A STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL THROUGH A YEAR OF FAMINE 1647-1648

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Dearth of Food in Malta

For some years after the siege of 1565, while the Knights of Malta were building Valletta, several Maltese had a very good opportunity to relieve themselves of their poverty. A number worked in the quarries, while others carried quarrying stones; others carried the stones to the building site. Quite a number were employed in the building of the city itself. 1

In the middle of the seventeenth century, however, the Maltese, falling short of industries or of profitable occupations, suffered serious problems of poverty. Out of about 60,000 inhabitants, 2 not more than ten earned a salary of about 600 scudi a


2. The Bishop of Malta Michael Balaguer, in 1637, wrote to the Secretary of the Papal State, and said that the population was 60,000 inhabitants: Bibl. Vat., Barb. Lat., ms. 6687, f.17r. A fully detailed statistic of the year 1632 gives a population of 51,750: N.L.M., Libr., ms.162, f.127r. (For its publication, see Alex. Bonnici, Maltin u l-Inkizzzjoni f'nos is-seklu sbatax, 1977, p.212). But historians do not agree about this official numbering of the population, see: P. Debono, Sommario della Storia della Legislazione in Malta, 1897, p.184. It is useful to observe that the above official statistic does not include those who, in some way or another, belonged to the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. The following extract is important to clarify the above: "Erano nel 1632 in Malta intorno di 57 mila anime......cioè 5 mila della Religione, e 52 mila degli abitanti; ma s'aumentano talmente quelli dell' Isola che arrivano adesso a 55 mila persone": N.L.M., Libr., ms.162, f.125r.
year. A few could honestly live on their gain or salary but all the rest lived in dire poverty. Sometimes, their poverty, for various reasons, became unbearable because the island was sterile, and the inhabitants were accused for not being industrious. 3

Malta, then, used to obtain 16,000 salme of grains from Sicily without any tax, on account of an old concession of the King of Spain. 5 That provision was always very badly needed. As a matter of fact, when the provision did not arrive in time, famine soon gripped the island. 6 From Sicily, the island received also a large quantity of wines, fresh and corned meat, vegetables, firewood, oil, silk, woolen goods, wax, sugar and spices. While Malta served as a guardian and a fortress against the Turks for Sicily, the latter rescued the former from starvation. 7

Malta, a small island deficient in resources, received further help from bigger nations. Spain provided for clothes; Venice aided with wood for the building of houses; France used to send metal and ammunition. All these necessities were sure of immediate marketing. Whenever such provisions failed to come, the island suffered many hardships. On the other hand, Malta hardly exported anything.
A STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL 1647-1648

On account of this, few vessels passed by, if not by chance: such as in the case of an unexpected storm. During 1647, Mgr. Anthony Pignatelli, a young Prelate who was to become well known throughout the Christian world, was in charge of the Tribunal of the Inquisition in Ma'ta. Many years after, he was to be chosen as a Roman Pontiff with the name of Innocent XII (1691-1700). Pignatelli had begun his term of office as an Inquisitor just at the end of the year 1646. The first year of his term of office marked a period of terrible suffering for the Maltese on account of food shortage. It was the month of May 1647. Sicily could hardly provide anything due to the dearth of 1646. Nothing was expected because in 1647, water as well was lacking. The bakeries of Malta had to overcome many problems to provide just what was necessary for the Maltese alone. Other unhappy circumstances rendered everything more difficult by creating new problems. During that inauspicious time, the galleys of Malta were engaged in helping the Serene Republic of Venice in the siege of Candia. The crew was expected to embark on the galleys all that was necessary for the whole period during which they

8 "Di Spagna vengono panni, et da Venezia legnami per uso delle fabriche, e di Francia delli metalli et monitioni delle quali specialmente Malta ne ha grandissimo bisogno": Ib., f.171r. For a confirmation of this, we quote again the above mentioned report: "In quanto al legname, vi è gran carestia perché viene tutto da fuori": N.L.M., Libr., ms. 162, f.125r. (For an interesting extract of this document already published, see: Aless. Bonnici, I Vescovi di Malta Baldassarre Cagliare e Michele Balaguer in Mel. Hist., v.5(1968-1971), p.131, note 56.

