

The Xewkija Parish

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A Historical Perspective

According to an ancient tradition, St. Paul's voice reached the area that is today occupied by the village of Xewkija as he proclaimed the new faith in Mdina. The inhabitants immediately embraced the teachings of Christ and demolished an ancient pagan temple to make room for a Christian church. Another legend claims that it was Paul himself who recommended that the new church should be erected in honour of the Precursor of Christ – St. John the Baptist. Whilst these accounts must be fictional, the remains of a prehistoric temple were indeed unearthed in Xewkija in 1647.

Figures from a census carried out in 1667 show that the hamlet of Xewkija was then the fastest growing community in Gozo, with 403 inhabitants in 90 households. The fertile soil in the area and a proximity to the Citadel that would have provided instant refuge in the event of an invasion must have made the Xewkija area particularly attractive. Notwithstanding a swelling population, the community was still dependant on the Rabat Parish. Practicality and a growing sense of identity

may have contributed to the Xewkijans' desire to establish their own parish.

Bishop Michele de Molina made a pastoral visit to Gozo in November 1678; four Xewkijans - Giovanni Maria Azzopardo, Giovanni Maria Mercieca, Domenico Xuereb and Giovanni Maria Pisano seized the opportunity to promote the cause and petitioned the Bishop to declare Xewkija a parish on account of an ever growing population which had soared to 650 by then. They also reassured the Bishop that the necessary funding to cater for the chaplain's subsistence and the erection of a new temple would be made available, as each family pledged an annual contribution of two tari. The Bishop agreed that the request was justified and on November 27th, Xewkija was proclaimed a parish, making the community the first village in Gozo. Dun Grezz Farrugia was selected to be the first Parish Priest.

The Old Church

The first Xewkija parish church was constructed in 1726 under Dun Dumink Abela (1694-1734) on



Xewkija Parish Church.



The Rotunda.

the design of Ġuzeppi Azzopardi from Birgu. The chief mason was Ferdinandu Valletta, a Gozitan. Ten years later the belfry was constructed and the church would be consecrated in 1755 by Bishop Paul Alpheran de Bussan. The plan was a standard cruciform layout, and had eight side altars with devotions as follows: to the left hand side of the main altar - Souls in Purgatory; the Holy Crucifix; the Immaculate Conception; and St. Andrew respectively; whilst to the right of the main altar were altars to Our Lady of the Rosary; St. Elijah; the Holy Family; and St. Anthony respectively. The first bell to crown the church was a donation by Can. A. Gourgion. The temple received its dome in 1830.

Giovanni Gallucci (1815-1882) was commissioned to create the painting on the dome half a century later. This painting depicted the Glory of St. John the Baptist and showed the Saint, with open arms, being crowned by God the Father. Gallucci received 625 scudi for his work and this is documented in a receipt that has been conserved

within the Episcopal Archives of Gozo. The technique employed by Gallucci strayed from the standard fresco methodology as the oil paint was applied directly onto the stone. Sadly this work was lost when the old church was demolished. Fragments of it still survive however and are exhibited in the museum of sculpture annexed to the present day Rotunda. It seems likely that the sculpture within the church was created by the brother of the celebrated Maltese Painter Francesco Zahra, who himself created many of the paintings.

The main painting in the church's choir was a representation of St. John the Baptist, clad in camel skin, preaching in the desert. This painting has traditionally been attributed to Mattia Preti, but Falzon (2005) postulates that this is in error and is more likely to have been created by Gioacchino Loretta, a close colleague of Preti. It was donated to the Xewkija church by Bishop Molina whilst the lateral paintings in the choir were donated by the Cassar family in 1788 and represented the Birth

and the Martyrdom of the titular saint, loosely based on originals by Caravaggio.

The Rotunda

The Rotunda of Xewkija is an impressive construction; internally, it measures 64 metres long and 43 metres wide. The internal diameter of the dome is 24.5 metres. The dome is supported on eight ferroconcrete columns of height 13.5 metres. The columns represent the eight beatitudes. The church has six transeptal chapels, designed by Ġużè Galea.

The need for a larger church to accommodate an ever growing population became evident and from time to time, renovations were carried out in an attempt to address this problem. Parish Priest Pietru Pawl Ciantar (1865-1908) petitioned the ecclesiastical authorities to approve the construction of a new church. This request was turned down however and in order to mitigate the situation, the nave was extended and the church was given a new facade which was reminiscent of

that of the Gozo Cathedral. The facade may have been built on a design by Ġużè Diacono.

Amongst the reasons for the delay in granting the necessary permits for the erection of the new church were a concern that priceless art may be lost during the demolition of the old structure; and that the Xewkijans may be left without a church to meet their religious needs whilst work on the new one was in progress.

