

# The M.U.S.E.U.M.

A magazine of the Society of Christian Doctrine, founded by Saint George Preca



Issue 12 September 2012



The

# M.U.S.E.U.M.

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*The spirit and vision of George Preca*

*The M.U.S.E.U.M. is issued biannually for friends and associates of the Society of Christian Doctrine in the Australian Region. M.U.S.E.U.M. represents the first letter of a prayer in Latin, Magister Untinam Sequatur Evangelium Universus Mundus translating Divine teacher, may the whole world follow the Gospel.*

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### Cover

Ceramic art piece - *Verbum Dei*, by Godfrey Xuereb. *Verbum Dei* is Latin for the "Word of God". The art piece separates these words to symbolically show that St George Preca endured many challenges to convey the Word of God.

This magazine is online at [www.sdcprecaoz.org](http://www.sdcprecaoz.org)

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# The Enduring Legacy of St George Preca

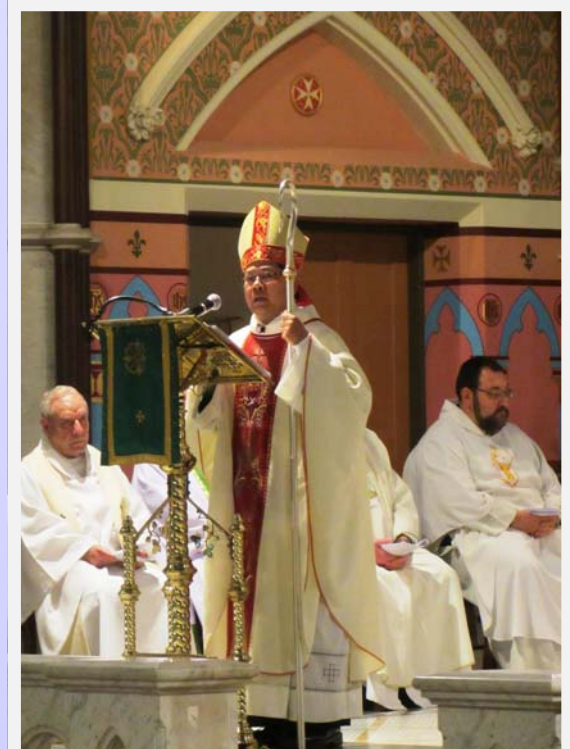
The 50th anniversary of the death of St George Preca occurred on 26 July 2012. Many people from across Australia came together at various events in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide to celebrate the great legacy left to us by George Preca, particularly the example and dedication shown to the life of the Church. The MUSEUM reflects and shares some joyous memories from these celebrations

## *Pilgrimage to the Monument of St George Preca and the Maurice Mifsud Memorial Mission*



# 50th anniversary of the death of st george preca

## *St George Preca Mass*



# The Pint, the Pipe and the Cross

## Maurice Mifsud Memorial Mission

The inaugural 'Maurice Mifsud Memorial Mission' entitled 'The Enduring Legacy of St George Preca' on the 50th anniversary of George Preca's death was delivered by Fr Carmelo Sciberras from Sydney at the Victoria on Hyde hotel, Yarraville, Melbourne on 24 July 2012.

Chesterton once said: "In Catholicism, the pint, the pipe and the cross can all fit together." On this night, although minus the pipe, at least inside, we were doing just that. This pub gathering is not unlike the gatherings that George Preca conducted in the public squares in Malta. These are still conducted today by our Members.

Maurice Mifsud who died in 2010 was sent by St George Preca to Australia in 1956 to continue developing the SDC in Australia. His life was dedicated to teaching others.

The SDC grew in Australia under his leadership, guiding the SDC as Regional Superior in Australia from 1975 through to 1997. Maurice spared much and his passion was like that of George Preca - to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to all and that is why we acknowledge him in this Mission.

Some guests dined before the seminar and were certainly uplifted by Irene, the vocalist who accompanied their dinner with well-known gospel

songs. The singing continued during the seminar where we communally sang in a spirit of joy.

During the seminar, Fr Carmelo spoke about the influence of St George Preca in the Church especially in the role of the laity. He was able to speak personally about George Preca drawing from his own experiences when he was a Member of the SDC. Fr Carmelo made reference to George being a great apostle of the Gospel which he used to call "The Voice of the Beloved"; wishing that his followers effectively preach the Gospel and be a 'voice of the beloved' to all.



