

# THE SERPENT OF AESCULAPIUS, THE CONFRATERNITY OF SS. COSMAS AND DAMIAN AND THE BISHOP OF MALTA

## A Medico-ecclesiastical Controversy of 1859

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In the Middle Ages it was the usage for artisans engaged in a particular craft or art to combine together to form confraternities and corporations under the aegis of the church. The former were associations aiming at fostering religious piety among their members and assisting them when sick or unemployed; the corporations were guilds concerned with the promotion of a high standard of workmanship among their craftsmen, the proper training of apprentices and the protection of the economic interests of their members.

In Malta these associations emerged into prominence in the early seventeenth century. The confraternities (called also sodalities and consodalities) and corporations bore the name of the tutelary saint of their craft; thus the carpenters formed the confraternity of St. Joseph, the jewellers that of St. Helen and the shoemakers that of St. Crispin. Their meeting place was usually the sacristy or oratory of the church where their patron saint was venerated (Cassar, 1965a).

The medical practitioners and surgeons of Malta were organised in a confraternity named after the protective saints of the profession Saints Cosmas and Damian. This confraternity, founded on the 10th October 1635, was also known as the **universitas barbitonsorum** (Cagliola, 1644), the reason being that the physicians and surgeons shared the membership of this association with the barbers as, in those days, the latter were ancillary assistants to

doctors and surgeons being entrusted with the application of leeches, the extraction of teeth and bloodletting.

The confraternity of SS. Cosmas and Damian held its religious functions at the church of St. Francis of the Minor Conventuals in Kingsway, Valletta, where it had an altar, still in existence, dedicated to the two brother saints. The altar piece is from the brush of Filippo Paldini (1544-1614?) (Cassar, 1972).

The saints' feast day was commemorated with great pomp and solemnity on the 27th September. A notable feature of this celebration was the procession from the Conventual Church of St. John to the church of St. Francis already mentioned and in which the Grand Master of the Order of St. John with the Chaplains of Obedience and the members of the confraternity, in their distinctive tunics, took part (Cassar, 1965b; *Suppliche* 1741-61). It is on record that these functions were already in existence in 1644.

We are unaware of the other activities of this confraternity until we reach the years 1720 and 1754 when the barbers asked the Grand Master of the Order of St. John to allow them to form their own brotherhood independently of the medical practitioners. We catch a further glimpse of the confraternity of SS. Cosmas and Damian on the 3rd June 1797 when by a government decree of this date the barbers were completely separated from the physi-

cians and surgeons and authorised to form their own corporation under the name of St. Ludovicus of France (Cassar, 1965b; *Suppliche* 1741-61).

We again lose sight of the confraternity of SS. Cosmas and Damian for the next fifty years when we read of a funeral service held by its members for the repose of the soul of Dr. Luigi Gravagna on the 29th March 1849 at St. Francis Church *Il Portafoglio maltese*, 1849). By this time the confraternity was known as the *pia società medico-chirurgica-farmaceutica*. In 1856 and 1857 the feast of the two saints was celebrated on the 27th September with High Mass and a panegyric in which the preacher exhorted the congregation to imitate the virtues of the two martyrs. The attendance in 1856 was, however, poor as less than a dozen medical men were present. The expenses of the ceremonies were defrayed out of funds collected from members of the profession but it was being found difficult to obtain the money as some declined to contribute, others made promises which they never fulfilled while a few agreed to pay only after much cajoling (*L'ordine*, 1856 & 1857). It appears that the religious celebrations were not held in the following years.

Towards the end of 1859 we come across a record of a few letters exchanged between the confraternity and the Minor Conventuals. The topic which gave rise to this correspondence was the altar of the confraternity in St. Francis Church. Some time in the first half of the nineteenth century the altar was rebuilt in the form of "a sepulchral urn flanked by two large trunks or rods of Aesculapius entwined by serpents and serving as columns to support the altar slab". These trunks and serpents were meant to symbolise the medical and allied professions but in the view of the Archbishop Bishop Mgr. Publio Maria Sant (1779-1864) they were pagan symbols so that one could not say whether "the altar was Christian or pagan or a mixture of both. The people who had remarked on this inappropriateness were scandalised". For this reason the archbishop requested the removal of the "pagan" emblems but his order was ignored.

