

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 Lauròn.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 Ryllo 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

*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 Lauròn and Mrs Matilde Sammut were the godparents.
2. They had seven children: Paul, Joseph, Alessio, Benedict, Annetto, Maria Antonietta and Rosa-Valentina. (Notes of Fr J. Meilak, SJ.).
3. *Letters and Notices*, [newsletter of the English Province of the Society of Jesus: obituary of Father Benedict Schembri], xxiv, 565.
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. Meilak, SJ., in *Ai Nostri Amici*, February 1937, viii, 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.⁶ He then joined the Sicilian Province, on 13 March 1842,⁷ and there he finished his noviceship.

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.⁸ In September 1846 he began teaching in the college at Caltanissetta.⁹

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 Filippini'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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ He took spiritual care of the diverse groups of Christians scattered in the surrounding villages.¹²

6. A note by Fr J. Meilak, SJ.

7. Catalogue of the Province of Sicily, 1843. This is the first time he appears as a member of the Sicilian Province. So it seems he did most of his noviceship 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. Catalogue of the Province of Sicily, 1845-1846. He gave the 'points' of meditation to the Brothers and taught catechism at the hospital.

9. Catalogue of the Province of Sicily, 1847-1848.

10. *Annali Siculi della Compagnia di Gesù compilati dal P. Alessio Narbone d.C. d.G. dall'Anno 1805 al 1859 e continuati dal P. Gaetano Filiti d. m. C.*, Vol. v, Palermo 1805, 120-1. Fr Schembri is 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.* 565.

12. '...che ben volentieri si dedicò a percorrere quei villaggi, coltivando i ceti diversi dei cristiani sparsi per tutto intorno'. (*Annali Siculi, op. cit.*, 326-7).

He returned to Sicily in 1853 and spent a year at the Jesuit Residence at Termini, where he did missionary work, directed the Sodality of Mary, taught catechism, heard confessions at the Residence and visited the prison.¹³

In September 1854 he began his theological studies at the Jesuit Collegio Massimo in Palermo. His pastoral work during the first year consisted in hearing confessions and visiting prisoners in jail, to which was added the teaching of catechism in the following year. In his third year he taught catechism in the church attached to the College and at the seminary of St Roch.¹⁴

In British Guiana

When he finished his theological studies, Fr Benedict was sent to the British colony of Demerara in British Guiana, where he landed on 1 November 1857.¹⁵

The abolition of slavery proclaimed on 1 August 1834 had led to the disappearance of the slave-workers from the two hundred or more cotton, coffee, and sugar estates. A Government-sponsored immigration of Madeiran Portuguese began. By 1850 there were over 16,000 immigrants. The English Government had stipulated that Catholic priests should be provided for the immigrants.

When the Holy See committed the Church of British Guiana to the Society of Jesus, the General of the Jesuits, Fr Peter Beckx, assigned the Mission to the English Jesuits in 1857. The Right Rev. James Etheridge, S.J., the Vicar Apostolic of British Guiana, had a very small staff of English and Italian missionaries to help him. Jesuits from Italy had been chosen by the Superior General himself because English Jesuits were in short supply and none could be spared from the Portuguese Province.

Bishop Etheridge, convinced of Fr Schembri's great zeal for souls, sent him to the Indian Mission of Santa Rosa on the Morucca river; the mission was then without a pastor, since Fr John Cullen, an Irishman, owing to ill-health had to retire after thirteen years of pastoral work. Finding no house there and the church in ruins,¹⁶ Fr Schembri returned to the Bishop in less than a fortnight and explained to him that he could not see his way to securing sufficient means for his support there.¹⁷

It seemed as though Providence were setting him apart to be the missionary of the Portuguese immigrants, who were spreading in great numbers all over the colony and settling in great numbers in Georgetown or its immediate vicinity. They had

13. Catalogue of the Province of Sicily, 1854.

14. Catalogue of the Province of Sicily, 1855-57.

15. *LN, op. cit.*, 566. Bishop Etheridge arrived in Demerara in March 1857, aged 48. He was ordained Bishop in London the following October. He died at sea on 31 December 1877, on a return trip from Barbados, where he had visited a sick priest. (Bridges, John, S.J., *Men of Faith who served the Catholic Church in British Guiana under Bishops Etheridge, Butler and Galton*, 1988, 34).

16. Letter of Fr John E. Darby, S.J., to Fr D. Glavina, S.J., 3.10.1924. Fr Darby (1858-1939) was in British Guiana from 1901 till his death.

17. *LN, op. cit.*, 566; Bridges, John, S.J., 'Witness to the Faith (5) Fr Benedict Schembri S.J.', in *Catholic Standard*, 1 May, 1988.

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:¹⁸ hardly any of them was married and all they did was to take their children to church for baptism.¹⁹

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

18. *LN, op. cit.*, 566.

19. Darby, *op. cit.*

20. *LN, op. cit.*, 566.

21. Darby, *op. cit.*

22. Bridges, *CS, op. cit.*

23. *LN, op. cit.*, 567. In 1857 the Easter Communions in Georgetown were 70. In 1858 there were 1,900, and 200 couples who had been living together were married. (Bridges, *CS, op. cit.*)

24. *Ibid.*

25. Bridges, John, S.J., *Men of Faith, op. cit.*, 8. The Sacred Heart parish was not a territorial parish, but served the Portuguese in all of Georgetown. (Bridges, *CS, op. cit.*)

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 unsparing 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 1875³³ Fr Schembri returned somewhat suddenly and unexpectedly³⁴ 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 around 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.

33. *Cat. Prov. Sic.* 1876. According to J. Bridges, *Men of Faith, op. cit.*, 32, he returned to Georgetown in October 1874.

34. *LN, op. cit.*, 499.

chaplain to the Almshouse, Hospital and Prison, the Societies of the Seven Sorrows and of St Mary Magdalen, of the Rosary and of St Joseph, and at Meadowbank, a small village some two and a half kilometres from Georgetown.³⁵ 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.³⁶

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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ He died at the Main Street Residence on 4 May 1898.³⁹ He was laid to rest under his Meadowbank church - of Nossa Senhora do Monte, Our Lady of the Mount.⁴⁰

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'.⁴¹ The Portuguese themselves considered him the founder of their church and congregation and their apostle and patron⁴² 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.

37. Cat. Prov. Sic. 1883.

38. Darby, *op. cit.*

39. Cat. Prov. Sic. 1899 and *Ex Litteris Annuis Prov. Sic. SJ.*

40. Bridges, *CS*, *op.cit.*

41. *LN*, *op.cit.* 499.

42. *LN*, *op.cit.* 567.