCIMENTO / DI GESÙ CRISTO.* / Recitato in  
Malta nella Chiesa Conventuale Maggiore / di S. Giovanni Batista. [pages 26 to 33]

PANEGIRICO / *IN ONORE DI / S. GIO: BATISTA* / Recitato in Malta nella Chiesa  
Conventuale Maggiore / di S. Giovanni Batista. [pages 60 to 66]

DISCORSO / *SOPRA / LA BOLLA / DELLA CROCIATA* / Recitato in Malta nella  
Chiesa Maggiore / Conventuale di S. Giovanni Batista. [pages 240 to 246]

Like the Capuchin Fra Serafino, Bona seems to have been specifically invited to the island by the Order to deliver sermons at the conventual church. This is indicated by the fact that all of Bona’s panegyrics were delivered there.

**Conclusion**

The objective of this brief study was to draw attention to an area of melitensia which is as yet mostly ignored, namely published texts of sermons. While increasingly common during the nineteenth century, such publications are less so for the preceding two centuries. Many undoubtedly are yet to be discovered in Maltese or foreign collections. Their study would, in turn, cast important light upon the mechanics of religious communication during the period.