

Editorial Note

“Qui narrant praeterita...” (*conf.* XI, 17)

The complexities of Christian thought and practice throughout history are best understood through the lenses of theology, culture, the arts, and the meticulous interpretation of documentary and other sources. This volume gathers a diverse collection of scholarly articles that explore significant dimensions of Early Christian theology, the historical evolution of Christianity in Malta, and the interplay between faith and artistic expression. Each article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of these themes, revealing how theological discourse and cultural contexts have shaped and continue to influence the Christian identity.

In light of these considerations, the Department of Church History, Patrology, and Palaeochristian Archaeology has aptly titled this volume of our Faculty's peer-reviewed journal “Qui narrant praeterita...,” a phrase drawn from Augustine's renowned work, *The Confessions*. This title, which translates to “Those who speak of past things,” encapsulates the essence of our Department's scholarly pursuits, each engaging in explorations that invariably connect to historical narratives so that the lived experience of faith in the past continues to nourish present ‘witness’ within the fluid context of our contemporary society.

This volume is structured into three separate yet related sections, each representing a specific area of expertise within our Department. The initial two articles focus on themes derived from the later patristic period, while the subsequent four delve into pivotal moments in the lived experience of the Local Church. The final two articles examine diverse artistic expressions, highlighting the interconnections between the realms of art, archaeology, and theology.

The first section, *Early Christian Theology*, begins with Rev. Dr Jonathan Farrugia's exploration of Gregory of Nyssa as a hagiographer. This study emphasises Gregory's dual contributions to the development of Trinitarian

doctrine and his reflections on individual sanctity, drawing on his homilies and the lives of saints. By examining the qualities Gregory valued in the saints he commemorated, such as orthodoxy and miraculous acts, Farrugia illustrates how hagiography served devotional and polemical purposes within the theological landscape of the fourth century.

In a complementary vein, Rev. Dr Joseph Ellul OP, investigates the nuanced relationship between Oriental Christianity and early Islam. Initially perceived as mere military incursions, the establishment of Arab-Muslim presence in formerly Byzantine territories prompted apocalyptic interpretations of history among Christians. Ellul's analysis traces the evolution of this perception as peaceful coexistence emerged, necessitating the development of a theological framework that engaged Arabic terminology and Islamic doctrines.

Transitioning to *History of the Church in Malta*, the volume offers insights into the island's Christianization through Dr George Azzopardi's study. Azzopardi critically assesses textual and archaeological evidence, arguing for a gradual process of Christian conversion in Malta, shaped by various social and cultural dynamics. This exploration of the idea of mission is further enriched by Rev. Dr Nicholas Doublet's re-examination of a letter attributed to St Ignatius of Loyola for centuries preserved by the Jesuits in their Church in Valletta as a relic of their founder. This letter was instrumental in establishing the first Jesuit College in Messina, which became a model for future Jesuit institutions, including Malta. It emphasised education as a vital tool for evangelisation, reflecting Ignatius' strategic mission to form young men for spiritual and academic leadership. This legacy shaped Jesuit influence in Malta, anchoring their educational mission in the College of Valletta, which later evolved into the current University of Malta. The letter's preservation as a relic highlights its significance, both spiritually and in furthering Jesuits' missionary and educational goals.

Rev. Prof. Hector Scerri's study on Mauro Caruana OSB, provides a biographical account of Caruana's formative years, highlighting his pastoral activities in Scotland and his election to Bishop of Malta in 1915. This study contributes to understanding the Maltese Church's leadership during a pivotal moment in its history. Additionally, Rev. Dr Kevin Schembri examines the workings of the Particular Legislation Commission of the Maltese Episcopal Conference between 1983 and 1988, revealing the intricate processes behind the drafting of Maltese Church law in response to the revised Code of Canon Law. Schembri's work underscores the collaborative efforts involved in shaping local ecclesiastical legislation.

The volume's final section, *Art*, features two compelling studies that highlight the intersection of faith and artistic representation. Rev. Prof. Martin Micallef analyses Padre Pelagio Mifsud's drawings of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mellieħa, assessing their historical accuracy and contextual significance within the Marian cult. Through careful comparison with contemporary sources, Micallef's work enriches our understanding of the devotional practices surrounding this historical site.

Lastly, Rev. Prof. Paul Sciberras offers a biblical reading of Filippo Paladini's Baroque painting, *The Circumcision of the Child Jesus*, in the Jesuit Church in Valletta. Sciberras argues that while the artwork depicts the physical act of circumcision, it simultaneously emphasises the importance of naming—underscoring the theological significance of Christ as Saviour. This reflection on the painting invites a deeper appreciation of how art can convey profound theological themes within the liturgical context.

Collectively, the studies in this volume illustrate the richness and diversity of Christian thought and practice, from the early theological debates to the historical narratives of Maltese Christianity and the enduring legacy of religious art. By engaging with these varied dimensions, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of how theology, history, and art intersect and interact with one another in the ongoing story of the Christian experience.

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