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**COMMEMORATION
OF THE 8TH OF SEPTEMBER 1565**

**ON THE OCCASION
OF THE NATIONAL FEAST OF THE YEAR 1946**



*(translated from the original Maltese by David J Vassallo, eldest grandson to JP Vassallo)*¹

8 September 1946

¹ (Explanatory footnotes all inserted by DJV). Joseph Paul Vassallo, born 17 January 1907 in Żebbug, Malta, died age 88 on 28 March 1995. See also: 1. William Spiteri. *Joseph P. Vassallo, former Director of Education*. The Sunday Times of Malta, 9 April 1995, p.53. 2. Paul Saliba. *F'għeluq is-xahar mill-mewt tal-Kav. J. P. Vassallo, O.B.E. Ġentlom, edukatur dedikat u magħġun bi principji nsara sodi*. Lehen Is-Sewwa 29 April 1995, pp.6,17. 3. William Spiteri. *A tribute to Chev. J.P. Vassallo*. Times of Malta, 20 January 2007. <https://timesofmalta.com/article/a-tribute-to-chev-j-p-vassallo.29073> . 4. Joseph M Ganado. *J.P. Vassallo deserves a tribute*. Times of Malta, 27 January 2007. <https://timesofmalta.com/article/j-p-vassallo-deserves-a-tribute.28353> .

MY FELLOW MALTESE,

When I was invited to deliver today's commemorative speech, I must confess that I felt full of joy and pride for the opportunity given to me to speak face to face with you about such dear and glorious events. Yet when I pondered within myself and began to examine and weigh the grandeur and beauty of these events my heart ached as I realised how feeble my ability was to speak justly about this subject. Yes, my brothers, because one would have had to be purified in the water of Siloam,² or the angel of inspiration would have had to touch one's lips with the ember of poetry,³ to be able to create a fitting paean to those heroes who around four hundred years ago bore on their shoulders the honour of Malta and of Christian Civilisation and left behind a name that will continue to echo for as long as the sun shines on the story of mankind.

And I feel myself even feebler when I behold the strong tendency of many people in these times who place their belief no longer in the spiritual but in material things, who neither care for yesterday nor for tomorrow, but who live in today and just for today; whose hearts never light up with enthusiasm, whose eyes never fill with tears of mercy, and who have never embraced anything except the spectre of their own egoism. And in my fear I seem to hear the voice of cynicism telling me "Are you not aware that we are living in the atomic age,⁴ in the wonder of things that you can see with your eyes and touch with your hands? And do you think perhaps that we should be moved by the events of long ago of a few pitiful thousands of people who drenched the land with their sweat in order to live and with their blood to die?"

Yet in this flight of thought I look around me, and I see a different spectacle of amazing courage; I see the still open wounds of battle against a fierce enemy; I look around me and I see babies conceived in the harshness of war, I see children who played and were taught under the veil of death; I see mothers and fathers with tears and sorrow on their faces; I see the skin and bones of famine sowing the seeds of illness and of death in the womb, in the cradle and in the midst of the flower of youth, and I hear again the shout of victory. Let the voice of cynicism and of materialism die. Forgive me if my thoughts made you tremble, and allow me to tell you that none other than yourselves can better understand and appreciate the heroism of those who died in 1565, because none other than yourselves can know better what it means to struggle for years without end with death staring you in the face.

² See John 9. Jesus took pity on a man who had been blind from birth, and answered his disciples' query: 'He was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him'. Jesus spat on the ground, made a paste with the spittle, put this over the eyes of the blind man, and said to him 'Go and wash in the Pool of Siloam'. The blind man went off and washed himself, and came away with his sight restored. The Pool of Siloam refers to the Lower Pool in a series of rock-cut pools just outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem, which was used by pilgrims for ritual purification before entering the Temple Enclosure.

³ The angel of inspiration may well be a reference to the Archangel Gabriel, the Divine Messenger who appeared to Mary at the Annunciation, and whose help is sought in communicating important messages.

⁴ The atomic age had dawned just a year previously, with the detonation of the first nuclear weapon at the test site in New Mexico on 16 July 1945, followed by the awesome destruction of Nagasaki and Hiroshima by atomic bombs on 6 and 9 August 1945 respectively, bringing the Second World War to an end.