Rev. Joseph Grech was installed as the new Parish Priest of Xewkija on August 9th 1947. He brought with him renewed enthusiasm and energy and spared no effort so that the much coveted project would see the light of day in the shortest time possible. He met on various occasions with the Bishop of Gozo, Mons. Ġużeppi Pace; on the Sunday prior to the feast of St. John of 1948, he proudly broke the joyous news to his congregation, announcing that all stumbling blocks had finally been overcome. He requested that all parishioners help in any way that they could, in the form of prayer, voluntary work and financial assistance.



The interior of the Xewkija Parish Church.

Ġużè D'Amato was born in Sfax, Tunisia in 1886; he designed several churches in Malta, but the Xewkija Rotunda must be his magnum opus; sadly he died on May 26th 1964 and did not live to witness the completion of this monumental work.

Work on the foundations of the Rotunda started on November 19th 1951, on the insistence of architect D'Amato, saying that his major projects always commenced on that date. A cross where the choir of the new church was to be located was ceremoniously placed on May 3rd 1952 after having been processionally carried through the main streets of Xewkija. The foundation stone, weighing approximately one tonne, was blessed and laid by the Bishop of Gozo, Mgr. Joseph Pace a day later. Within a hollow in this stone were placed some silver and gold coins, relics of saints and a parchment bearing the following words:

AD MAJOREM DEI GLORIAM
AMPLIOREMQUE S.J. BAPTISTAE
PATR.
HONOREM
EXCEL. IOS. PACE D.D. PH.D. I.C.D.
GAUDISIENSIS EPUS.
HUNC LAPIDEM ANGULAREM
AQUA LUSTRALI SPARGENS AC
PONENS
AUSPICATUR ILLUD TAM
EXPOTATUM ET EXPECTATUM
NOVA FORMA AC MIRUM SPLENDORE
XEUKIANUM TEMPLANUM
QUOD AFFABRE DESIGNAVIT
IOS. DAMATO INSIGNIS AC DE S.M.
ECCLESIA
VALDE MERITUS ARCHITECTUS
ADM. REV. IOS GRECH
ARCHIPRESBYTERO
PIO XIII PONT. MAX. ELIZABETHA
BRIT. REGINA
FELICITER REGNANTIBUS
a.d. IV NONAS MAIAS
MCMLII¹

In order to ensure that the people of Xewkija would always have a church to cater for their religious needs, the new church was built around the old one. Until 1953, a chapel dedicated to St. Paul was annexed to the old church but this was demolished to make room for the new construction.

Rock for the construction was initially quarried from Barriera tal-Bur, limits of Ġhajnsielem; this was found to be of unsatisfactory quality so stone was then quarried from St. Elizabeth Street in Sannat. Again, this yielded unsatisfactory results so another source was sought. A quarry in Ġharb was the source of material until the temple was completed.

A project of such sheer magnitude would certainly require a steady stream of funding; yet the zeal and determination of the Xewkijans would not be dampened. The construction took eighteen years to complete and at no point did the process come to a standstill due to a dearth of cash. Devout parishioners contributed generously in cash and gold items, whilst members of the clergy conducted door-to-door collections, with households each donating a weekly shilling. On New Year's Day, the Archpriest would receive the *strina* – a cash gift. Farmers and fishermen used to donate a portion of their produce, such as turkeys, rabbits, eggs and roosters, which would have been put on sale alongside various household items on New Year's Day, the Feast of St. John and the Feast of the Martyrdom of St. John. Two major collections used to be held annually; one at end of the Lenten talks and another at the conclusion of talks held on the occasion of the Immaculate Conception. Xewkijan emigrants from various countries also sent generous cash gifts. The eight ferroconcrete columns were each funded by individual benefactors. The whole construction cost £100,000; were it not for the untiring voluntary effort of the parishioners, the cost would have been well in excess of £1,000,000.

¹For the greater glory of God and that of our Patron St. John the Baptist, His Excellency Joseph Pace D.D., Ph.D., JCD Bishop of Gozo blesses and lays this foundation stone. So commences the construction of the much desired and awaited temple of Xewkija, a temple the design of which is entirely new and the beauty of which is unprecedented. The architect, the illustrious Ġużè D'Amato is worthy of all praise from the Holy Church for his untiring efforts during the days of the Very Reverend Ġużèppi Grech Archpriest of Xewkija, during the reign of Pope Pius XII and that of Queen Elisabeth II. 4th May, 1952

The masonry work was entrusted to Joseph Cauchi and Anthony Vella, both from Xewkija; and Emmanuel Saliba from Għarb. Due to deteriorating health, Cauchi retired from the project after four years. Advancing age also forced Anthony Vella to retire in 1958 and his brother, Joseph Vella took over. Joseph Vella will be especially remembered for the erection of the eight columns between 1951 and 1958 and the massive dome, completed on May 31st 1970.