9. Anthony Pignatelli, a Neapolitan of noble origin, the future Innocent XII, arrived in Malta on December 17. 1646. He succeeded Mgr. John Baptist Gori Pannellini, who had not left a good impression on the island: especially in the administration of justice. Though Pignatelli was not eminent for his activities, he was always very highly praised. From the very beginning, Pignatelli tried to soften through gentle manners the hatred engendered in Malta against his predecessor. He knew how to face difficulties with courage, how to exercise justice with prudence and moderation, and how to judge without any passion. Besides, though suffering from a delicate physical constitution, up to the time of his departure from Malta on April 23, 1649, he continued to be admired by the Knights, by the people of Malta, and by the Holy See itself. Bibliography about Inquisitor Pignatelli is far from abundant. We were the first to publish something about his period as an Inquisitor in Malta. But the Pignatelli family was very well known in Southern Italy. Hence, few publications published in Naples reveal many interesting facts about that noble family. For a reference to the bibliography about the Pignatelli family and to Anthony Pignatelli in particular, see. Alex. Bonnici, Arrival and first days in Malta of Anthony Pignatelli, Inquisitor and Apostolic Delegate in Mel. Theol., v.25. nn.1-2 (1973), p.34.

10. Ib., pp.34-47

11. For the best study that refers to the participation of the Maltese in the siege of Candia, see: P. Piccolomini, Corrispondenza tra la corte di Roma e l'Inquisitore di
had to stay far away from Malta. However, they could not find the indispensable supplies.  

At the beginning of 1647, Malta had an abundant supply of rice. In fact, the Knights of St. John granted due permissions to the Ma'tese to sell 3,000 cantara of rice in order to avoid it becoming spoilt. Grand Master Jean Paul Lascaris (1636-1657) and the Council had imposed one condition: each seller had to put aside five per cent of his rice for the necessary provisions of the island.  

Forbidden by Law to export Rice  

Soon during 1647, the Ma'tese began to feel the imminent danger of famine. On account of this, on May 27, the Council of the Order revoked the permission to export rice. Knight Ludovico Bisaura, by means of an earlier permission, had already in good faith laden on a vessel a quantity of rice. The Council, to avoid trouble, allowed him to export all that amount already taken aboard.  

The day after, May 28, 1647, the Council decreed that the sum of...
money collected by the Order's Commissioners from the selling of grain had to be handed to the Magistrates of the Università so that it might be employed in buying barley. The Università had to take charge of its purchase and then pay back the Commissioners, while grains were to be sold to the people. Nothing, however, was done up to end of August. In fact, on August 23, the same decree was issued again.

At that time, the Maltese possessed more rice than what they needed. However, they had to be very careful to prepare for an imminent threatening danger of famine. Besides, rice alone could not appease their appetite. For the civil authority, it was a hard task. After a bit of reflection, however, it was decided not to forbid the exporting of rice anymore. At the same time, the exporters had to provide for an exchange with other vital necessities. But, though they were regularly obliged to bring something else in return, they were exceptionally permitted to load 200 cantara for Sicily because, in other circumstances, that island had often assisted the Maltese.

More than 100 cantara of rice were exported to Messina. In return, 1,000 cafisi of oil were brought to Malta.

ra, e considerando che sotto buona fede, con la licenza che prima havéva ottenuta, ha imbarcato alcuna quantità di riso...... non ostante il decreto hier i fatto, hanno concesso al sudetto de Bisaura che possa estrahere quello solamente che già si ritrova imbarcato": Ib.

16. “Die XXIX mensis Maii 1647: Considerando la scarsa raccolta, che tanto qui quanto in Sicilia si spera nel presente anno, e desiderando provvedere al meglio che sarà possibile all'alimento ordinario de i poveri vassalli di questo dominio...... hanno ordinato et commandato che tutta quella somma, che si ritrova in mano de i Commissari sopra di ciò deputati, e quella, che d'ora innanzi dalla sudetta vendita perrà, si consegna da essi a i Magnifici Giurati dell'Università a fin d'impiegarla in compra d'orgio per beneficio di detti vassalli, con obbligo di restituir alli medesimi Commissarii le sudetta somma di denaro che conseguiranno al prezzo del sudetto orzo, che si comprerà di mano in mano, come se ne n'anderà vendendo”: Ib., ms.258, f.82v.