*Fr Carmelo Sciberras delivers the inaugural 'Maurice Mifsud Memorial Mission' at Victoria on Hyde hotel, Melbourne, Australia to mark the 50th anniversary of the death of St George Preca*



*Procession of the Verbum Dei caro factum est,  
by Charles Micallef*

Fr Carmelo recalls that the ordination of George Preca took place on 23 December 1906, at St John's Co-Cathedral administered by Bishop Pietro Pace. However he celebrated his first Mass at St Cajetan's church in Hamrun on Christmas Day. This is significant for George had a profound understanding of the birth of Jesus Christ the '*Verbum Dei*' into the world.

Full of enthusiasm and confiding in God's love and providence, he started his priestly ministry with the Hamrun youth and adults whom he had already been meeting during his diaconate. Some of them later became the first Members of the Society of Christian Doctrine.

During all those years, George Preca spent his life doing God's will. He lived a saintly life, becoming the "masterpiece" God always meant him to be. He translated this closeness to God into a humble service of spreading God's word in Malta and beyond. This is the legacy left to us by St George Preca.

The experience has opened new doors for us to appreciate more deeply the life, spirituality and thoughts of St George Preca.

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# It's Home Away from Home



Fr Tony Cox ssc pictured with the crew of "Blue Sky"

*"I was a stranger and you made me welcome"*

Mt 25:25

Fr Tony Cox is a Columban priest and is a member of the Catholic Vocations Ministry Australia. He began his term on the Executive in March 2011 representing the Victorian Vocation Network. Tony's ministry includes accompanying seafarers at the Stella Maris Seafarer's Centre in Melbourne.

Tony's association with Stella Maris Seafarer's Centre in Melbourne goes back to the mid-1990s when he returned from Japan. Having worked with the Melbourne Harbour Trust Commissioners before entering the seminary, his fascination with ships and

the sea is long! Usually once a week he tries to visit the ships in the Port of Melbourne. Other volunteer members of the Stella Maris Seafarer's Centre visit the other days of the week. In the course of a day around six or seven ships can be visited. Along with all the other various volunteer support and assistance, the Stella Maris Seafarer's Mission statement of "providing a home away from home to all the Seafarers; ensuring that the spiritual, social, physical and materials needs are met - regardless of race, colour or creed" is lived out.

Fr Tony has celebrated Mass on board and there have been many blessings of new

ships and also many a time spent talking and sharing life. Easter and Christmas are especially times when all Seafarers appreciate the contact with the Centre and if possible they avail of the Celebrations associated accordingly.

Each visit to a ship and each day presents new challenges but with the co-operation and the support of the Shipping Agents and the Port Staff and Security, these are met. As Tony has commented, "walking up the narrow gangways to the tops of these big ships is a bit daunting but knowing the Apostleship of the Sea acts for the Church among the Peoples of the Sea highlights one aspect of mission which we so often forget about - the service of hospitality. To see the delight on the Seafarer's faces indicates and highlights the fact that the work of Stella Maris is valued by so many". During 2010 over 17,500 Seafarers visited the Centre in Melbourne.

Tony reflects it is a far cry from the days of "HMS Pinafore" but some aspects of the sea always remain! Water and the sea are so much part of our lives that it is often only when we are confronted by its dwindling or rising levels that we take the time to think, reflect and plan for the future. We need

water to exist, no matter who, what or where we are.

We travel and many a day we see, look and even stare at the great ships on our seas but rarely consider what lies below and above the decks of these huge monoliths of the oceans. As yesteryear and yesterday, today shipping is a crucial, yet often unseen, component of global economy. We all depend on shipping for a majority of the goods and products we own and consume. By extension, we rely on the crews who sail the ships to and from our country. These seafaring women and men endure many challenges at sea: they often experience severe loneliness, isolation and also depression, and above all they are separated from their family and friends for many months at a time. To add to this, apart from the dangerous seas which often swell up, now the real threat of piracy is a factor in the life of every seafaring person. Some shipping companies now hire permanent security guards who watch the decks 24/7 while at sea.