As soon as his successor Fr. Gaetano

Pace Forno took over the administration of the diocese (1857-75), he gave the same order to the Minor Conventuals and the rector of the confraternity through the Vicar General but he, too, was ignored.

The confraternity of painters, under the patronage of St. Luke, also possessed an altar in the same church. They too had decided to rebuild their altar dedicated to this saint. "Encouraged by the disobedience (of the doctors)" they adorned it with "sculptures of the square, the compass, the hammer and other symbols of the arts; but as in Malta these (tools) are recognised as masonic signs many were scandalised and the press criticised" the new designs.

Archbishop Pace Forno again repeated his instructions to the Minor Conventuals to have these "inconveniences" removed but "everything was in vain".

On the 31st August 1859 the Minister General of the Friars of St. Francis, Fra Salvatore Cali' of Catania, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology and Adviser to the Sacred Congregation of the Index, came to Malta to visit the convents and churches of his Order and to hold a Chapter General. Bishop Pace Forno took the occasion to call the attention of the Minister General to the dispute about the two altars. During his visit to the church of St. Francis, Fra S. Cali' having seen the "equivocal emblems of the fine arts" adorning the altar of St. Luke and the "symbols of Aesculapius" decorating the altar of Saints Cosmas and Damian, concurred with the Bishop that they were out of place.

On his departure from the Island on the 10th September (*L'ordine*, 1859), he gave orders to the Father Guardian to persuade the owners of the altar of St. Luke to take away the emblems of the fine arts and to induce the confraternity of Saints Cosmas and Damian to "remove from sight those entwined serpents representing medicine and reminiscent of a pagan myth . . . , it being inappropriate to have emblems of paganism in Catholic churches".

It appears that the Father Guardian, Fra Giuseppe Bonaventura Farrugia, had no difficulty in convincing the confraternity of painters, who were in charge of the altar at St. Luke, to take away their emblems.

In fact "they obeyed" and no such symbols can be seen to-day surrounding the altar of St. Luke. In the case of the brotherhood of Saints Cosmas and Damian, the medical fraternity adopted a different attitude and reacted quite strongly.

The Father Guardian duly informed the medical confraternity of the instructions he had received from his Minister General. He wrote thus to Dr. Calcidonio Parnis, the procurator of the confraternity on the 28th September 1859 (translated from Italian):-

"In accordance with the written orders given me by the Rev. Minister General I have to ask you, as Procurator of the Venerable Consodality of Saints Cosmas and Damian, to take steps to take away and remove from sight within eight days those entwined serpents, symbolising medicine and recalling a pagan usage, which are quite improper and intolerable in a sacred place.

I await a written reply to this letter as I am responsible towards the Head of the Order for the execution of his commands. In the meantime I sign myself with all due esteem,

the most humble and obedient  
servant,

Fra Gius. Bonaventura Farrug'a,  
Father Guardian."

Dr. Parnis replied the next day in the following terms (translation):-

"Very Rev. Father,

In answer to your letter of yesterday, I have to inform you that it is not within my power to remove any one of the emblems existing in our altar of Saints Cosmas and Damian as the said altar is the property of the medical corps. I have, however, communicated the contents of your letter to the President of the Society who has instructed me to call a general meeting to which pertains the duty to deliberate on the matter.

In my capacity as procurator I solemnly affirm that any aggressive act

committed by anyone against the altar will have unpleasant consequences.

I am, with all due respect,  
Dr. Cal. Parnis."

