Seminary library's 250-year history

by **Rev. Dr Hector Scerri**

THE ORIGINS of the Seminary library date to October 1756, when Bishop Paul Alpheran de Bussan (1728-1757) deposited 500 *scudi* in the *Massa Frumentaria*, on condition that the interest goes to the upkeep of the library.

We have to remember that the Seminary in Malta was still in its infancy. It had been founded in March 1703 by Bishop Davide Cocco Palmeri (1684-1713). It was Bishop Alpheran who saw to the construction of a new building (1733-40) to be able to house this institution within adequate premises.

Bishop Alpheran died in 1757. He, too, bequeathed 500 *scudi* to support the library. A document which throws light on the existence of this institution is the *Inventario delle Supelettili e Libri del Seminario*, a document dating to March 1759.

This interesting inventory lists 79 works in the library. Another nine works were added in April 1771 under the heading *Libri ritrovati nella Libreria del Ven.do Seminario*. It is obvious that the library was very limited in its resources. Its origins were indeed very humble.

The library would expand from time to time thanks to various bequests, especially by priests who left their personal collections to the Seminary, a generous tradition which has continued to this day. Its earliest benefactors included the patriot, Dun Mikiel Xerri (1737-1799), professor of philosophy at the University and mathematics lecturer at the Seminary, and Dun Gaetano Pisani (donation in 1781).

The library today possesses over 30,000 books, besides a very rich collection of periodicals. The last decades of the 20th century saw its greatest expansion. In 1914, the library's catalogues listed 1,240 books, indeed a meagre quantity by today's standards.

The *Catalogo del libri nella Libreria del Seminario Maggiore della Notabile* (November 25, 1914) subdivides the collection under 16 subject headings – Dogmatic Theology: 37 books; Moral Theology: 71; general theological works: 19; Sacred Scripture: 97; Patristics: 15; Law, including canon law: 71; History: 178; Philosophy: 55; Latin Literature: 50; Lives of the Saints: 40; Preaching and Meditation: 124; the study of Hebrew: 21; Italian Literature: 118; English Literature: 218; Dictionaries: 27; Miscellaneous: 97, plus some others.

One should bear in mind an important feature in this library's history, namely the transfer of the Seminary from Mdina to Floriana in 1858. Yet, between 1910 and 1921, the Seminary was housed once again in its birthplace, Mdina. How did this physical transfer affect the library?

One can perhaps conclude that the 1858 transfer to Floriana practically meant an increase in the number of books for use by seminarians. The reason behind this was that part of the Floriana premises was previously occupied by a retreat house, known as *Casa di Manresa*, popularly referred to as *San Kalcidonju*. The latter had its own collection of books.

It is clear that the two collections, namely the Seminary collection and that of the *Casa*, remained separate for many years. It is uncertain whether the seminary students could borrow or consult books from the *Casa*.

An undated index, probably compiled some time between 1900 and 1920, the *Indice della Libreria di S. Calcedonio*, provides us with a list of 1,210 books. These are classed under three main sections: *libri ascetici* (469 volumes); *libri storici* (355) and *libri scientifici* (386).

We know that when Archbishop Maurus Caruana retransferred the Seminary to Floriana in 1921, the two book collections were still distinct from each other. They were eventually fused into one library during World War II. In the post-War period, especially during the rectorships of Mgr Giovanni Mifsud (1937-51) and Mgr Albert Pantallaresco (1951-63), the Seminary library acquired useful collections of books on English Literature and the Latin and Greek classics, especially through the assistance of the British Council.

The Seminary library moved yet again in 1978 to its present location. This took place in the context of the transfer of the Seminary from Floriana to Tal-Virtù, Rabat. This providential move by Archbishop Mercieca entailed situating the