The Stella Maris Seafarer's Centre in Melbourne is one of 353 Centres Worldwide providing pastoral care service and support for seafaring women and men. The Stella Maris Centres are part of the official missionary work in its care for seafarers and the Apostleship of the Sea. This agency is operating globally under the



*Fr Tony Cox ssc pictured with "Cap Jervis"*

auspices of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of the Migrant and Itinerant people which is based in the Vatican.

# Catholic Religious Against the Trafficking of Humans

After presenting to the Year 11 students at Ave Maria College, Alberfeldie, on the topic of Human Trafficking, Peter Judge asked me to write a few words about ACRATH.

Catholic Religious Australia (CRA) is the auspicing body for Australian Catholic Religious Against the Trafficking of Humans (ACRATH) of which I am a member.

At the recent UISG (International Union of Superiors General) Conferences in Rome, women religious committed themselves to eradicating the trafficking of women and children. I was present at the 2004 conference. I am passionate about this issue and have the privilege of walking beside three women who have been trafficked.

Operating in all states and in Canberra, ACRATH members raise awareness and educate about the evil of trafficking. They visit politicians, talk and cooperate with the Red Cross, Project Respect, Stop the Traffik, Anti-slavery and other groups. They do this to help those people who have been trafficked into Australia and / or other countries for the purpose of sexual exploitation, forced labour in a factory, restaurant, farm, building site and removal of organs.



A number of Congregations have given ACRATH the use of their premises, donated sums of money, commissioned their members to volunteer as members, promoted the work of ACRATH in their communities and schools and kept themselves abreast of news by receiving the newsletter which is published twice a year.

Presentations to senior students in Colleges have been a special focus for ACRATH members. Seminars have been conducted also with topics such as:

- Understanding and addressing the demand side of sex trafficking.
- Reconstructing masculinity and transforming men's sexuality.
- What role do women / girls and men / boys play in this process.

***"In a new country there will be no slavery & hence no slaves"***

*Captain Arthur Phillip said this in 1787 before leaving England to become the 1st Governor of the new colony of Australia. Phillip landed at Sydney Cove in 1788 after an 8 month sea voyage*

Some achievements have been made by ACRATH intervention. These include Visa Reform where victims are helped to return home or remain here for extended periods and eventually obtain permanent visas; housing for women who need supportive and safe accommodation – this is an ongoing issue and not yet resolved; licensees of all brothels in Melbourne are obliged to display signage (in several languages),



[www.acrath.org.au](http://www.acrath.org.au)

People are NOT for sale

prominently posted, with regard to sex slavery and sexual servitude; financial compensation for victims.

Allens Arthur Robinson law firm working on a *pro bono* basis have obtained compensation for three victims and are working on two more cases; access to education for women who wish to do courses at TAFE and other English courses; commitment to Fairtrade and Millenium Development goals.

Who are trafficked? These include marginalised women and children; ethnic minorities; indigenous people

and hill tribes, refugees and illegal immigrants, illiterate women and runaway girls.

Traffickers, pimps and buyers exploit women and girls seeking to improve their lives through employment, migration or other opportunities such as education.

I believe with the cooperation of media and awareness raising activities the issue of trafficking is becoming better known in the last couple of years. I ask readers to pray for these victims and spread the word yourselves!

Sr Therese Power rsm

### Prayer to End Trafficking

O God, our words cannot express what our minds can barely comprehend and our hearts feel, when we hear of men and women, boys and girls deceived and transported to unknown places for purposes of sexual exploitation and enslavement and all kinds of abuse because of human greed and the desire for profit at this time in our world.

Our hearts are saddened and our spirits angry that their dignity and rights are being transgressed through threats, deception and force.

We cry out against the degrading practice of trafficking:

Against the sale of women and girls into the sex industry;

Against the sale of people of all ages for their bodily organs;

Against the capture of boys who become child soldiers;

Against the enslavement of men in dangerous, dirty and demeaning work;

And against the sale of babies.

We pray that the buying and selling of people will end.



