

DOMINIC CUTAJAR
THE POLITICAL IDEAS OF M.A. VASSALLI

The excellent study by Mr Frans Ciappara on Mikiel Anton Vassalli's early years and his expressed desire to join the priesthood¹ have thrown new strong light on Vassalli's formative years. It so happens that several years back I had come across the same collection of correspondence which I did not expand upon due to a number of reasons. I am though mainly drawn to Vassalli's political ideas which I have a strong feeling we have been consistently misconstruing.

It seems to the present writer that Mr Ciappara has not fully exhausted the material he has come across. The text of Vassalli's letter to Bishop Labini dated April 30, 1788² makes a strong and special impact; for through it transpires the genuine impellent reason behind Vassalli's call to the ecclesiastical state, primarily motivated by an overwhelming desire to expand and specialise his potential in oriental languages.

Attached to that letter, there is also a *breve* or attestation signed by the Cardinal-Bishop of Palestrina Marc'Antonio Colonna, issued on February 28, 1788 in which it is stated clearly that Vassalli "*a mense Julii Anni 1785 ad presentim usque infrascriptam die in hac alma urbe commemorantem*"³. This ties up neatly with known facts, namely that in 1785 he had won a prize for Arabic at a local school⁴, after which he must have proceeded directly to Rome.

Important Letter

At this point the letter of April 30, 1788 becomes doubly important, for resting as it does upon Cardinal Colonna's *breve*, it enables Vassalli to add "*mi son dato per qualche tempo di studio delle tre principali lingue Orientali Ebraica, Arabica e Sira alla quale concurrò. Di più per questo fine mi son arrolato nella Congregazione dei Chierici nella casa della Missione come dall'annessa si raccoglie*".

So that Vassalli himself distinguishes two stages during which he was learning Oriental languages in Rome: the first, presumably following his arrival there in 1785; then for about a year at the Congregazione which the *breve* helps us to fix to 1787–1788 by indicating its duration "for about a year" (*ab anno circiter*).

The above clarification puts into clearer perspective Vassalli's frantic efforts to acquire serious knowledge of Oriental languages to enable him carve a career in that particular field.

It is more than likely that the genuinely pious Bishop Labini had seen through the doubtful sincerity of Vassalli's "call" to the ecclesiastical state – apart from the possibility of Vassalli having already acquired a reputation for unorthodox views. The Bishop had therefore purposely withheld from granting his own clearance, seizing upon the mere excuse of Vassalli having failed to serve in church for three years, as the candidates were supposed to do. In so doing the Bishop was unconsciously blocking Vassalli's career and most of all his efforts to get a lecturship in Oriental Liturgy at the *Sapienza* – an issue that embittered the two personalities' future relations with fateful results.

Thus bearing in mind his Bishop's determined opposition and the lack of tangible evidence, one should be chary of asserting that Vassalli actually took the initial step towards the priestly state. His status of *Abbate* need not to be taken seriously in an age when every teacher was automatically assumed to be one. A clearer understanding of the matter is sure to materialise when Mr Ciappara publishes and analyses the entire material touching the case.

Beam of light

The matter interests me most of all because it throws a beam of light on Vassalli's motivations and his ideals. He is thus seen to be first and foremost an academic, endowed with a single-minded compunction to forge ahead in his career. As a brilliant intellectual he could not fail to be deeply impressed and affected by the *lay emphasis* of the French Enlightenment and the powerful upsurge of nationalism that it generated.

It was a time when forgotten ethnic groups were waking up to their identity, finding through linguistic studies a natural expression for their nationalism. And it was precisely in the latter field that Vassalli had developed his interests, his academic *iter* finding its logical and idealistic goal in nationalism. In this idealism of his, Vassalli belongs entirely to the intellectual milieu of his age.

Yet the national identity of Malta was itself a novel concept; it had practically never existed before, for the still prevalent Medieval concept of "people" bore no relation to the idea of nationality. It is likely that Vassalli may not have realized all the complexities of the situation.

Reform

Instead, with the boldness of a born idealist, he seized the opportunity of acting in the political field—as he had inevitably to do to follow the dictates of his conscience. He showed amazing nerve in petitioning Grand Master de Rohan to institute a reform of the Order's rule as to permit the Maltese to share the responsibility of their country's sovereignty.

The implication is clear. In a flash of intuition, Vassalli had understood the delicacy of Malta's position; as a small country without resources, overpopulated by the standards of the time, it was clear that the Island would never earn its livelihood by its unaided efforts.

Significantly, Vassalli was not proposing or aspiring to eject out the Knights, because even in the reduced circumstances following the 1793 confiscation of its French property, the Order was still able to bring annually to Malta large amount of capital without which the Island would have become quickly impoverished—as indeed it was to do from 1813 to the 1840s.

Yet there was an element of naiveté in Vassalli's hope that an aristocratic institution, as the Order still was at the time, would even consider seriously the nationalistic appeal of a single man; that the ideas he gave voice to accorded well with the spirit of the time was in those historical circumstances a net disadvantage. The rebuff

Vassalli received closed yet another door, driving him to attempt conspiracy—another of that age's romantic fixations. Soon he found himself betrayed and inevitably cast into prison.