It is not known what was the decision reached by the general meeting of the Society. It is certain, however, that the emblems were not removed. The Bishop, therefore, through the Chancellor of the Episcopal Grand Court sent this letter to the Father Provincial of the Minor Conventuals, Fr. Michele Schembri, on the 15th October 1859 (translated):-

"Very Rev. Fr. Provincial,

His Excellency Rev. Mgr. Archbishop Bishop of Malta was informed at the commencement of his administration (of the diocese) that in the church of St. Francis of Valletta there was an altar with two large staffs of Aesculapius. In view of the fact that these are wholly pagan symbols and, therefore, inappropriate in the house of God and more so, in an altar on which the bloodless sacrifice (of the Mass) is celebrated, he has already twice suggested both to the religious community and to the confraternity, which claims to own the altar, to have them removed.

His directions repeatedly expressed in the most explicit manner have remained unheeded. Meanwhile the Very Rev. Fr. Salvatore Cali', Minister General, during his recent visit to the convent of the Order, has ordered the removal of the said pagan emblems from that altar. Since not even this mandate has been obeyed, His Excellency, in his capacity as Diocesan and as Apostolic Delegate, commands that from to-day until the said staffs of Aesculapius are removed, the said altar of Saints Cosmas and Damian is being interdicted so that no one is allowed to celebrate Holy Mass (thereon).

Your most humble and obedient  
servant,

Sac. Emmanuele Corsoni,  
Chancellor of the Episcopal  
Grand Court."

The reply of the confraternity was resolute. They did not write to the Archbishop but they addressed the following letter to the Fr. Provincial on the 19th October, that is four days after the declaration of interdiction of their altar (translation):-

"Very Rev. Father,

In answer to your esteemed letter of the 28th September addressed to one of us, we have been directed to inform you, as deputies of the Medico-chirurgical-pharmaceutical Corporation under the title of Saints Cosmas and Damian, that the coiled serpents to which you refer are the symbols of the medical profession and as such quite suitable as an emblem of this corporation. In fact this emblem was adopted at the very inception of the corporation following the example of similar corporations elsewhere and especially in the capital of the Catholic World.

The coats-of-arms of families and of corporations are to be seen, without any incongruity, in all the churches of the diocese; and in some instances quite independently of the object represented. To avoid drawing up a long list of examples, it is sufficient to call the attention of Your Paternal Reverence to the insignia adopted by the Cathedral Chapter which appears on the silver frontal that adorns, on the most solemn feast days, the main altar of the church of Malta. Here the serpent, or rather the viper, is seen curled round the sword and surmounted by that form of crown with which the pagans decorated their gods. Furthermore, does not the bishop himself carry a serpent coiled round his pastoral staff? Besides if all the objects which recall pagan rites and usages were to be eliminated from our churches — this being the reason on which Your Paternal Reverence seems to base your request — our cult will be deprived of its outward and imposing majesty since many, not to say almost all, of its features were derived from the pagan rite as its

influence gradually waned; or else were, from the very beginning adopted by the Christians, although they had been previously used by pagans, as they represented ideas common to both Christians and pagans.

In the particular instance of the entwined serpents, which are the cause of such fear to Your Paternal Reverence, we have to add that they were placed on the altar belonging to this noble corporation as insignia of the medical profession twenty-four years ago with the full knowledge and after a serious and mature consideration of the ecclesiastical authority as we shall prove if and when the occasion arises. For this reason the medical corporation which we represent does not consider it decorous and incumbent on them to adhere to the request made by Your Paternal Reverence.

Moreover, as the medical corporation is the possessor of the altar of Saints Cosmas and Damian and as ownership is safeguarded by the sanctity of the law and the authority of our Queen, we deem it our duty to inform Your Paternal Reverence and any one else whom it may concern that the medical corporation, in order to ensure the inviolability of its rights on the said altar, will not allow anyone to lay his hands on it and will take legal steps against anyone who attempts to do so.

Most humble and devoted servants,  
Cav. Gaetano La Ferla,  
Dr. Paolo Grillet.

At this point the correspondence comes to an end and we have to search elsewhere for a clue as to how the dispute was resolved. It is convenient, therefore, at this stage to pause in our search and cast a glance at the corpus delicti and at the personalities involved in the case.

