

Professor Horatio Caesar Roger Vella
Scholar and Benefactor of our Franciscan Archives



Early in the morning of every Tuesday, at 5.00 am sharp, Professor Horatio Caesar Roger Vella begins his day at our Franciscan OFM Provincial Archives housed in our Santa Marija ta' Ġesù friary in Valletta, Malta. He arrives at 4.30 am, parks his car near the cruise liner terminal, and for these last 5 years walks up Ta' Liesse Hill and up the Victoria Gate steps to Saint Ursola Street.

I got to know Professor Vella some ten to twelve years ago, when he came as a pilgrim to the Holy Land with his wife and son. A devout man of deep faith and strong traditional Catholic values, Professor Vella fell in love with the Holy Land. During the week we spent together we spoke about the Archives of the Custody of the Holy Land in Jerusalem, and about my work as Provincial Archivist and Librarian in Malta, which I did on a very part-time basis, being based as I was in the Holy Land and only going to Malta for some weeks at a time to sort out books and documents after the premature death of Fr. George Aquilina OFM on 29 September 2012. Patri Ġorġ, as we affectionally called him, was a life-time historian, librarian, archivist and chronicler of our Province. He worked tirelessly, alone and in silence, to catalogue and arrange our historical Archives. When he died I knew that we would never be able to replace his expertise and love for our historical documentary patrimony. I tried to do what I could. Professor Vella was providentially sent by God to help me in a way I never even imagined.

Speaking about our Archives, I told him that we had a room in the Archive complex, where Fr. George had gathered many loose documents that he found in our friaries. He had already tried to collect them in many boxes and files, but they were not catalogued. To my delight Professor Vella offered to do the work. A mammoth enterprise that is just half-way through after 5 years. Professor Vella was already doing similar initiatives of cataloguing documents in various parishes in Malta and Gozo, and he had published the results of his work in voluminous catalogues of the same Archives. Just to mention a few: the Gozo Cathedral Archives, the Birkirkara Collegiate Archives, the Archives of Ġħarb and of Żebbuġ in Gozo. And many others. Horatio, as I affectionally call him, would tell me of the pitiful condition in which he would sometimes find historical archives, of the tons of dust he would inhale, of climbing up and down ladders to carry volumes in shelves, of insect spray that he would inhale. I saw him doing the same thing in our Archives.

Professor Vella has the patience of a Carthusian monk. He sits quietly on the computer for hours on end, cataloguing each document after having carefully read its contents and recorded them, with the aim of eventually placing them in a final order when he has concluded listing thousands of them on his computer. He can work for 8 hours at a time and still look fresh and vibrant when I go to say goodbye in the early afternoon. The payment for this highly-professional job

is given to him by God alone... we Franciscans offer him the opportunity to have lunch with us. It is the least we can do. Maybe he deserves a much greater sense of gratitude than this. But Horatio cherishes the moments he spends with us friars. And he has generously repaid us more than once by inviting the entire fraternity for sumptuous dinners in his house in Kirkop, where he goes out of his way to offer us a menu we cannot easily forget.

I am writing all this because I feel that we Franciscan Friars Minor owe Professor Horatio Vella a debt of gratitude for what he is doing. His prudence and discretion in our regards are impeccable. So is his sense of respect at our way of life, and his courteous manners at table and in the friary. If he was not a happily married husband and father, Horatio would be a welcome Franciscan friar among us.

I spoke about his love for the Holy Land. Ever since he came on pilgrimage with me, Horatio has offered his services, free of charge, as he always does, to the Custody of the Holy Land. He insistently begged me to arrange for him to do some voluntary work in favour of the Custody. At first I could not imagine what to offer, but at last a golden opportunity offered itself. For 6 years in a row Horatio has been coming to Jerusalem to work in the Custodial Historical Archives, where he is transcribing entire volumes of correspondence and documentation of Custodes of the Holy Land during the 17th and 18th centuries. There, as in Malta, he works around the clock with meticulous precision. He succeeds in transcribing and editing an entire volume each year, with the hope that some day the Custody will publish at least some copies for Archives, since it is a question of private and delicate documents that are only of interest for historians. I knew Horatio would arrive by plane early in the morning, and at 8 am the Archivist would call me bewildered by the fact that Horatio presented himself for work punctually at 8 am, without even having had breakfast. For 6 years Horatio stayed in Jerusalem and never got anywhere else to return to the Holy Places he once visited. When I used to ask him to go out he would tell me that he came to the Holy Land to serve the Custody, not to be a tourist. Sadly Horatio has not been able to go back during these last two years because of Covid-19 restrictions, but we hope to see him back. Every morning at 6.30 am he goes to the Holy Sepulchre for the Latin sung Mass. His presence in the Custodial Archives during the month he spends in Jerusalem is prudent and courteous, and the Archivist and his collaborators are impressed by the amount of work he gets done in a day.

I am writing all this because I feel that we, Franciscans, owe Professor Horatio Vella a debt of gratitude. I would like those who read this short presentation to appreciate what he is doing for our Order, for the Custody of the Holy Land, and for our Franciscan Province. To be aware of what he has done and is doing for

our local Church in Malta as a scholar and expert Professor of Classics. Professor Vella has never asked for any remuneration, but he deserves at least a minimum of consideration and appreciation for what he is offering. Some people are sidelined and forgotten because their work is hidden and silent. Professor Vella is one of them. He deserves better.

Fr. Noel Muscat ofm
Provincial Librarian and Archivist

Biographical note:

Professor Horatio Caesar Roger Vella was born in Malta on 26 November 1952. After his studies at the Seminary and in the UK he acquired his doctorate in Classical Languages at the University of Malta where he studied in 1976-1979. His first publication was his doctoral thesis on Quintinus, *Insulæ Melitæ Descriptio (1536)*. Professor Vella lectured at various universities, in Zimbabwe (1979-1989), Malta, Malawi, Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania and Melbourne, Australia. His numerous publications include books and papers on Maltese History, Classics, Greek Mythology, and he is well known as an expert translator of Latin and author of Latin epigraphs. Professor Vella lives in Ħal Kirkop in Malta and is married to Vivienne neé Caruana. They have a son, Jerome. Above all, Professor Vella is a fervent Catholic and a member of the Order of Saint Lazarus.