A set of six paintings by Chev. Paul Camilleri Cauchi from Victoria, Gozo adorn the walls of the Rotunda. These depict scenes from the life of the titular saint as follows:

- The Annunciation of the Birth of John
- The Birth of John
- John the Baptist showing Jesus to his Disciples
- The Baptism of Christ
- John Before Herod
- The Martyrdom of John the Baptist

The paintings above the confessionals (showing the Birth of John and John Before Herod) measure twelve feet by eight feet whereas the remaining four measure sixteen feet by eight.

Guzè Galea from Rabat, Malta designed the apse, the six architectural perspectives and the marble floor.

On the same day that the dome was completed, it was crowned with a large wooden cross, some 2.5 meters high and 2 meters wide, and weighing 72 kg. It was blessed by Apostolic Nunzio, Mgr. G. Majoli amid much cheering and rejoicing. Mgr. Nicholas Cauchi, Bishop of Gozo also attended the ceremony.

Fr. Joseph Grech, sadly died following an accident on October 18th 1971 at Mgarr, and his duties taken over by Mgr. Carmel Mercieca, who expedited the demolition of the old church. The



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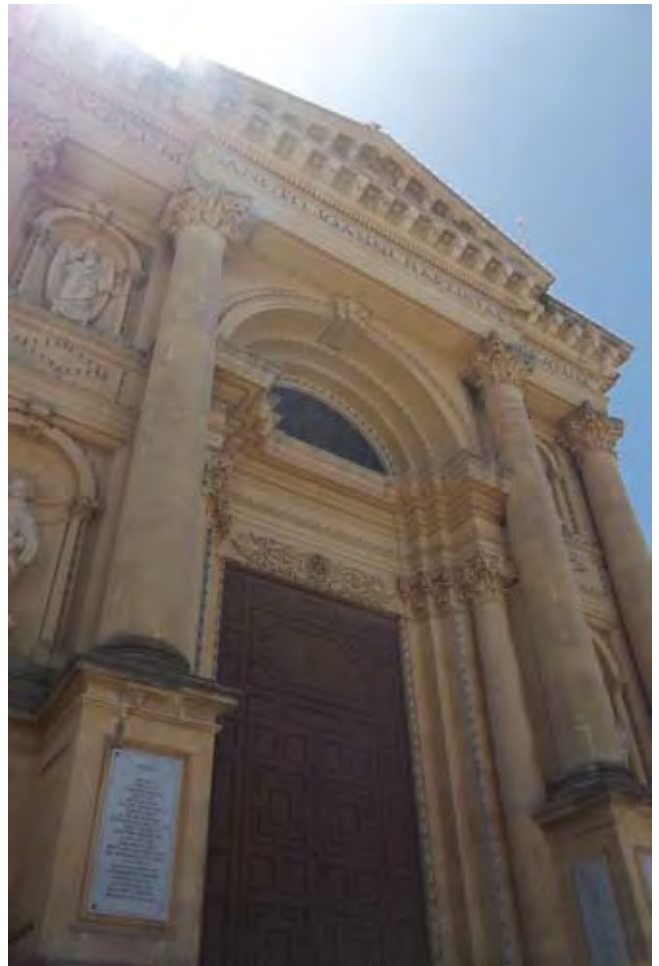
last mass in the old church was said on April 2nd 1972.

The church was consecrated by Mgr. Nicholas Cauchi on June 17th 1978, coinciding with the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Xewkija parish. During the ceremony, Mgr. Cauchi blessed the twelve marble crosses on the walls of the church. These used to hang in the old church but were encased in bronze Maltese crosses, made by the Stefano Sibelio factory in Italy, on a design by Ġużè Galea. The ceremony was also famously attended by Cardinal Silvio Oddi. Marble plaques commemorating the occasion were unveiled by the Cardinal and the Bishop.

The Rotunda became the seat of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta in Gozo in a ceremony held on Friday, 23rd June, 1978. During the ceremony, the Sacred relic of the hand of St. John the Baptist was placed on the High Altar, lent by the Patriarch of Venice, Cardinal Albino Luciani who would become Pope John Paul I shortly after.

The old church did not merely cease to exist; parts of it survive today and serve as a Museum of Sculpture. During the dismantling of the old church, each stone was meticulously numbered so that the structure could be reassembled in its present location. The foundation stone was laid on August 29th 1978, on the occasion of the feast of the Martyrdom of St. John.

The Rotunda dominates the Gozo skyline as it will always dominate the memories of those who pay it homage. The temple of Xewkija is indeed impressive in terms of design and proportions. Just as massive however has been the sheer determination of the people of the little village throughout the course of its history to realise their dreams despite the numerous obstacles that needed to be overcome; and despite the pomp and grandeur of the modern temple, it is a fine example of the new blending in harmoniously and seamlessly with the old and the humble.



The facade of the Xewkija Parish Church.

Mark Zerafa received his education at St. Aloysius College and read Science at the University of Malta. He is co-founder of the website www.reachmalta.com