You witnessed your homes and your churches destroyed, your towns and villages demolished; you have seen your children die in front of your eyes, and you recognised the serenity and the gift of consolation when man no longer hopes in man and instead rests his tear-washed cheeks in the embrace of his Eternal Father, the Merciful God.

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When we let our vision dwell on the weave of history and see how it is adorned with the rise and fall of nations, and when we also examine the lives of nations and of individuals, we observe how often Providence in her inscrutable manner makes use of the most humble means to belittle and control the pride of the great, so as to tease human ambitions which place their hope only in material resources – in money, in the number of people, in the extent of land, in physical forces. In order to admonish and warn time and again that God alone is the Lord of life and of death, both of individuals and of nations, she chooses one who in the eyes of the world is poorest and lowliest, and wields him as a pen so that through him she can write her mysterious decrees. God sees the humility of his servants and places them on the throne of glory. He who created everything from nothing knows how to reduce everything to nothing. Both sacred and civil history are replete with such examples. But one example that shines brightest and most gloriously in the firmament of history is the Great Siege of Malta of 1565, when a little rock lost in a vast sea, lacking in size, in the number of people and in means but endowed with the light of Faith – which always remains its greatest endowment – held firm, and shattered and repelled wave after wave of the armies of the greatest empire of the Orient and covered them with blood and with disgrace.

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In those times, the Ottoman Empire had reached the zenith of its might. Under the command of a series of courageous and wise sultans it was spreading its branches along the shores of Africa and the Mediterranean and had reached as far as the heart of Europe. The standards of the Crescent Moon were fluttering from Algiers to the Red Sea, from Croatia to the Tigris and Euphrates and had arrived at the walls of Vienna. In the 46 years of his reign Suleiman the Great alone had annexed to the Empire, Belgrade, Rhodes, almost all of Hungary, the Crimea, the provinces of Mossul, Baghdad, and Basra, part of Armenia, Yemen, and Aden, Algiers, Oran and Tripoli, and a great part of Egypt towards the area of Nubia. And facing this amazing power, against this awesome threat that sought to destroy the Cross of Christ, what were the Christians of the West doing? We see them, o my fellow Maltese, insulting and quarrelling and killing one another, sect against sect, family against family, full of jealousy towards each other, their minds set on how to grab the monopoly of commerce from one another.

And against this Goliath I see the tiny Order of St John and the Maltese People rising up; and I see those [Ottoman] warriors, generals and admirals, whose names

alone terrified the trained armies of the European Nations, falling humiliated below the blows of this tiny David.

On the 18th May 1565, the sails of the Turkish Expedition appeared on the horizon of our Sea. Some 153 Turkish galleys and a large number of transports appeared like a merciless scythe approaching to destroy the most beautiful rose of the Faith of Christ.

You can imagine what our forefathers felt, oh Brothers, when they saw the Crescent Moon in its ferocity embracing our shores. No one better than yourselves who can practically still hear the wailing of the siren signalling enemy attacks, the explosion of bombs and of mines, who can practically still see your homes disappearing completely beneath clouds of dust and tongues of fire, no one better than yourselves can understand what went through the minds and the hearts of our wretched forefathers.

And if you understand so well this heart-felt ache, that you hug your children daily as if it were for the last time, and that you look at the sun each evening without hope of another day dawning, you too will understand, because like them you have felt it, that determination stronger than steel, to conquer or to die, but you would never surrender.

And for three and a half months the battle continues. Walls and forts would fall, thousands of people would fall wounded or dead; thirst, hunger and illness would take their toll, and the struggle carries on. Every foot of ground is sold more dearly than the pearls of the Sultan; Saint Elmo, Saint Angelo and Saint Michael earn eternal glory. Never surely could the Order of St John have predicted, when it landed on this tiny Island 35 years before, that here, standing shoulder to shoulder with the Maltese, it would earn its greatest honour.

Oh what deeds of heroism did those days witness! What examples of strength and of valour. Only the enlightened words of our [National] Poet can do them justice:

Tell me, o sun, in the passage of each year,

That measures with it the history of mankind,

Have you ever seen anything more beautiful than our Saint Elmo?

Have you ever seen lions fiercer than the Maltese?

