A MALTESE JESUIT IN SOUTH AMERICA:  
FR BENEDICT SCHEMBRI SJ*  

Salv. Mallia

The Society of Jesus has had a long tradition of missionary work in all corners of the world, from its early years till its suppression in 1773 and since its restoration in 1814. Many were the Maltese Jesuits who remained faithful to this tradition. One of these was Fr Benedict Schembri, who spent over forty years in South America.

Benedict belonged to a distinguished Maltese family. He was born in Valletta on 1 November 1821,¹ the fourth son of Magistrate John Baptist Schembri and Luisa Lauron.²

When he was about ten years old, his parents, who were very religious people, sent him for his education in “a pious household.”³ It would seem this was a community of the Franciscan Order, for he was very knowledgeable about their ways and habits. He never returned to his first home and family afterwards.⁴

When the famous Polish Jesuit Maximilian Rylo stopped in Malta in 1839 on his way to Rome from Syria, his preaching filled youths with spiritual enthusiasm, and many were those who were attracted to the Society of Jesus. One of these was Benedict, then 18 years old. He was already acquainted with the Society through the letters from his elder brother Paul, who had become a Jesuit in 1832.⁵

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*This article is based mainly on material in the Archives of the Maltese Province of the Society of Jesus.
1. Parish Church of St Dominic, Valletta, Baptismal Register 1818-26, 260. He was baptised on 2 November 1839. Oddly enough the name by which he was known was the last but one in the list of names given him at his Baptism: these were Joachim, Joseph, Raymond, Mary Paul, Anthony, Benedict and Santu. Dr Raymond Lauret and Mr Matilde Sammut were the godparents.
2. They had seven children: Paul, Joseph, Alessio, Benedict, Annetto, Maria Antonietta and Rosaventina. (Notes of Fr J. Mallia, SJ.)
4. Ibid. No other documentary evidence has surfaced so far. The Conventual Franciscans did not have anything of the kind (personal communication by Fr Arthur Saliba OFMConv., Archivist at the Franciscan Friary, Rabat). It was the same with the Capuchins: in any case they would not accept boys of less than fifteen years of age as students or novices (Fr Francis Azzopardi OFMCap., Archivist at the Friary, Floriana, in a letter dated 22.x.2002). In a letter dated 24.vii.2002 Fr G. Aquilina OFM, Archivist at the Friary, Valletta, informed the present writer that the Franciscan Friars Minor had no policy of accepting children in the community for their education. But individual children might be helped by one or other of the monks or allowed the run of the convent. It would seem, therefore, that the writer of the Obituary assumed too much. It is more likely that Benedict lived with some family, maybe relatives of his, and had a very close acquaintance with Franciscan Friars.
5. Paul Schembri was born on 27 August 1812, joined the Roman Province of the Society of Jesus on 27 April 1832, and died on 11 November six years later. (For further details see his short biography by Fr J. Mallia, SJ., in Ai Nostri Amici, February 1937, vili, 2).
The young Jesuit
Benedict entered the Jesuit novitiate of the Roman Province at San Andrea del Quirinale on 21 August 1839. At some time he fell sick and was sent to recuperate in Malta. He then joined the Sicilian Province, on 13 March 1842, and there he finished his novicenship.

Some months later he began a two-year course in Rhetoric (studying Latin, Greek and Italian) at the Casa Professa in Palermo, to which were also attached the novitiate and juniorate. He then studied philosophy for two years at the Collegio Massimo in the same city. In September 1846 he began teaching in the college at Calcisessa.

In January 1848, the people of Palermo rose in rebellion against Ferdinand II of Naples and set up their own Parliament. The Jesuits were afraid they would be expelled. The Jesuit superiors took the very unusual, maybe even unprecedented, step of ordaining ten Jesuit students of theology halfway through the course. They took advantage of Bishop Angelo Filippioni’s presence at the Collegio Massimo and asked him to ordain them. Benedict must have been one of them, even though he had apparently not yet started theology.

