

Ġużeppi Mercieca (1928-2016) – The Bishop who came from Gozo

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Introduction

Throughout the years a great amount of literature has been written about the life and ecclesiastical career of the late Archbishop Ġużeppi Mercieca, who was archbishop of Malta from 1976 to 2006. Mr Charles Buttigieg's monumental biography of Mgr Mercieca, *Ilkoll Aħwa Fi Kristu. Ġużeppi Mercieca – Memorji*, published in 2014 by Klabb Kotba Maltin is the jewel in the crown among all the writings that dealt with the long life of Dun Ġużepp Tal-Mewta, as he was known in Gozo, before he moved to Rome for his studies and eventual colourful career in the Sacra Romana Rota.

Gozitan Roots

It is interesting to note that Archbishop Mercieca's autobiography, immortalised in book form by Charles Buttigieg, who was for many years the PRO of the Archdiocesan Curia, was made possible by another Gozitan who was very close to the deceased archbishop, namely Mr Pawlu Mizzi, the founding-father of Klabb Kotba Maltin, also a Gozitan who was born in the whereabouts of Pjazza Tomba – now known as Pjazza Santu' Wistin – just a stone's throw away from Triq il-Providenza – the street in which the late Mgr Mercieca was born. To render this coincidence more alluring, after his marriage to Marija neè Scicluna, Pawlu Mizzi moved from Gozo to Malta and settled at number 1, Archbishop's Square and in the mid-seventies became Archbishop Mercieca's life-long neighbour.

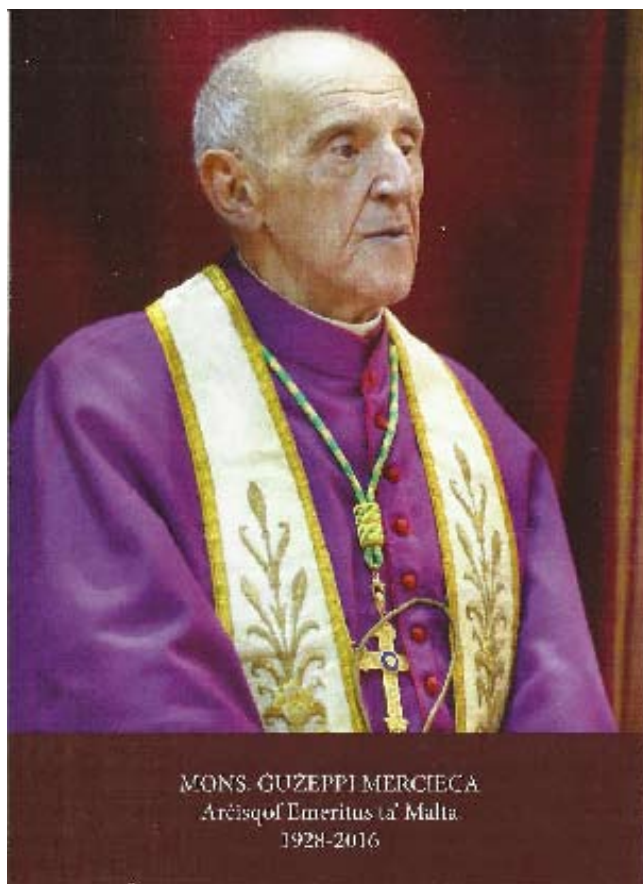
Childhood in Rabat, Gozo

Ġużeppi Mercieca was born in the family home in Triq il-Providenza, one of the narrow winding streets that make up the old medieval town of Rabat. St George's Parish Church – the church in which he was baptised and received his First Holy Communion and also confirmed, was only a corner

away from the house. He was born on the 11th of November 1928, the eldest child of the family.

I remember vividly how on one of my regular Sunday visits to my paternal grandfather, Baskal Attard, Archbishop Mercieca became the subject of the conversation. At one point my grandfather referred to Archbishop Mercieca as his second cousin. Later on, when I was old enough to put my shyness away and was able to pose a couple of questions to my grandfather, it became clear that Archbishop Mercieca's maternal grandmother, Marinton Vassallo, was a younger sister of my grandfather's maternal grandmother, Marirož Gatt. Even unto this day, many old families of Victoria are somehow related to each other.

It would be interesting to note that Mgr Mercieca came from a very religious family; two brothers of



Mgr Ġużeppi Mercieca

MONS. ĠUŻEPPI MERCIECA
Arċisqol Emeritus ta' Malta
1928-2016

his father, Saverio, were priests. From his mother's side, a cousin of hers – Mgr Tarçisju Gatt – was also a priest, known for his dedicated service as vice-parish priest of the Cathedral Parish. The family was one of humble roots and his father earned a living through winemaking and the running of a traditional *hanut tal-inbid* (wine drinking shop) which still stands at the corner between Providence Street and St George's Street in the heart of Rabat.