Because they saw battered down one by one

The stones of their bastions under the fires,

Yet their strength was not broken, and the Enemy

*Found them waiting him there on the foundations.*⁵

And in their agonies this group of heroes did not lack the chalice of bitterness, the bitterness of abandonment by their friends, of their fellow Christians, who in their laziness and vanity left them to be killed instead of giving them help. And who then at the end wanted to share in their glory when they did not have the courage to share in the shedding of blood.

Oh, let us salute whole-heartedly our forefathers who have bequeathed us such an abundant inheritance of love, of glory, and above all of faith. And when we remember our brethren let us not forget the Knights of St John who kneaded their blood into the dust of our land, and like our brothers they joined together and died for the same ideal. And among them all let us venerate and love the memory of our great Leader, wise and courageous, Grand Master La Valette.

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I have skimmed over very lightly, just as lightly as a butterfly touches the scent of a rose, the events of those times that year after year continue to open and fill your hearts with fragrance. Yet now it is fitting that together we should see with the eyes of intellect and like a bee gather and store the honey of truth and of learning from this rose.

If we analyse the factors through which Victory was achieved, we cannot but reach the conclusion that they were mainly spiritual. It is not the number of people and the number of cannon, it is not the strength of the walls and the temper of steel, it is not the composition of bone and muscle, but it is something that is conceived and matures in the soul, and like the soul its roots are in eternity. This something we can call the ideal. And the more this ideal surpasses the material needs of mankind, the more it gathers strength and the more wholesome its fruit becomes. And what stronger and more beautiful ideal can there be than that of Religion, of the love of God? This, oh brethren, was the ideal of our forefathers; and from here they drew the force which shattered their enemies and astonished Europe. Because other ideals are more or less attached to the earth and to life and on them they more or less depend; but the religious ideal surpasses all the others, and the more it detaches itself from the earth the more it rises and the stronger it becomes. Oh what an amazing ideal and how mysterious are its ways. Insult a man and he rejoices; beat him and torment him and he smiles; take away his wealth and it's like curing him of a wound; take his life and he blesses you with his last breath. Money and honours he fears, he seeks suffering and treasures it like a precious pearl. It's not surprising that bombs and cannons cannot affect him. And only

⁵ *'Ghidli, ja xemx, fil-mixja ta' kull sena ...'* Poem by Dun Karm Psaila, National Poet of Malta, and great-uncle to JP Vassallo.

thus can we explain the resistance of our forefathers. Their fervour and their valour were derived from a never ending power. 'In Te Domine, speravi, non confundar'.⁶

And another fruit I see of this ideal is patriotism, the love of our country – a love that on close inspection you realise is nothing else but the love of your mother and of your father, of your children and of your children's children, the love of the language that grows with you from the cradle, and dies with you in the grave. It is the love of religious and civil traditions, of the form of thought, that a man cannot cast off except in death. As Lacordaire says well 'Without a homeland man is a dot lost in the fortuitous events of time and of space'.⁷

From these two ideals for which our forefathers fought and died a host of virtues are conceived, but I shall choose only three of them: the love of sacrifice, the love of duty, and obedience. Throughout the Great Siege at every hour and moment we see how our forefathers were ever ready to sacrifice themselves and their dear ones in the call of duty. No-one flinched, oh brothers, no-one pushed his friend forward so that he would remain free from danger; no-one showed off or put on airs because he was superior to his friends in wealth or in stature. The need dictated the duty, and obedience and discipline served it.

This is the lesson that I select from the events of the Great Siege, here I see the factors that led to victory. And if someone doubts that this is so, if someone thinks that these ideals, these virtues no longer have a place in our life today, I shall show him another siege, another victory no less glorious than the Maltese together with their brothers of the British Empire obtained over the enemy of freedom. The basic circumstances are essentially the same: an aggressive ideological fanaticism – Mohammedanism on one side,⁸ Nazism on the other – a thirst for power and for land; only the weapons have changed, the virtues and passions remained the same.

And from the first wailing of the air raid warning siren that froze the hearts of everyone, until the moment the bells of our churches proclaimed the song of victory, what was it that kept you steadfast and brave-hearted, Oh Maltese People, amidst the destruction, the tears and the hunger, if not faith and hope in God, if not the love of your country, no matter how small, and of your children, if not the love of justice and of Truth? And whenever the enemy slammed you against the ground I saw you rise like Antaeus even fuller of enthusiasm and strength,⁹ and I witnessed the cruelty and the

⁶ *In thee O Lord do I put my trust. Psalm 30:2* (Vulgate Bible). The first line of the Latin translation became the final line of the Te Deum. Adapted from mediaeval choral music, and sung by Clare College Cambridge, enjoy: [In Te Domine Speravi, non Confundar](#)

⁷ Jean-Baptiste Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, OP (12 May 1802 – 21 November 1861), French Dominican priest, reputedly the best pulpit orator of the 19th century, dedicated to the education of youth. A favourite quote: *It is not genius, nor glory, nor love that reflects the greatness of the human soul; it is kindness.*

⁸ Now more commonly described as Islamic fundamentalism.