The caduceus or staff or rod with one or two serpents entwined round it appeared as an attribute of the healing Greek god Aesculapius after the sixth to the fifth century B.C. As a pagan deity of medicine, Aesculapius aroused the antagonism of

Christians in the second century A.D. when he was regarded by the early Fathers of the Church as an evil spirit and even identified with Satan himself. In spite of this hostility, however, the concept of Aesculapius as a beneficent divine physician survived in the Christian guise of miraculous healing saints. Prominent among these were the physicians Saints Cosmas and Damian who like Aesculapius effected cures during incubation i.e. by appearing to the patients in their dreams, counselling them, prescribing remedies or healing them by the laying on of hands as was practised in the Asklepeian temples at Epidauros, Pergamum and Cos.

Aesculapius with his traditional symbol of the rod and serpent re-emerged in the sixteenth century in Christian Europe during the humanist culture of the Renaissance when the visual arts ceased to be the handmaids of religion and attained an independent existence and expression. Since then the rod and serpent have become the symbol of the medical and pharmaceutical professions (Schouten, 1967a).

In Malta it was adopted as an emblem of the *Società medica d'incoraggiamento* on its foundation in 1837. The serpent and rod are emblazoned over the white and red shield of Malta (*Statuti*, 1843) and form part of the design by Nicola Zammit of the diploma of membership of the society (Ms. 491).

In mythology the serpent symbolises rejuvenation, an idea derived from the periodical shedding of its skin and the formation of a new one. The rod represents the renewal of vegetative life; hence both stand for the indestructibility of life and, by analogy, for recovery from illness and for restoration to health (Schouten, 1967b; Geddes, 1945).

Among the Hebrews the serpent stood for salvation. When the Israelites complained about their food, while wandering in the desert round Sinai, God punished them by sending fiery serpents, many dying of bites from these animals. When the Israelites repented the Lord told Moses to make a brazen serpent and mount it on a pole so that whoever was bitten would recover by looking at it (Numbers, 21:4).

In later years the Christians adopted the brass serpent as an image of Christ. The bronze, which withstands the ravages of time, signified His Divinity; the serpent symbolised His Humanity; and the pole stood for the wood of the cross on which He was crucified for the salvation of the world (The Messenger of St. Anthony, 1969).

In sixteenth century Germany silver medals were struck depicting the brass serpent on the obverse and a crucified Christ on the reverse side. They were worn as a protection against the plague (Schouten, 1967c).

The rod and serpent motif was accepted within a Christian context by 1762 when it was incorporated in a painting of Saints Cosmas and Damian by Johann Anwander for the Maria Himmelfahrt Kirche in Dilligen-on-the-Danube (Schouten, 1967d).

These remarks regarding the place of the serpent in pagan and Christian thinking show how well read were Drs. La Ferla and Grillet about the role of serpent symbolism in ancient times. Their reference to the crowned serpent or viper coiled round the sword is an allusion to the coat-of-arms of the Cathedral Chapter of Malta. This device is derived from St. Paul's shaking the viper into the fire on landing on the Island of Malta after his shipwreck (Luke, Acts, 28,3). The crown symbolises the glory of martyrdom and the sword the instrument by which the apostle was put to death. This emblem is displayed on the top of the steeples of the Cathedral Church at Mdina and on the facades of farmhouses and other buildings belonging to the Chapter of the Cathedral.

Some of the protagonists — Fr. M. Schembri, Fr. G. Bonaventura Farrugia and the Rev. Em. Corsoni — who were dragged into the controversy only in view of their official positions in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, have eluded all my attempts to get to grips with them as personalities.

Mgr. Fra Gaetano Pace Forno, the son of the lawyer Dr. Fco. Pace, was born in Gozo on the 5th June 1809. His mother belonged to the family of the barons Forno of Palermo. He joined the Augustinian Friars eventually becoming the Father Provincial

in 1847. In the following year he founded the school which is still run by his Order. In 1857 he was appointed coadjutor to Mgr. Archbishop Publio M. Sant and when the latter resigned in December of the same year, Fra Gaetano Pace Forno assumed the direction of the diocese. He became bishop of Malta on the 31st May 1858.