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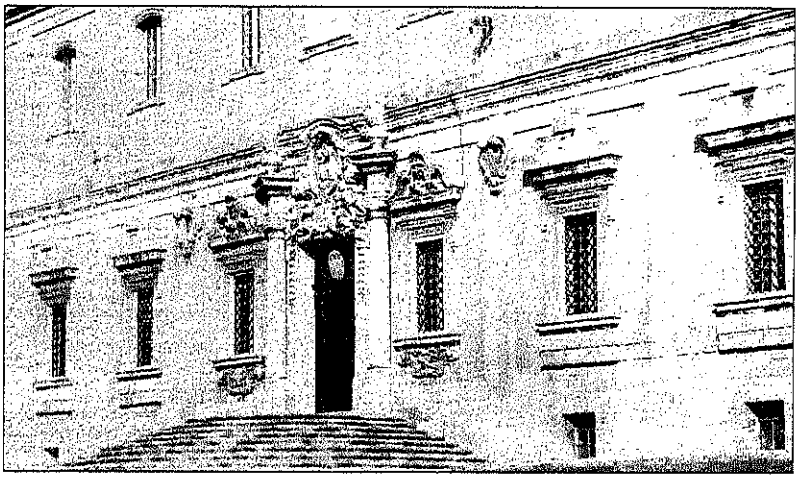

THE Floriana Seminary, today the Archbishop's Curia

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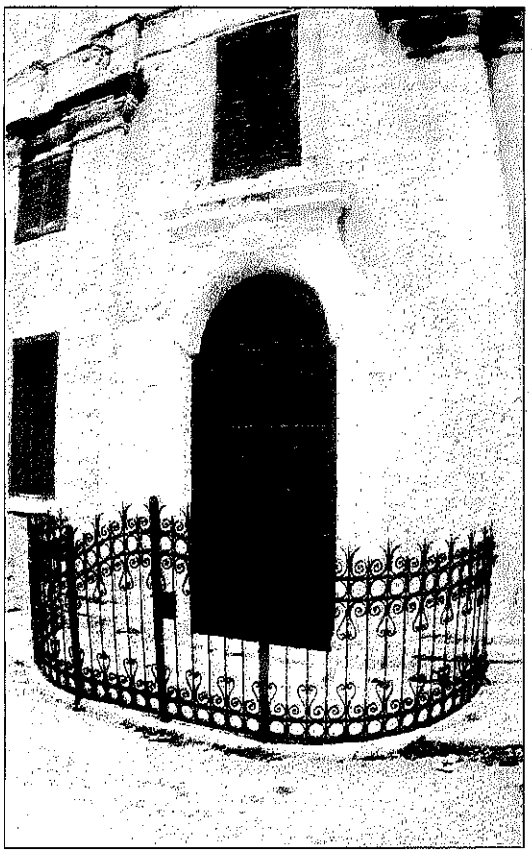


CASA Madonna di Manresa, in Floriana

(Continued from page 117)

house of priestly formation for the diocesan clergy within a totally new setting in what was previously the Mater Admirabilis Training College (1954-1973) for female teachers, run by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart. Indeed, the new premises for the Seminary were a far cry from the drab environment at Floriana. A spacious setting for the Library was also readily available.

1978 was an eventful year in other respects, too. That year, the Faculty of Theology was ousted from the University of Malta. After the Holy See recognised the Faculty as an autonomous institution, it continued its academic role from one of the wings of the Seminary and from a block of classrooms on its campus.

The need was soon felt to provide a library service to lecturers and students of the Faculty of Theology. It was decided to house this new library jointly with that of the Seminary; 1978 marks the beginning of a new phase in the history of the Seminary Library, by then already over two centuries old, namely the housing of two libraries under one roof and one joint administration.

Library work which had previously been carried out by the seminarians on a voluntary basis was now entrusted to professional staff. The first librarian, appointed in 1980, was Guzé Cassar Pullicino (1921-2005), the well-known historian and expert on Maltese folklore. In the 1950s he was librarian at the University of Malta, and later occupied posts of high responibility in various government ministries and departments.

BISHOP Paul Alpheran de Bussan, founder of the Seminary Library

The library expanded rapidly over the years through endowments, both locally obtained as well as from abroad. Many more periodical subscriptions were either continued or started. Today, the library is subscribed to about 200 periodicals, and some 150 other periodical collections are available. The latter comprise either discontinued collections, *riviste morte* or collections received as bequests.

In September 1988, after the Faculty of Theology was reincorporated into the University of Malta, a Foundation for Theological Studies was established to proceed with a number of academic initiatives. Not only was the foundation to finance, in part, the running of the Faculty of Theology at the University, but also the promotion of theological research. Among other commitments, this meant a continuation in the support of the library.