⁹ Antaeus, in Ancient Greek mythology, was son of Poseidon and of Gaia (the earth mother). He proudly challenged passersby to wrestle with him, and remained invincible as long as he retained contact with the earth. He was famously defeated by Hercules who lifted him up and crushed him to death in a bear hug. J.P. Vassallo also refers to Antaeus and the earth, as a theme lesson on humility, in his poem of reflection '*Bejni u Bejn ruħi*', published in his anthology *Rimi Ġdid*.

pride of the 'Luftwaffe' shattered and crashing in the sea, in the fields and in your valleys, Oh Malta! The time of heroes has not perished, Oh my brethren, the spirit still conquers matter.

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I have almost finished what I had to say, O Brothers, in short. However, before I come down from here I would like to cast my glance to the future, because I feel that I would be betraying the occasion and, so to speak, mocking you and even more so your children if I do not tell you what I feel as a Maltese, what I fear, what I hope. History, as Cicero says well,¹⁰ is the witness of times and the teacher of life. Yes, we should venerate and hold dear the past, we should always love the memories and the works of our Forefathers, because he who does not venerate the past has no right to have a future, but we should love them not with words or vanity, nor bask in their glory as an actor would don a costume for the stage, but their example should become one with us, it should be like the breath of our soul, like the beat of our heart, like the sight of our eyes.

Peace, says Milton, has her victories no less renowned than has war.¹¹ And I would add and say that the victories of peace are often more difficult, because the enemy with whom one struggles in peace comes not with fierceness in his eyes, and with a sword in his hand, but with a smile on his lips, with promises in his hands, and we ourselves pull him towards us and take him into our hearts just like the Trojans joyfully took into the heart of their city the horse that caused their downfall, their destruction and their death.

In just a short time from now, Malta will become the owner of her own destiny.¹² With her courageous and loyal behaviour she deserves to hold the reins in her hands. This is something beautiful, but also very serious. We shall have duties and great responsibilities bestowed upon us; ours will be the honour if we govern well, ours the woe if we govern poorly. Our great Leader in the war we have just experienced, Mr Churchill, promised his country toil and sweat in order to achieve victory, and no less must we do in order for us to take Malta forward and achieve victory of the peace. Oh fellow Maltese, let us not lose between ourselves and in peacetime what we have won from the enemy in war. What value would monuments have, what value would sweet words of praise have, if in the running of our country we do not show those qualities, those virtues that we showed in the moment of heroism. Let us not boast any more of sieges and of heroes, of victories and of glory, if we are going to betray in happiness, in laughter and in delight that ideal that saved us in our moment of need and of sorrow. May religion and the love of our country be like stars that guide us on our right path. Let

¹⁰ Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC), Roman statesman, scholar, lawyer, philosopher, writer and orator.

¹¹ Milton, Sonnet 16. *To the Lord General Cromwell*, May 1652. John Milton (1608-1674) was an English poet, man of letters, and civil servant for the Commonwealth of England under Oliver Cromwell.

¹² Malta finally became an independent nation just 18 years later, on 21 September 1964.

us not allow greed, ambition and personal interest, jealousy or the spirit of vengeance blind us to the true well-being of our country, and destroy within us the love of one another. Let each one of us here vow to the souls of those who toiled and suffered and died for Malta, whom I here seem to see looking down on us; let us all vow, old and young, men and women, noble and humble, rich and poor, those who work with their minds and those who work with their hands, like children of the same mother, that we shall perform our duty to the best of our ability, each according to the path chosen for him by Providence, that we shall work with fervour and with diligence according to what is just and righteous,¹³ with sacrifice if necessary, with obedience and with discipline, and with love of our neighbour, so that over Malta, our beloved Malta, there will always reign the Blessing of God.

¹³ See Proverbs 21:3