His tenure of office was marked by a few episodes of friction with the British authorities who governed the Maltese Islands in those days. The first clash occurred on the very day of his installation as bishop when the commander of the British troops in Malta refused to fire the artillery salute that in the past had been accorded to the bishop of Malta on his installation. In 1860 he was at variance with the Governor when an Italian operatic company made some uncomplimentary allusions to the temporal power of the Pope although the Governor had ordered the company to withdraw the play in question. In the following year he was again at loggerheads with the Governor when some roofing stones were removed from the vaults in St. John's Co-Cathedral to ascertain whether certain structural alterations could be carried out in a nearby cellar. A far more serious discord arose in 1865 concerning the question of the validity of marriages between Catholics and Protestants which lasted for many years before a final solution was reached (Laferla, 1938).

Very little is known about Dr. Calcedonio Parnis. The son of a doctor, he studied *belles lettres* at Pisa before he turned to his medical education at Malta. He had a very short professional career dying at thirty-six years of age on the 18th August 1864. He is buried in the Carmelite Church at Valletta having been the Rector of the Confraternity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (*L'arte*, 1864; *L'ordine*, 1864).

Dr. Gaetano La Ferla, born on the 16th April 1802, qualified in medicine and surgery in 1825. He was a founder member of the *Società medica d'incoraggiamento* when this association was set up in 1837 (*Guida*, 1855; *Pronostku malti*, 1960; *L'arte*, 1865). He wrote a monograph on the use of asafoetida resin in the prevention of foetal death in cases of inertia of the uterus dur-

ing labour (Laferla, 1855). He stressed the need of studying the natural history of the Maltese Islands (1838-39) and proposed the compilation of a series of biographies of Maltese medical men (*Storia società medica*, 1845a; Ms. 1404).

In 1844 he went to the Regency of Tunis to deal with a "contagious illness" that spread among the troops of His Excellency Ahmed Bey who honoured him with a decoration as a reward for his successful efforts. In 1853 he drew the attention of the British Consul General at Tunis to the plight of the Maltese settlers in that Regency and interceded with him to protect them from the Mussulmans without charging them the prescribed fee. He was back in Malta in 1854. In 1856 he was elected a member of the Council of Government (*Ricorsi e lettere* 1854; *The Malta Government Gazette*, 1856). He belonged to various foreign medical associations among which the *Società Royale de Medecine de Marseille* (1835), the *Società frenopatica italiana* (1862), the Physico-Medical Society of Moscow (1862) and the *Accademia medico-chirurgica di Genova* (1857). He died on the 30th August 1865 at sixty-three years of age at Siggiewi (*The Malta Observer*, 1965).

The Grillet family was established in Malta in 1645 when the Frenchman Stefano Grillet (or Grigliet) married Margerita Cannolo at Birgu. By the end of the century the Grilletts had become a "medical" family there being a surgeon Sebastiano and his son, a physician, also named Sebastiano, who lived in Valletta in the first two decades of the eighteenth century (*Libr. Ad.* 53). Dr. Paolo Grillet studied medicine and surgery at the University of Pisa where he qualified in 1845. He appears as a member of the *Società medica d'incoraggiamento* on the 16th June 1846 when he took part in a discussion on *purpura haemorrhagica*. His name occurs again in the proceedings of this society in 1848 in connection with a debate on hydrophobia and with a proposal for plans for the preparation of a standard nomenclature of diseases to obviate the confusion caused by doctors who referred to different diseases by the same name and to the same diseases by different names. In 1849 he was

elected a member of a commission set up by the society to study measures for a port medical service at a time when cholera had appeared in various Mediterranean ports (*Storia società medica*, 1845b).