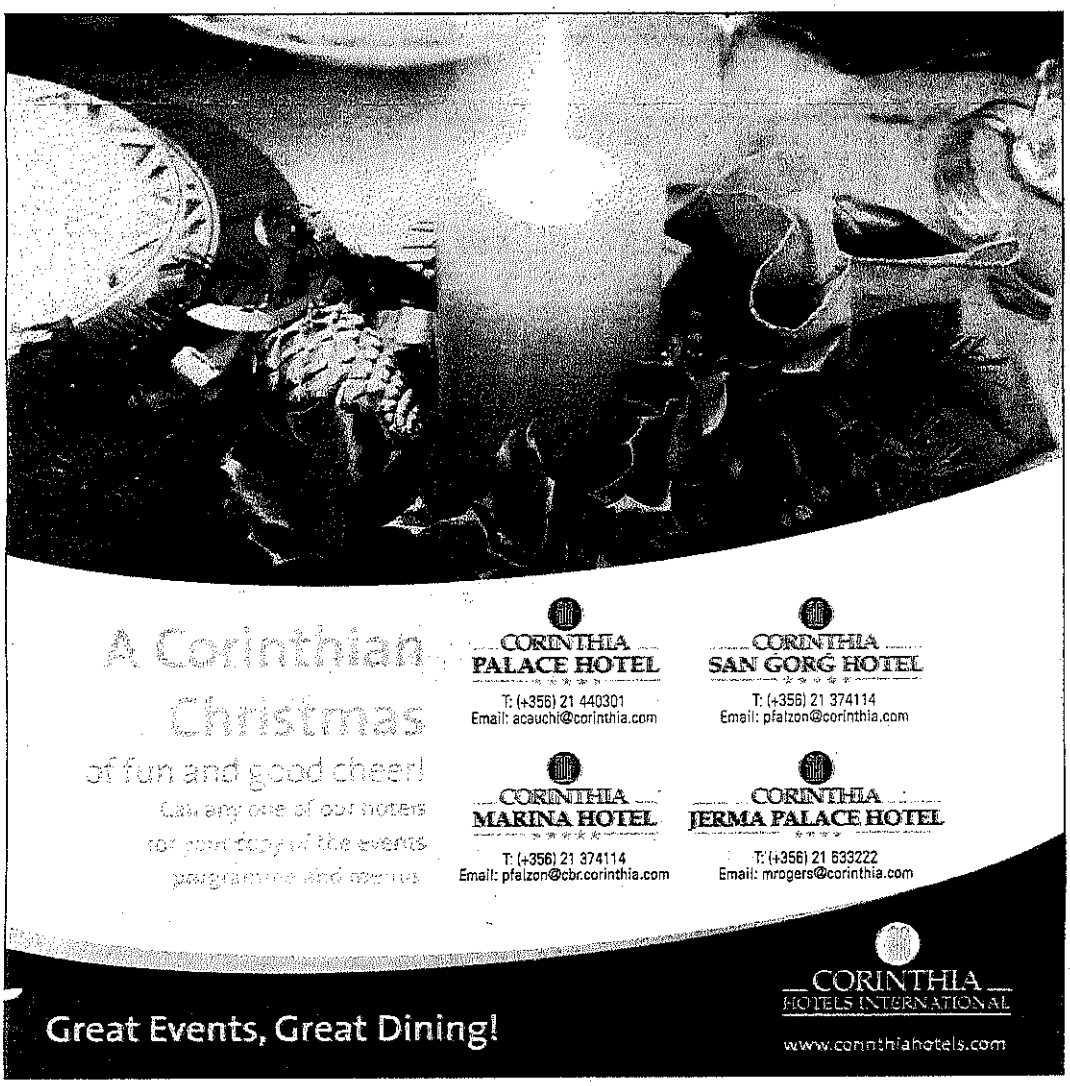
Since then, the Seminary/Foundation Library, as it is now called, continued its various operations. In 1997, a spacious extension was constructed to house the vast periodical holdings. This was formally inaugurated on February 13, 1999, by Archbishop Mercieca. A specialised section on the Maltese clergy was also launched on that occasion.

When the Catholic Institute Library, at Floriana, closed down in the mid-Nineties, the authorities decided to transfer this 5,000-strong collection to the Seminary. This herculean task was accomplished in February 2005.