# Under the Grill

## with Most Rev. Vincent Long OFMConv



From his birth almost fifty two years ago in Gia-Kiem, Vietnam, the love of Jesus Christ has always filled Most Reverend Vincent Long with hope. With his family, Bishop Long escaped from Vietnam as a boat person in 1980, finally arriving in Australia in December 1981. In 1983 he became a Conventual Franciscan friar and commenced his studies for the priesthood in Melbourne in 1984. Three years after his priestly ordination on 30 December 1989 he was sent to Rome for further studies. In the years following his return, he was assigned as a formator in his Order, parish priest of Kellyville NSW and Springvale Victoria, and elected superior of his Order in Australia in 2005. On 20 May 2011, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI appointed Fr Vincent as Auxiliary Bishop for the Archdiocese of Melbourne assigning him the Episcopal see of Tala.



### 1. Could you tell us something of your childhood and what it meant to be Catholic in Vietnam?

Following the Fall of Saigon, the victorious communist government was extremely harsh in its rule, particularly over South Vietnam and those it considered imperialist collaborators such as officials and soldiers of the former regime. Within a few years, Vietnam was reduced to total chaos due to the international embargo, the border wars against China and Cambodia, forced collectivisation, not to mention the proliferation of the so-called 're-education camps'. We grew up in poverty, isolation and in a state of constant fear.

I should mention too that I was in St Paul's Minor Seminary for my native diocese of Xuan Loc, 60 km north of Saigon, when the 'Liberation Army' arrived and turned it into their barrack. We were expelled and my desire for the priesthood would remain concealed until I found myself in the free land of Australia.



### 2. What were the circumstances which led to your arrival in Australia?

I left Vietnam in August 1980, on a small boat. I was among the thousands who escaped the harsh rule of communism after the Fall of Saigon in 1975. It was a twist of fate that I followed the footsteps of my parents who themselves took to the sea to escape communism in the North following the 1954 Geneva Convention that divided Vietnam into 2 halves, similar to the political situation in Korea today. The 7 day journey itself was terrifying. We had more people on board than we had anticipated and as a result, we had to dispose of anything that would have caused the boat to sink. We ended up getting rid of even our water, food and petrol supplies. When you are faced with life and death, the choice is very simple. But we count ourselves fortunate, certainly more fortunate than thousands of other Vietnamese boat people who were robbed, raped, killed by pirates or simply perished at sea. Then, I lived in a refugee camp in Malaysia for more than one year. As harrowing as it was, I think I am luckier than the refugees or asylum seekers of today, especially when it comes to their treatment and the Australian government policy.

*Thank you Bishop Long for sharing these thoughts with us.*



### 3. How then did your vocation develop?

The decision to become a priest or a religious is often quite complex and multifaceted. In my case, it began when I was 13 years of age, living in one of the most turbulent periods of my country's history. The war and its terrible effects had a profound impact on me, even as an adolescent and a young man. The decision to be a priest was initially motivated by a desire to help people who suffered. Then, as I became more mature, I was able to test and deepen that desire in the context of my faith and lived experience. I did not have a peaceful childhood and adolescence. My parents being refugees from Communist North Vietnam were forced to move from one place to another. Then the war, the escape by boat, the experience of living in a refugee camp and that of settling in a new country all played a significant part in my vocation journey. They all contributed to the birth and growth of my strong desire to alleviate suffering and to help people who suffer. Eventually, it was a matter of choosing what option in life which would best enable me to realize this desire.

The encounter with the friars in Springvale following my arrival in Australia in 1981 was critical to my vocation discernment. I was at the stage where I really wanted to continue my pursuit for the priesthood which was interrupted by the communist victory (April 30, 1975) and the watershed events that followed (escape by boat, refugee camp in Malaysia and arrival in Australia). Their simplicity and especially their service to the marginalized appealed to me immediately. I wanted to share in their vision of life.



### 4. What was your reaction when you were appointed auxiliary Bishop?

I had just arrived back to the Order's headquarters in Rome after a long trip to Asia when I was summoned to the Office of the Congregation for Bishops. I was later informed that the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI had appointed me Titular Bishop of Tala and Auxiliary of Melbourne. I was completely taken aback. After all, I am not a typical Australian; I am a migrant from Asia and a former refugee. It was not an ordinary appointment, I thought. It was an unusual choice on the part of the Holy Father. I felt a mixture of joy and apprehension.