During the Crimean War (1854-56) he went to the Crimea where he dedicated himself to military surgery. On his return to Malta he served "with zeal and self-abnegation" in the cholera epidemics of 1865, 67 and 1887. He spent the last years of his life as District Medical Officer of Valletta, Quarantine Medical Officer and Visiting Physician to the Lazzaretto. In recognition of his services to the Italian community in Malta he was created *Cavaliere dell'Ordine della Corona d'Italia* in January 1890. He died on the 29th July 1890 (*La rivista medica*, 1890).

As already stated, after the letter of the 19th October 1859 over the signatures of Drs. La Ferla and Grillet, the archives of the Minor Conventuals at Valletta disclose no further information on the subject (Fiorini, 1973). Efforts to track and locate the registers of the confraternity have given no clues as to their whereabouts but a search in the archives of the Archiepiscopal Curia has revealed further documentation from which we learn that the crisis had deepened and reached a climax when the issue was referred to Rome through a memorial submitted by the Friars.

In a letter of the 23rd January 1860 the *Sacra Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari* at Rome informed Archbishop Pace Forno that it had learned that the doctors had opposed the removal of the serpents on the ground that these animals were not meant to recall pagan rites but to symbolise the medical profession. The doctors claimed the right of setting up their heraldic emblem in any place that belonged to them. It had also been brought to the knowledge of the *Sacra Congregazione* that the Minor Conventuals had been advised to sue them in a lay Court of Law to induce them to remove the serpents in question and that, as the Friars were reluctant to do so, the Archbishop had reacted by interdicting the altar. The *Sacra Congregazione* did not consider it "prudent to initiate court proceedings in a lay tribunal much

more so (in a country) under the influence of a Protestant government" (i.e. the British Government). The *Sacra Congregazione* concluded its letter by inviting the Archbishop to inform Rome what was "the real reason that gave rise to the interdiction of the altar."

Archbishop Pace Forno replied on the 11th February. As his arguments and observations throw a revealing light on the complex pattern of social and religious life in Malta in the mid-eighteen-fifties it is worth reproducing extracts from his letter at some length. After giving an account of the events leading to the interdiction, he remarks that if the serpents and abacus "were sculptures within a shield, one may allow them outside the altar proper on the pilasters at the sides of the altar as is the custom with coats-of-arms of noble families; they cannot, however, be permitted as they actually are and as an integral — or rather a principal — feature of the slab itself on which the Immaculate Lamb is sacrificed. Such strictness would not seem necessary abroad; but it is not so in Malta where we live in the midst of a thousand critics and especially among Protestants who grasp every opportunity to accuse us of idolatrous rites. It is necessary for the *Società medico-chirurgica* whose deputies, to justify their disregard of my order and that of the Father General, stated that . . . if the Catholic Church were to do away with its pagan (rites) nothing will be left. Such is the concept of the church held by these men . . . some of whom, as is publicly known, do not believe in the Christian religion."

The doctors, however, were not the only persons to earn the strictures of the Archbishop; in fact he openly expressed his disapproval of the conduct of the Minor Conventuals (Sammuto, 1860) who, on the pretext of being regular priests and of their church being outside the jurisdiction of the Archbishop, "do and allow everything to be done without his sanction". He also deplored the fact that one of the friars had insulted him and his officials not only in public but also in church and that the friars endeavoured to have the interdiction revoked by the *Sacra Congregazione* to be in a position to "boast that they had

shamed the bishop of the diocese".

As to the involvement of a lay tribunal in the dispute, commented the Archbishop, there would be no need to take this step "if the friars had been prudent enough. Having known since some time that those emblems were not suitable in a Christian altar they should have endeavoured, with good manners, to make the members of the sodality, among whom there is no lack of reasonable (men), understand the whole question. But the friars did not care about the remarks of the public neither about the remonstrations of the bishops nor the latter's orders. It was only when they were prohibited from celebrating Mass on the altar that they began to stir. But what did they do? They irritated the members of the sodality. It is well known that one of the friars, who is eager to have the interdiction revoked, has been insulting them in the streets saying that they neglect to fulfil their paschal duties and even threatening to break the rods with his own hands. In the end, when the friars, with their lack of prudence, had rendered any agreement impossible they came to ask what they should do. They were told to have recourse to the law courts. What else, under the circumstances, could one do? Either remain with the altar interdicted or else take steps to remove those emblems through court action. This was a necessary consequence. It every time that anyone refused to obey an order that order were to be rescinded, then all the laws of the world would have to be abolished".