In Algiers
Immediately thereafter or shortly afterwards, he was sent to do missionary work in Algiers, where a great number of criminals from different parts of Europe, and especially from Italy, were kept in confinement. He took spiritual care of the diverse groups of Christians scattered in the surrounding villages.

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6. A note by Fr J. Meilak, SJ.
7. Cat. (catalogue of the) Province of Sicily, 1843. This is the first time he appears as a member of the Sicilian Province. It seems he did most of his novicenship in Rome. During his time as a student of Rhetoric in Palermo he was assigned to give the ‘points’ for meditation to the Brothers and teach catechism in the church of the Casa Professa and in the Church of St Francis Xavier. In the second year he acted as beadle for the scholastics.
8. Cat. Prov. Sic. 1845-1846. He gave the ‘points’ of meditation to the Brothers and taught catechism at the hospital.
10. Annali Sisidi della Compagnia di Gesù compilati dal P. Alessio Nerbone C. D.G. dall’Anno 1805 al 1859 e continuati dal P. Gaetano Filitti d. m. C., Vol. v. Palermo 1805, 120-1. Fr. Schimbri was included among the priests in the Catalogue of the following year. The date of ordination could not be traced in any of the archives which the present writer consulted. The Society in Sicily was suppressed by the Revolutionary Government in July/August 1848 and the Jesuits dispersed. They returned some months later.
11. LN, op. cit., 1855.
12. ‘che ben volontieri si dedicò a percorrere quei villaggi, coltivando i ceti diversi dei cristiani sparsi per tutto intorno’ (Annali Sisidi, op. cit., 326-7).
15. LN, op. cit., 1855-57.
16. Letter of Fr John E. Darby, S.J., to Fr D. Givanna, S.J., 3.10.1924. Fr Darby (1858-1939) was in British Guiana from 1901 till his death.
hitherto been quite neglected. Fr Schembri began looking them up in every nook and corner of the town and getting acquainted with them. He found them very ignorant and very careless in the practice of their religion; hardly any of them was married and all they did was to take their children to church for baptism. 18

The church building was in truth a small chapel, where all the sermons were given in English - a fact that would repel the Portuguese. Fr Schembri felt that his future work was to be among them. 20

Fr Schembri's apostolic work soon began to show results: he formed them into a community, succeeded in convincing many of those not lawfully married to get married in Church. He used to celebrate a special Mass for them in the old and only church then in Georgetown, on Brickdam, where he preached in Portuguese. 21 He saw that it was necessary to recall the customs familiar to the Portuguese parishioners. He quickly learned their hymns and devotions. 22 His warmth and homely manner soon won their confidence and in a short time there was a sizeable congregation. A certain rivalry then ensued as to which of the two, the English or the Portuguese, should have the preference during the eleven o'clock Mass. Bishop Etheridge very prudently decided that the Portuguese should have their own separate church. 23

A wealthy Portuguese gentleman, named Manuel Fernandez, offered a site in one of the best districts of Georgetown, and the magnificent church of the Sacred Heart of Our Lord was built on Main Street. Funds for its erection were provided by Bishop Etheridge, who is said to have contributed twelve thousand dollars, and by Fr Schembri, who raised the remaining sum of eight thousand dollars. The church was built in the form of a Latin cross, having altars placed at the head, and in each arm of the cross. The dedication in honour of the Sacred Heart was inspired by Fr Schembri's ardent devotion, and the promise he had made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque, to whom he had committed the success of his apostolic work. 24 The Sacred Heart Church was opened in time for Christmas 1861, and solemnly blessed by the Bishop on 22 June 1862. 25 It was to be completed in stages over the

following years.