### 7. What do you see as the strengths of the Church in the Western Region of the Archdiocese of Melbourne?

The Western Region of the Archdiocese is one of the most diverse and also one of the poorest in Melbourne. Yet, from where I stand, it is the migrant poor who are often the faith-filled members of the Church. Perhaps, this is why the Western Region is relatively dynamic in terms of participation on the part of the faithful. Being a migrant bishop myself, I hope to tap into this hidden strength of our region and to foster greater awareness of our mission in the world today.



### 5. As a Conventual Franciscan, what particular spirit do you bring to your role as Bishop?

St Francis was not in favour of friars taking on positions of influence which might inhibit their ability to live their fundamental vocation to be 'lesser brothers' to everyone. For him, leadership must be a service of humility and not of domination. As a Conventual Franciscan, I approach my Episcopal appointment with this perspective in mind.

I was ordained in 1989 and was assigned various ministries in various places, including Parish Priest, Formator, Provincial Leader and General Councillor of my Order (the Conventual Franciscans). In terms of my lived experience, I knew poverty, war, adversity and other extreme trials and tribulations as a human being. It is my hope that I can bring all of these to bear on my new ministry. However, I also realise that whatever qualities I have, I am far from being complete. Hence, it is also my ardent desire to learn much from others and to walk with them in the path of faith, hope and love.



### 6. There are a large number of committed Asian Catholics in our churches today providing a reminder that Christianity is not solely a Western religion. You have been quoted as saying that the Vietnamese are the 'new Irish'. How might the Church in Australia evolve over the next decade?

The Catholic Church in Australia is changing in terms of the makeup of its membership and particularly its clergy. Prior to the great influx of Asian refugees in the 70's and 80's, for instance, there were very few Catholics of non-European descent in Australia. Now, they are a lot more visible, especially in suburban parishes. Their presence and active participation bring richness and vitality to the Church in this country. The clergy too is richly blessed with many new faces. The Vietnamese alone have about 150 priests working across the country. There are significant number of clergy from India, the Philippines and other places. Thus, from a demographic point of view, the Church is evolving to reflect the changes in our multicultural society.

# Reaching Out

One of the most rewarding experiences one can do is to support the missionary work conducted by many religious organisations overseas, by travelling to developing countries and reaching out to those in need.

From 19 June to 4 July, I and two other teachers had the privilege to lead a group of ten young people from St Bede's College, Mentone to Thailand to support the missionary work of the De La Salle Brothers. We travelled to Nakhon Sawan in Central Thailand to work as volunteers at the La Salle Child Development Centre located on the outskirts of the city. This free kindergarten is mostly attended by impoverished children whose parents work at a nearby landfill. Also amongst the children were those that were homeless and were looked after by the Brothers community.

At the kindergarten, a key objective was to build an outdoor pavilion to enable the children to gather outside to either learn or play while being sheltered from the hot sun. The pavilion was built with traditional Thai features and using traditional Thai building techniques. We toiled in the hot Thai sun and in high humidity to complete the pavilion in seven working days. Although we found the work difficult at times, we were motivated by the happiness of the children and their beautiful smiles that welcomed us each morning and farewelled us at the conclusion of each day.

The happiness of the children actually lifted our spirits. Every day, some of the students were invited to take a seat at the back of a truck with the rest of the kindergarten children for their ride home. Nothing could prepare them for the journey that took place.



*Volunteers pouring the concrete slab of the pavilion*



*Volunteers and the pavilion*

Seeing the devastatingly poor conditions that these children live in and yet manage to keep a smile on their face had a significant impact. I doubt any of the students will forget that eye-opener for a long time.

Apart from the building programme, the students also spent time with the kindergarten children, participating and facilitating various educational activities and games. One of the most memorable experiences for the students was the

distribution of gifts to these children which the students purchased themselves or collected through donations or sponsorship prior to their departure. The smiles, laughter and excitement of the children as the gifts were distributed was an experience that the students will remember and cherish for many years to come.

Our residence was at La Salle College in the city of Nakhon Sawan. There each of the students were introduced to two or three Thai students who would be their mentors. Being of equivalent age to the students, these mentors accompanied them during their time at Nakhon Sawan, spending much of their



*A student volunteer assisting an orphaned child from the kindergarten who had recently broken his leg*

personal time sharing their college, city and culture. Each afternoon after the students returned from the kindergarten, the mentors would be waiting to socialise with them and partake in various sporting events together. The students were astounded by the selfless generosity of the mentors who did so much to make them feel right at home. This included providing them with gifts, food, a farewell party and their free time on the weekends. As a result, friendships flourished between the mentors and the students. Goodbyes became very difficult at the conclusion of the programme.