Regarding the reluctance of the *Sacra Congregazione* to start court proceedings, he hastened to assure them that they had been very badly informed about the lay judicature of the Island. "In Malta", he says, "the tribunals . . . are independent of the executive administration in fact they deal with law suits even against the government itself . . . and the judges are so upright that they deliver judgments even against the government when the latter is at fault. Besides, the judges are all Catholics . . . and before reaching a decision they would ask for the opinion of theologians and of experts on the Catholic rite. Both my predecessors and myself have had recourse to these tribunals on

many occasions and, it must be truly said, that due to the integrity and independence of the judiciary we never had any reason to complain". The friars themselves, concluded the Archbishop, had felt no qualms on a past occasion to sue their own superior in the Police Courts.

While the Archbishop had no anxieties about the administration of justice in the Island, he was quite alarmed at the alleged inroads of freemasonry among his flock. "It is well known", he observed, "that in Malta the number of (masonic) sects has increased considerably and that many Maltese have joined them; if we go on like this, we will one day see on our altars the image of a head of a sect and, under the pretext of exemption or of *ius patronatus*, one would have to tolerate this abomination. Most Eminent Fathers, Malta is an exceptional country. One must be on one's guard to resist profanation; otherwise there is the risk of losing the purity of the Catholic cult and also of every religion" (Pace Forno, 1860).

The Archbishop's preoccupation about the diffusion of freemasonry in Malta was not altogether unjustified; indeed a prominent freemason, writing in 1880, stated that there was probably no part of the world where freemasonry had so greatly prospered during the nineteenth century as in Malta. As early as 1815 the Bishop of Malta had remonstrated with the Governor, Sir Thomas Maitland, against the weekly meetings of freemasons in Valletta. In 1843 he publicly condemned all secret societies and especially freemasonry (Broadley, 1880).

The dispute between the doctors and the Archbishop caused no *furor* in the press in spite of its unusual nature but it was summarily referred to in a jocular vein by the *Filantropo maltese*. In its issue of the 31st January 1860 this paper represented Saints Cosmas and Damian nursing a grudge against the Maltese first because their altar had been interdicted and secondly because none of the medical men — Drs. Gaetano La Ferla, Felice Grech, Francesco Adami, Luigi Calleja and Nicola Mamo — who had presented themselves as candidates for the Council of Government had been elected (*Il portafoglio*, 1860a.)



In fact the Council resulted formed of six lawyers and two business men (*Filantropo maltese*, 1860). But the dawning of the year 1860 was of great concern not only to Saints Cosmas and Damian but also to Bishop Pace Forno. Grave events, triggered by the *Risorgimento* in neighbouring Italy were seriously upsetting his peace of mind: no less, in fact, than the "impiety" of those who were struggling to destroy the temporal power of the Holy See to further their ideal of a united Italy. Faced with this "sorrowful and tragic" crisis the Archbishop directed all his energies to exhorting his Maltese flock to pray for, and to show their solidarity with, the Pope (*L'indipendente*, 1860). He showed his pre-occupation in a pastoral letter issued at the beginning of February 1860 (*Il portafoglio*, 1860b). Compared with this threat to the Head of the Catholic Church, the dispute about the "sculptured emblems of Aesculapius, which since years had adorned" the altar of Saints Cosmas and Damian was a trivial matter indeed. In fact the interdiction was withdrawn, the lifting of the ban being announced in a local paper on the 9th February 1860 (*Il messaggiere*, 1860).