Among his other apostolic work he instituted a Congregation of the Sacred Heart for women and one of the Living Rosary for men. 26

On 27 April 1865, he took his last vows as Spiritual Coadjutor at the Pro-Cathedral. 27

In his pioneering apostolate, Fr Schembri met with many difficulties and aroused some opposition, indeed hostility. Possibly he occasionally insisted too much on his own views and carried out his plans with an excessive zeal; at any rate, Fr Schembri desired to confer with the Superior General. 28 On 23 June 1865, he started for Rome along with the Bishop, while Fr Baldini succeeded him at Main Street. 29 Fr General deemed it wiser to assign him to work in Brazil; Fr Schembri readily obeyed and began his apostolate there shortly after. 30

No doubt the ill-disposed members of his former flock 'rejoiced at his departure, for his unsparking zeal and courage had roused bitter scorn and hatred against him' in the breasts of those living disordered lives 'and others obstinately opposed to the faith, who ventured to utter threats even against his life, but to such his answer had always been, that he was in the hands of God and was not afraid of what they might do'. 31

In Brazil

Fr Schembri spent ten years in Brazil. During the first three years he was posted at the Seminary at Pernambuco (today Recife) and the next three years at the College of St Francis Xavier in the same city. In 1871 he began four years of pastoral work in the Jesuit Residence at Desterro (today Florianopolis) in the Province of Santa Catarina. 32

In 1875 Fr Schembri returned somewhat suddenly and unexpectedly 33 to British Guiana. We then find him stationed at the Cathedral in Georgetown. He was

26. Ibid. Fr Schembri introduced the ‘peculiar’ devotions of the Madeirans: novenas (the chief of them at Christmas, and others in the course of the year, notably for the Assumption) accompanied by litanies in Portuguese and ending with Benediction; ‘mission’ sermons; the Month of May; and the triduum for the feast of the Sacred Heart in June. At the ‘Holy Ghost’ feast a dove on a stick was carried round the neighbourhood, and on the day of Peter the Fisherman a ‘barque’ would be carried round the villages where there were many Portuguese fishermen. (Bridges, CS, op. cit., and Men of Faith, op.cit., 8-9).

27. Darby, op.cit.

28. LN, op.cit., 567.

29. Darby, op.cit.

30. LN, op.cit.

31. Ibid., 567-8.

32. Cat. Prov. Sic. 1866-76.


34. LN, op.cit., 499.
chaplain to the Almshouse, Hospital and Prison, the Societies of the Seven Sorrows and of St Mary Magdalene, of the Rosary and of St Joseph, and at Meadowbank, a small village some two and a half kilometres from Georgetown. What he had done for the Portuguese in Georgetown he now did for the labourers and fisher folk of Ruimveldt, Meadowbank and the East Bank. He built a church for them at Meadowbank. The new church was blessed by the Bishop on 12 December 1875 and the first Mass was said by Fr Schembri on the 16th, the first day of the Christmas Novena.

From 1882 onwards he resided at Main Street, by the Church of the Sacred Heart. Besides his usual pastoral work he was also for many years Director of the Centre of the Apostleship of Prayer for the diocese for many years. During the last three years of his life he suffered from ill-health. But till a few weeks before he died, he kept up his habit of hearing confessions for hours on end. He died at the Main Street Residence on 4 May 1898. He was laid to rest under his Meadowbank church - of Nossa Senhora do Monte, Our Lady of the Mount.

Epilogue

Of his 59 years as a religious Fr Schembri spent 46 years as a missionary: five in Algeria, ten in Brazil and thirty-one in British Guiana.

He comes across as a warm-hearted, affable priest who understood the needs and the mind-set of his parishioners, a zealous priest who was able to strike out new paths of spiritual enterprise; he was unafraid to face those who led immoral lives, and shrugged off their threats, fully confident in the Lord.

He founded the Portuguese churches and communities at Georgetown and Meadowbank. He was 'a valuable missionary, and his name was held in great esteem in the Colony'. The Portuguese themselves considered him the founder of their church and congregation and their apostle and patron in Heaven.

35. Bridges, Men of Faith, op.cit., 32.
36. Ibid. In later years Meadowbank developed its own special celebrations. On the night of 2 November, the faithful would bring lighted candles to place on their relatives' graves. On Passion Sunday two processions with two full-sized wax figures of Christ and his sorrowful Mother were held along the East Bank road, starting from different points; they would then meet at the 'Fourth Station' of the Way of the Cross.
38. Durby, op.cit.
40. Bridges, CS, op.cit.
41. LN, op.cit. 499.
42. LN, op.cit. 567.