*Volunteers riding home with the kindergarten children*



*Volunteers distributing gifts to the kindergarten children*



*Volunteers and mentors*

The motivation to give of oneself and work with the local Thai people was strong amongst the group. In addition to the daily activities already described, the students each evening proceeded to the hall where the orphan boarders would study to assist them with their homework. Language was initially a barrier however over the stay, communication skills developed and by the end of the experience, the students were able to help the boarders with ease. Although homework was the focus, the friendships that developed meant that homework was at times pushed aside for games and socialising. The happiness of these boarders when many had sad upbringings had a profound effect on the students and taught them to appreciate all that they had and how fulfilling it was to share what one has with others.

Overall, this invaluable experience enabled the group to step out of their comfort zones and learn many new things about each other, about another culture, and above all, about themselves. It opened the eyes of the students to what could be achieved and what a dramatic effect one's efforts and capabilities can have, particularly to those in need. It gave them belief that they can make a difference and inspired them to do more of this kind of work in the future. As a teacher, it also reinforced how amazing young people truly are and their potential to make a positive difference to our society and indeed the world.

Mark Micallef sdc



*Volunteers assisting the boarders with homework*



*Volunteers at a Buddhist temple*



*Volunteers and children under the pavilion*

# Saint George Preca Award for Helpline

For twenty years now, Fr Michael Gatt who is the parish priest of St Kieran's, Osborne Park in Perth has been running a 24 hour Christmas Helpline. In acknowledgment of this service, he is the recipient of the inaugural St George Preca Community Service Award presented by the Maltese Professional and Business Association of Western Australia.

The Award was presented at a dinner in Fr Gatt's honour with Archbishop Emeritus Barry Hickey of Perth as a guest of honour. The award was established to recognise people within the Maltese community of Western Australia who have made a sustained and significant contribution to the community of WA.

Fr Gatt's Helpline which is sometimes referred to as the 'Gattline' by the local media was established in 1992 with the assistance of six helpers. It has assisted thousands of callers who are unable to cope with the loneliness of Christmas by taking their 'phone calls and providing a sympathetic ear. The Helpline is open for 24 hours between 24 December and 2 January each year. Fr Gatt was presented with a framed picture of St George Preca.



*Dr A V Sciberras, Hon Consul for Malta, Mrs Louise Vink, President Maltese Professional and Business Association, Fr Michael Gatt and Archbishop Emeritus Barry Hickey of Perth*



May Fr Gatt find the strength and courage to continue the good work in the community with the Helpline and in all

that he undertakes in his role as Community Pastoral leader.

# Sister Mary Regis Galea Isp



*Sr Mary renews her vows. Her sister, also a Little Sister, Sr Vincenza beside her from Bologna, Italy*

residents; God's compassion and merciful love.

Sr Mary Regis Galea is a Little Sister of the Poor who celebrated 50 years of her religious profession at St Helen's church at Birkirkara in Malta on 17 July 2012. Sr Mary Regis is currently missioning in Dunedin, New Zealand. She holds a deep respect and admiration for St George Preca.

Before entering the Little Sisters of the Poor at Hamrun in 1962, with two friends, who were also joining the Little Sisters, they made their last visit to Fr George Preca. He was

Encountering Christ in prayer and serving him in the poor with love—this is the life of a Little Sister of the Poor!