Seminarian and Priest

Mercieca went to the school run by the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Palm Street and later on attended the primary school and the Minor Seminary, both in Victoria. He frequented the Oratorju Don Bosco for catechism lessons. Bishop Ġużeppi Pace of Gozo was of the opinion that the young seminarian Ġużeppi Mercieca should further his studies at the Collegio Capranica in Rome, a stone's throw away from the Pantheon. He came back to Gozo for his ordination which took place in St James' Church in the main square of Victoria; the other candidate to be ordained with him was Dun Saver Calleja, a priest who also hailed from Victoria. The ordination took place on the 10th of March 1952.

Connections with the Seminary

Mgr Mercieca was to return to Gozo once more and strengthen his ties with the diocesan seminary which he once attended as a secondary school student. It was in 1959 that he was recalled from Rome by Bishop Pace who asked Mercieca to teach the students at the secondary level as well as the seminarians in the Major Seminary. It was during this period that Bishop Pace named Mercieca as Rector of the Sacred Heart Seminary. Mercieca was to serve as rector from 1958 to 1969 and was then succeeded by the late Patri Anton Azzopardi S.J. The Jesuits continued to run the seminary in Gozo until 1997 when Bishop Cauchi appointed a diocesan priest for the office. As rector of the Seminary, the future archbishop of Malta was the fourth priest from Victoria to fill the post; the previous two were Mgr Giuseppe Farrugia known as Tal-Vers, Mgr Alfons M. Hili who later on became Archpriest of the Cathedral Church and Parish Priest of St George's and Mgr Antonio Vella.

Promoting Gozo

Archbishop Mercieca was also a promoter of Gozo and its diocese. When the superiors of the diocesan seminary in Gozo decided that it was right and just that the newly-ordained priests in Gozo be awarded a baccaluarate in Theology at the end of their studies, Mgr Mercieca was instrumental in the proceedings. Without blowing trumpets, he used his influence in Rome to affiliate the Gozo Seminary with the Pontifical University of St Thomas known in short as the Angelicum. This happened in 1994 and the news was greeted with jubilation on Archbishop Mercieca's native island. The late Bishop Cauchi and the late Archbishop Mercieca worked together in various ways and many-a-time they wrote together the various pastoral letters addressed to the Church in our islands. The pastoral letter which addressed the issue of Malta's inclusion in the European Union was perhaps the most renowned among these important documents.

Later Years

When in 1974 Mgr Mercieca was nominated by Pope Paul VI as auxiliary bishop to Archbishop Gonzi, it was more difficult for him to visit Gozo for long periods. His visits to the house in which he was born became less frequent although he remained close to his two brothers, especially to his brother priest Dun Ġwann. In 1976 he became archbishop of Malta and moved to Mdina. I remember when as a seminarian, we visited him as a group at the Palace in Mdina; his face would radiate with an unexplainable joy every time people from his native Gozo paid him a visit. As seminarians, we would stand in a straight line and as he shook our hands he would ask us where we hailed from in Gozo; in more than one case, he would know quite well a member or two of our families. His memory was certainly clear in this regard.

Until a few years before his death he would also preside over the Thanksgiving Mass on the Third Sunday of July at St George's Basilica – his native parish – on the occasion of the titular feast of St George, Patron Saint of Gozo, at the end of which he would intone the Te Deum.



Archbishop Mercieca on the 60th anniversary of his ordination to priesthood

Archbishop Mercieca was awarded the Ġieħ Ġhawdex Award by the Circolo Gozitano on Sunday the 17th January 2010.

Mgr Mercieca will be remembered as a humble priest with a great heart, a gentle speaker but a wise man, economic in his words but clear in his thoughts.

I just hope that at some point in time, Gozo will erect a monument that would make future generations aware that once a prelate from Gozo rowed the barque of Peter in our islands with fairness and brotherly love even in times of turmoil and division.

I will always remember Mgr Ġużeppi Mercieca as the soft-spoken priest who acted wisely over the period of three decisive decades in the history of our island nation.

Geoffrey G. Attard was ordained priest for the diocese of Gozo in June 2004. He graduated M.Th. in Ecclesiastical History from the University of Edinburgh in November 2005 and he graduated M.Lit. in Practical Theology from the University of St Andrews with a dissertation entitled "Climate Change and the Catholic Church" in 2008. He has recently published his dissertation in book form.