17. “Die XXIII Augusti 1647. ........In conformità del decreto seguito sotto li ventinove di Maggio prossime passato hanno deliberato et ordinato che tutta quella somma di denaro provenuta dalla vendita de frumenti, e che perrà dalla medesima destinata per tagliarsi e che si ritrova in poter de Commissarii sopra di ciò destinati, e quella che d'ora innanzi verrà in mano loro si consegna da detti Commissarii secondo che li verrà ordinato dall'Illustrissimo Signor Luogotenente a fine d'impiegarla in compra de frumenti per provisione delle sudette Isole”. Ib., f.100r.

18. “Die XXVIII mensis Junii 1647... hanno dato licenza a Nicòlò Gheimar di poter estrahere di questo dominio ducento cantara di riso per il regno di Sicilia, con questo però che dia pleggeria di far constare che il sudetto riso effettivamente lo sbarcarà in detto regno”: Ib., ms.116, f.33v.

19. *Cafiso* or *Cafisso* is derived from Arabic “Qafas”, and, although the meaning is slightly different, it is still used in Maltese. In Siciliy, in Malta, an din other localities along the Mediterranean Sea, *Cafiso* was a measurement for an average of six
20. Someone carried to Malta a bargeful of sardines and he was paid with 20 cantara of rice. 21 Another merchant obtained permission to manufacture gunpowder from the proceeds of 30 cantara of rice sold in Syracuse. 22 Other similar permissions were granted always with the imposition of importing other provisions to Malta. 23

On August 13, 1647, due to that precarious situation, though at war with the Moslems, the Council conceded an exceptional pass through Malta to Ali Ogli Granatino, a Moslem from Tunis, on the condition that he had to bring to Malta a large quantity of barley, wheat and oil. 24

The Maltese would have liked to import more from Sicily. But, being short of money, they were finding it very difficult. On account of this, the Jurats of the cities of Valletta, Birgu and Isla, together with those of the rest of Malta, in the name of the University, on August 30, 1647, humbly requested the Grand Master to lend them money from the common treasury so that they might obtain grains from Sicily. 25

Unluckily, Sicily itself was suffering hunger up to October 1647. As a
result, provisions from that island increased heavily in cost. At the beginning of October, the Knights tried to apply a remedy by handing 5,300 scudi to Peter Cassar, one of the Jurats of the Università who promised to do his best to buy vital necessities for Malta.26

The following day, Fra Vincenzo Crescimanno, the Order’s Navy Commander, found he could buy one thousand salme of wheat from a freighter in Bindicari, and another thousand salme from Terranova. The cost-price, however, was not encouraging, but in that precarious situation, the Council decided not to miss such an occasion. The Commander was ordered to obtain 2,000 salme on the best possible terms; but he was not to exceed the price of 12 scudi each salma. At the same time, the mandate given to Peter Cassar was renewed.27 Afterwards, the Knights sent 2,000 scudi to Fra Crescimanno as earnest money to be handed to the contractors. The agreement was that they deliver the rest of the money requested as soon as the food provisions were received.28

26. “Die eadem (October 5, 1647). Essendo stata data notitia all’Eminentissimo e Reverendissimo Signor Gran Maestro et al Venerando Consiglio dalli Venerandi Procuratori del Tesoro come, considerata la grande penuria di frumento e le difficoltà che nel regno di Sicilia si ritrovano per comprarlo et estraherlo, haveano deliberato di mandare al sudetto Regno li Magnifico Pietro Cassar, consegnandogli qui tre mila scudi contanti per eseguire l’ordini che loro li danno in scritto, da Sua Eminenza et Venerando Consiglio furono approvati con lo scrutinio delle palle 1i sudetti ordini, eccetto in quella parte che parla di poter fare compra per conto della Università”: Ib., ms.258 f.103v.