Jeanne Jugan is the Foundress of the first Little Sister of the Poor and was canonised by Pope Benedict XVI on 11 October 2009. The Sisters have a vowed life with the additional vow of 'hospitality'. The vow of hospitality perfects the gift of them to God and brings their religious consecration into the realities of everyday life. It gives a spiritual value to the many humble acts of service performed throughout the day, and enables them to communicate to the elderly



*Pictured outside the SDC Central House chapel*

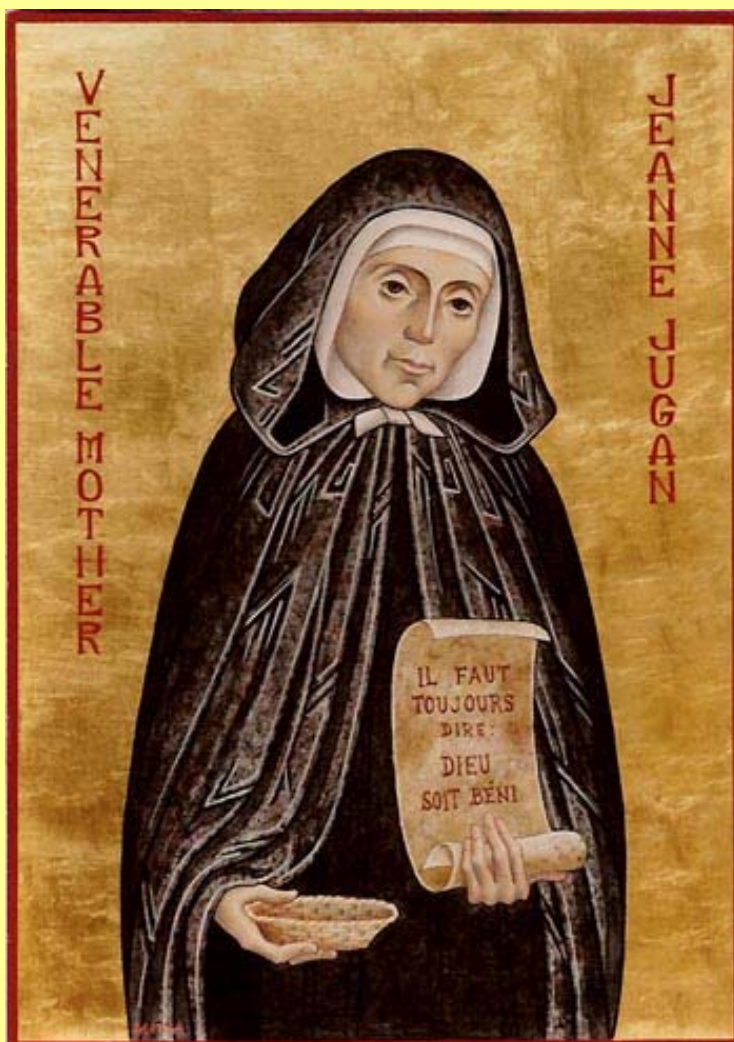
delighted to see them and they asked him to bless them and the direction of their lives. Sr Regis recalls Fr Preca turning to her saying in Maltese *Alla jkun mighak!* - be strong have courage. Sr Mary has never forgotten these words and they have given her strength through the years.

Fifteen days after her profession Fr Preca died. She would have loved to be present at the funeral but was in France at the time.



*Congratulations Sr Mary  
on your anniversary*

*Sr Mary with companion sisters of her congregation, Little Sisters of the Poor*



***“It is a great  
grace God has  
given you  
in calling you  
to serve the  
poor ...  
what happiness  
for us, to be a  
Little Sister of  
the Poor!”***

*Saint Jeanne Jugan*

# Welcoming the Statue of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre

The SDC's new mission in Sagua la Grande, Cuba started in March 2011 following an invitation from H.E. Most Reverend Arturo Gonzalez Amador, of Santa Clara who, after coming to know about the SDC and its charisma, wished its apostolate to extend into Cuba.

This new mission has continued the SDC's expansion beyond the Maltese Islands. In 1956, St George Preca commissioned six SDC Members to establish the SDC's apostolate in Australia. Then in 1983, two SDC Members were sent on an exploratory mission to the Sudan. As other Members were inspired to serve in missions outside of Malta, the SDC opened its next mission in Brixton, London in 1988, followed by Kenya and Albania. Peru was to follow and established the SDC's presence in Latin America. Poland along with Cuba are the more recent missions to be established.

Understandably, much of the focus for the Members ministering in this new mission has been to breathe in the new air, adapting to new circumstances and inculturation while simultaneously wrestling with the challenges to establish and progress programmes to make the Gospel known. In the eighteen months since their



*Statue of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*

arrival, the Members have done this very well. The three SDC Members currently based in Cuba are well inserted in their ministry, loved by the people and much appreciated by the Church.