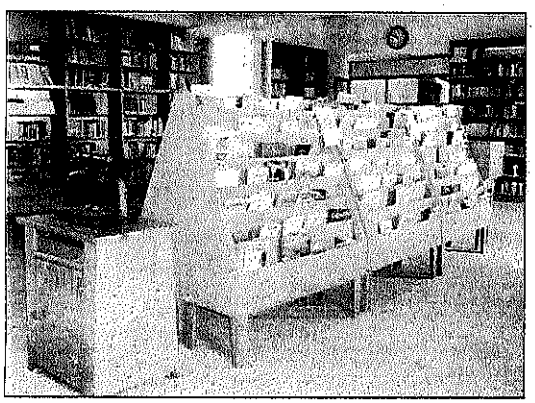
It should also be said that a sizable quantity of these books already belonged to the Foundation Library as they had been on permanent loan to the Catholic Institute when evening courses organised by the Faculty of Theology were held at Floriana. Thus, room had to be sought for this sudden influx of books.

During the past 20 years, there have been numerous book bequests and donations. Some of the largest collections to be received include those from Mgr Professor Joseph Sapiano, Mgr Joseph Lupi, Lorenzo Schiavone, Fr Joseph Sammut and Canon Benjamin Tonna, to mention a few.

Other donors – who would rather not be identified – were generous enough to donate their personal collections during their lifetime, and are happy to see their books used by a wide range of students. A further extension to the library was completed and opened last October – a silent, yet tangible, commemoration of the



THE entrance to the Archbishop's Seminary at Tal-Virtù



INTERIOR of the Seminary Foundation Library

250 years since the humble birth of the Seminary Library in 1756.

* * *

The opening hours of the Seminary library are Monday to Saturday: 8.30 a.m. to noon;
Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays: 4 to 8 p.m.;
Thursdays: 4 to 6.30 p.m.

Rev. Dr Hector Scerri, the Seminary vice-rector and a University lecturer in dogmatic theology, is the chairman of the Library Committee.

Acknowledgements: research carried out by the late Mr G. Cassar Pullicino and Ms G. Barbara, the current librarian, was instrumental in the composition of this feature)

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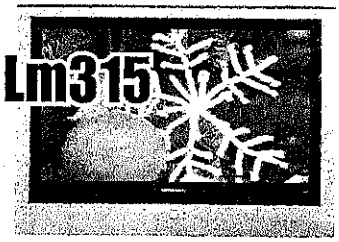

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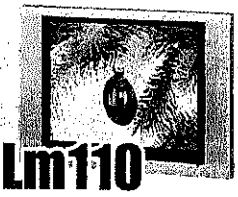

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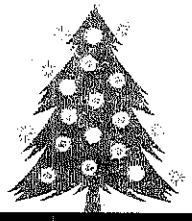

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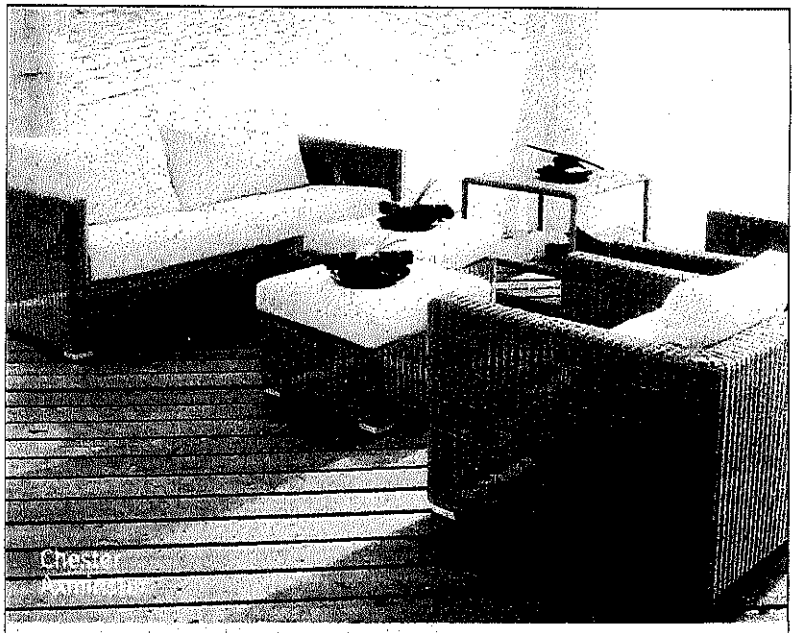

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