27. “Die sexta mensis Octobris 1647. Havendo l’Eminentissimo e Reverendissimo Signor Gran Maestro comunicato al Venerando Consiglio una lettera del Commendatore Fra Don Vincenzo Crescimanno, nella quale in risposta d’una scrittagli da Sua Eminenza dà avviso di sperar potersi comprare mille salme di frumento consegnate nel caricatore di Bindicari, e forse, secondo ha inteso, altri mille nel caricatore di Terranova, però ch’i frumenti si vendono a prezzi rigorosissimi... si dia l’ordine al detto de Crescimanno di procurare effettuare la compra delle sudette due mila salme consegnate nellì detti caricatori di Bindicari e Terranova per quel men prezzo che secondo le presenti occorrenze et scarzezza di frumenti gli sarà possibile... Non ostante questo ordine, si stia sopra il mandare il Magnifico Pietro Cassar in Sicilia per cercar frumenti”: Ib.

“Die XII mensis Octobris 1647... Il Commendatore Fra Don Vincentio Crescimanno in conformità del decreto seguito sotto li sei del corrente mese compì mille salme di frumento, o più... con questo però ch’il prezzo non ecceda li dodici scudi per salma”: Ib.

28. “Con un altro scrutinio di palle hanno ordinato e commandato che dalli Venerandi Procuratori del Thesoro si mandino due mila scudi di moneta di Sicilia con la fregata del passo a fine di consegnaarsi al sudetto de Crescimanno per dar caparra a’i venditori del sudetto frumento, e che il restante del prezzo si pagará dando aviso della compra in conformità del detto decreto de’i sei del corrente mese”: Ib.
Arrangements of the Knights in a struggle against famine

Peaceful contracts and diligent inquiries were not enough to appease the hunger of about 60,000 inhabitants. Malta, under the grip of famine, was compelled to infringe even the dictates of justice. Little by little, through the aid of occasional supplies received up to the end of October 1647, the extremes of scarcity were avoided, but they remained to be in an imminent danger. On October 19, 1647, a vessel full of wheat laden in Ancona and on its way to Livorno sought refuge in the harbour of Malta. The Knights, fearing the dearth of food, ordered this vessel to leave all its provisions in Malta and in case of a refusal, violence had to be used. The bastions of St. Angelo and St. Elmo together with other vessels in the harbour had to stop it from leaving with their artillery.

On October 20, 1647, the Order through some Knights in Sicily, had again the possibility to buy 400 salme of grains, but at a very dear price of 11 scudi each salme. The island, however, never had a sufficient quantity of wheat. Consequently, rice had to substitute wheat. The Grand Master and the Council decided to investigate the quantity of rice owned by the Maltese. So, on November 7, 1647, Commissioners were appointed and everyone had to declare in their presence the quantity of rice one owned. They did not admit any exceptions, not even to those who were usually exempt. The Commissioners were also in charge of stopping galleys or vessels from loading any rice for export out of Malta. In case of a suspicion, they could inspect any boat leaving the island.

The Commissioners soon began their work. In order that no one might transgress the law postponed claiming ignorance, on November 12, the Council prolonged the date to the

29. "Die XX mensis Octobris 1647... hanno deliberato et ordinato che si pigli il frumento del vassello, ch'hieri entrò in questo porto, il quale, havendo caricato in Ancona, dice portarlo in Ligorno, e che in caso che facci forza per andarsene, li Castelli di Sant'Elmo e di Sant'Angelo e l'altri vasselli che sono in porto gl'impediscano l'uscita con l'artiglieria, e che per maggior sicurezza subita si tiri dentro del porto grande, e si metta alla posta della Capitana": Ib., ff.103v-104r.

30 "Die eadem (October 20, 1647). Havendo l'Eminentissimo e Reverendissimo Signor Gran Maestro data notitia al Venerando Consiglio d'una lettera che gli vien scritta alcune persone che si ritrovano con frumento gl'haveano parlato con desiderio di venderlo, domandando ad undecei scudi per salma, Sua Eminenza et il Venerando Consiglio... hanno risoluto che dal suetto de Biringucci si comprino sin alla somma di trecento o quattrocento salme, dando capparra ai venditori, e che lo devano condurre ne i magazzeni di Noto, che sono Bindicari e Capo Passaro": Ib.,f.104r.