One event however that has assisted these Members to establish themselves has been joining the local faith community to welcome the statue of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre and celebrate the 400th anniversary of its discovery.

Devotion to the La Virgen de

la Caridad del Cobre is so deeply rooted in Cuba that her image is found in every church and also in most homes. Men are also known to carry small statues of her in their pockets. Her feast is celebrated on 8 September by all Cubans, even those living abroad. Depicted holding the infant Jesus, the statue invites all to keep Jesus in their hearts and to look to him for mercy, courage and spiritual help.

Much intrigue surrounds the discovery of the statue. In 1612 two brothers, Rodrigo and Juan de Hayos, and a



*A painting of the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre is seen in a museum of Catholic artifacts and artwork at the cathedral in Santiago, Cuba*

slave boy left Santiago del Prado (known today as El Cobre) to fetch salt with which to preserve meat for the copper miners in their district. During their voyage, they found themselves in a storm in the middle of the Bay of Nipe on the Atlantic coast of Cuba. Deciding to anchor for the night and wait for dawn, the brothers observed a 'small white bundle' floating towards them in the early morning. On inspection, they found it to be a 40 cm statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary standing on the moon with clouds on both sides of it and three gold winged cherubs beneath. The Virgin Mother was carrying the infant Jesus on her left arm that had one hand raised in blessing and the other carrying a golden globe. In her right hand, the Virgin Mother was carrying a crucifix – the symbol of humanity's salvation. A wide

embroidered cloak gave the statue a triangular shape. The statue itself was attached to a wooden board carrying the inscription, 'I am the Virgin of Charity'.

It did not take long for the local inhabitants to erect a sanctuary in honour of the Virgin of Charity in Santiago del Prado. This sanctuary soon became a national place of pilgrimage. The city was later given the name of El Cobre, Spanish word for copper due to the copper mines in the area.

In 1916, Pope Benedict XV declared La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre patroness of Cuba and in 1977 Pope Paul VI crowned the statue during the Eucharistic Congress held in Santiago de Cuba. It was crowned for a second time by Pope John Paul II in Santiago de Cuba during his historic visit in 1998.

Cubans feel a natural urge to implore the Virgin Mother's protection whenever they find themselves in difficult situations. It was no surprise that they even took the statue with them on the battle front during the wars for independence in 1868-1878 and again in 1895-1898.

The 400th anniversary of the discovery of the statue is therefore a very special and monumental event for the Catholic community of Cuba and has been embraced with plenty of enthusiasm. In preparation for the anniversary, the statue throughout 2011 was taken in pilgrimage to every parish on the island. Between 3 and 6 June 2011, the pilgrimage passed through Sagua la Grande. The SDC community there participated both in the preparations for the visit and in welcoming the statue.



*Procession of the statue to the parish church*



*The statue presented to the local church community*

The SDC community firstly assisted in the refurbishment of the local church (Gothic Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus). There the statue made its entrance on the Saturday afternoon of 5 June where it was given a rousing welcome by a multitude of parishioners. In the course of the Mass that followed, children taught by the SDC formed a choir and led the music. In the evening, a concert in honour of the Virgin was held outside the local parish church which included a song composed especially for the occasion. One Member, Joseph Buttigieg took part in the orchestra by playing the violin.

On the 8 September 2012, the local community again gathered to celebrate this devotion. Similar scenes of euphoria were witnessed as multitudes gathered to show their love to the heavenly mother. In solidarity, they prayed that through the

intercession of the Virgin Mother, all Cubans will remain united to her divine son.

The great display of devotion to the statue of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre is a clear sign that the flame of faith in Cuba is still burning. As for the SDC, the community of three Members continues the SDC's apostolate of making the Gospel known. Joseph Buttigieg helps with the digitalisation of the parish data, and teaches theology

to prospective candidates for the priesthood. John Mifsud is responsible for much of the repairs and maintenance work on the two churches of the parish, while Robert Gauci, an architect, will be assigned related work within the diocese. Recently twenty four young people and adults aged 16 to 65 from the parish of the Immaculate Conception in Sagua la Grande, Cuba received the sacrament of Confirmation, many of which were prepared by the SDC.



*Joseph Buttigieg sdc with the newly Confirmed*