The campaign against the incorporation of "pagan allegorical insignas" in sacred art, however, did not slacken. The editor of the "politico-religious" newspaper *L'ordine* while referring to certain mosaic gravestones in our churches, deplored the "horrible profanation" by sculptors, painters and other artists who had dared to represent sacred objects with mythological symbols (*L'ordine*, 1860a).

The rift between the Archbishop and the confraternity was eventually healed apparently after the emblems of the rods and serpents supporting the altar slab were removed; in fact the present altar of the two saints conforms to the conventional pattern of other altars in our churches. We have not succeeded in tracking down a pictorial record of the lost altar and we wonder what were its artistic merits. But not everything was lost. In a letter of the 30th September 1860, the *Sacra Congregazione* expressed their satisfaction at the "conclusion of the conciliation" between the Archbishop and the *Società medico-chirurgica*

and gave their approval for two shields with the symbols of Aesculapius to be fixed to the pilasters on each side of the altar "in conformity with the design" forwarded to them. These gilded emblems of Aesculapius have survived and to this day they grace the altar of Saints Cormas and Damian in the Church of the Minor Conventuals.

The serpent coiled round the abacus is picked out in bold and gilded relief on a shield which is framed by branches of laurel (*Laurus nobilis*) which, like the rod and serpent has asklepian associations for the god of healing is sometimes figured crowned with laurel while in the past an ethereal oil was obtained from the leaves and fruits of this shrub and used as a medicament.

From 1860 onwards the emblems of Aesculapius no longer called forth the wrath of the Maltese ecclesiastical authorities; so much so that henceforth the rod and serpent were incorporated in the ornamentation of memorial inscriptions on the marble tombstones of physicians and surgeons buried in our churches. Random examples are those of Dr. Antonio Mifsud (1883) and Dr. Daniel F. Chetcuti (1895) at the Rotunda Church at Mosta and of Dr. Giuseppe Rocco Peralta (1896) at the Parish Church of Balzan.

The subsequent fate of the various personalities involved in the controversy can be told in a few words. Mgr. Fr. Gaetano Pace Forno died at Naples on the 22nd July 1874 (*Il portafoglio maltese*, 1874). He had lived long enough to witness the dreaded fall of Rome in 1870 when, on the 20th September, the Italian army under General Cadorna breached Porta Pia and entered the city bringing to an end the temporal power of the Pope.

Of the three medical protagonists — Drs. Parnis, La Ferla and Grillet — the first two preceded the Archbishop to the grave; the third one was laid to rest in 1890.

The *pia società* of Saints Cosmas and Damian faded into obscurity. It did not figure in a list of eighteen confraternities that contributed with other constituted bodies to a fund of fifty-four thousand francs which was sent to Pope Pius IX by the Maltese Diocese as a sign of solidarity

when his temporal power was threatened by the armed forces of the Italian *Risorgimento* in 1860 (L'ordine, 1860b). From now on we lose trace of the confraternity which has disappeared without as yet giving us a hint as to how and when its extinction came about. In fact nothing has been found in the way of its records.

### Comment

This excursion into a byway of Maltese medical history shows how the religious factor has moulded the pattern of the social, political, artistic and intellectual life of Malta in the past. Any deviation from the orthodox religious framework — even as late as the mid-nineteenth century — called forth the intransigent opposition of the Maltese ecclesiastical hierarchy who suspected implications of the most dangerous kind even in the universal and harmless emblem of a professional association. Indeed they saw the disrupting enemy in all shapes and on every front not only in the artistic manifestations of classical culture and in the flow of foreign influences among the laity, but even within their own ranks.

The episode, however, has its redeeming aspects; for by their stand our past colleagues brought into sharp relief their corporate sense of honour and set us an example of courageous resistance against what they felt to be the unreasonable demands of others. Although their efforts were not completely successful we cannot but look with pride on the resolute manner with which they met the challenge and on their dignified endeavours to save from oblivion a unique landmark of our medical heritage.

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