The experience left him no feasible political option but to throw in his lot with the pro-French party, although it is arguable if he ever belonged to the Jacobin party. Indeed when the French occupied Malta, they showed rather lukewarm interest for this impractical idealist, treating him with a kind of detached benevolence—as the British were to do later.

The September 1798 revolt in the countryside must have represented the acme of disillusionment for Vassalli, caught in an entirely false "nationalistic" position, committed to the side of a foreign power against his own people.

What could a man of his moral integrity do in such circumstances? He resolved this dilemma with the same moral boldness with which he had once before addressed the absolute authority of de Rohan. He opted to abandon "his party" and the relative security of Valletta by making his way to the village of his birth—to his own people.

Exile

The French cared too little to oppose his request, but on the other hand Vassalli was again being a foolhardy idealist in assuming that his countrymen—in the full fury of revolt—would not mistake his "revolutionary" past for pro-French partitism. Someone might even have suspected him of being the author of "*Għall armi Repubblikani immorru kontra n-nobiltà uru li ahna vincituri għajtu oviva l-Libertà*"⁵.

In all probability Vassalli had nothing to do with this bit of popular verse, but it was well known that he had identified himself with the "*Repubblikani*". His leaving Valetta could easily be interpreted as an attempt at infiltration: and anyway, according to their lights, he would inevitably be seen as a "dangerous" influence. Hence the implacibility of the rebels' conduct towards Vassalli—once again put in chains, this time by his own countrymen as he must have bitterly contemplated—and soon forced into exile.

In some round-about-way, Vassalli made his way to France, where he was soon joined by a large and distinguished band of exiled Maltese, the former adherants to the French cause. The French government had allocated funds for these exiles to set up a colony in Corsica—a plan that never got off the ground due to the exiles' prevarication⁶.

Vassalli appears to have retained his independence, standing out through his quiet dignity and intelligence. But at the time when the French were negotiating peace with Britain, they lent an ear to these exiles' view in dealing with the thorny issue of Malta. In particular they took note of Vassalli's ideas which were soon embedded in article 10 of the Treaty of Amiens (1802).

According to this article, the longest in the Treaty, Malta was to be returned to the Order of St John under a number of specified conditions: (1) The Order was to elect a Grand Master after its return to Malta; (2) both the French and the English

Langues were not to be reconstituted: (3) A Maltese Langue was to be established without its members needing proofs of nobility: (4) Britain was to evacuate all its forces from Malta: (5) half the garrison was to be composed of Maltese commanded by Maltese officers: (6) Malta's independence was to be guaranteed by Britain, France, Austria, Spain, Russia and Prussia: (7) Malta's neutrality was to be solemnly declared: (8) the harbours of Malta were to be open to all mercantile shipping, including those coming from Muslim states after relations are mutually regularized: (10) the Order's statute was to be maintained: (11) the dispositions contained in paras (3), (5), (7), (8) and (10) were to be enacted as integral laws of Malta: (12) the Sicilian Crown was to provide a force of 2000 for a period of one year after the island passes back to the Order: (13) the guaranteeing powers of para (6) were to ratify the above positions.

Destiny

Many of the far-seeing conditions contained in the Treaty of Amiens had in fact first featured in the petition Vassalli had submitted a decade earlier to Grand Master de Rohan, and they were clearly designed to reclaim for Malta its independence in a way that would have also ascertained that the dignity of its people be respected.

History was thought to reserve for Malta a different destiny. The Treaty of Amiens was never put into force as hostilities between Britain and France soon recommenced. By the provisions of the Treaty of Paris (1815) Malta found itself a lowly Crown colony, a fate which Vassalli had sought to avert: the Island's oldest and sole "political" institution, the *Università*, was scrapped in 1812, while the country sunk into possibly the worst of its economic depressions.

Vassalli's role as an initiator of political ideas had come to an end. He returned to the country of his birth estranged from his people and his Church, an impoverished academic with a bleak future staring him in the face, distantly patronised by the British. By the time of his death, all the sound and fury had faded, himself passing away practically unnoticed.

Vassalli's literary activity evinces his early academic interest but serves also as a back-drop to his faith in Malta's nationalism, the flame of which he sought so hard to kindle. In material terms, his life can be summed up as moving human failure—an idealist crushed by harsh political realities. But on the spiritual level, he was nothing less than the first conscious advocate of Malta's nationalism—the proverbial sower baulked by the elements and the parched, stony soil of his land.

1. F. Ciappara: "M.A. Vassalli studied for the priesthood", *The Sunday Times*, March 2 and March 9, 1986.
2. *A.A.M. Brevia et Constitutiones*, vol. XXV, ff. 290–291.
3. *A.A.M. Brevia et Constitutiones*, vol. XXV, f. 289.
4. F. Ciappara: "M.A. Vassalli wins a prize for Arabic", *The Sunday Times*, June 19, 1983.
5. *The Canzona per il Giorno festivo della Libertà* was issued and distributed by the pro-French *Repubblikani* in 1798; the Maltese version was entitled "*Ghagna Ta Trionf tal-L'iberta*".
6. A.C.M.Pan.56 f. 227: the entry is headed *Rifugiati Maltesi* and concludes with the words: "*tutto questo mi fu riferito da Vassallo*".