31. "Die septima mensis Novembris 1647. Considerando ch'alla penuria grande ch'è di frumento si può solo supplire con il riso che si ritrova in quest'Isola, e desiderando saper esattamente la quantità che vi è... hanno deliberato doversi deputar Commissari, acciocché inanzi a loro, tutti quelli che tengono riso di qualsivoglia stato e condizione, siano tanto religiosi quanto secolari revelino la quantità con che si ri-
following Friday, November 13.\textsuperscript{32} Those who refused to reveal the quantity of rice owned were threatened with confiscation in favour of the common treasury. They could also incur a fine of 15 scudi for every cantaro not revealed, out of which 10\% had to go to the person that made the denunciation.\textsuperscript{33}

Although that warning seemed very severe, the Maltese did not present the rice quantity immediately, as it might have been expected. On the other hand, the Knights abstained from implementing the threatened fine; but they did not cease from insisting that each Maltese should help for the common welfare of the Island. On December 5, 1647, the Council granted another ten days both to Knights and to civilians, during which they were expected to carry their rice to the common warehouse. The decree was placarded in all the Auberges and in many other public places. Again and again, all were menaced with the confiscation of their rice. The Order declared that half of the rice had to be bought by the authorities of the State and the other half by the University for the benefit of all the civilian population of Malta.\textsuperscript{34} Notwithstanding all this, the target date for the declaration of

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\item trovano, e doppo riferiscano al medesimo Venerando Consiglio, e parimente acciò che con essatta diligenza procurino che sopra le galere et altri vesselli detto riso per estraherlo fuori del dominio non s'imbarchi, visitandoli quando saranno di partenza, se così da loro sarà giudicato conveniente": \textit{Ib.}, f.104v.
\item The document refers just to the day of the week; but the exact date can be known from A. Cappelli, \textit{Cronologia, Cronografia e Calendario Perpetuo}, Milano, 1960, p.97.
\item "Die XII mensis Novembris 1647... hanno prorogato il termine per far detto rivelo sin per tutto il venerdì prossime futuro sotto pena, a qualsivoglia religioso di qualunque grado, qualità, e condizione sia, che in detto termine lascierà di rivelar la quantità di riso con che si ritrova di confiscazione a favor del comun Thesoro di tutta quella quantità che haverà lasciato di rivelar, et oltre di ciò sotto pena a favore del medesimo Thesoro ipso facto incurrenda di quindici scudi per ogni cantaro di riso, che non haverà rivelato, offeringo dieci per cento al denuntiante, e dando alli detti Commissarii per il sudetto effetto l'autorità necessaria et opportuna": N.L.M., Arch., ms.258, ff.104v-105r.
\item "Die quinta mensis Decembris 1647: Intesa la relatione dell\'e Venerandi Commissarii, sotto li sette di Novembre prossime passato deputati sopra il rivelo del riso, l\'Eminetissimo e Reverendissimo Signor Gran Maestro et il Venerando Consiglio, con lo scrutinio delle palle, senz\'alcuna discrepanza, hanno deliberato, ordinato, e comandato che tutti i religiosi e secolari debbano fra il termine di dieci giorni consegnare nel magazzino che si deputarà tutta la quantità di riso con che si ritrovano, e che se gli debba pagare il suo valore a ragione di scudi quattro e tari otto per cantaro, sotto pena, non consegnandolo, di confiscazione, ipso facto incurrrenda, cioè del riso de Religiosi a favor del commun Thesoro, e de secolari a favor del fisco di Sua Eminenza, e che per il sudetto effetto sì publich il presente decreto nell\'Albergie e luoghi consueti, e si faccino li bandi soliti, e parimente che la metà del sudetto riso si compri per la Religion, e l\'altra metà per l\'Università": \textit{Ib.}, f.105v.
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the rice was further extended up to December 23, 1647. 35

During that careful search, the Commissioners had to see and examine again whether the Maltese owners had brought all their rice. 36 When the Order had an approximate compete control of the rice quantities, the proprietors began to sell it to representatives of the Knights or to the Università at the price of 4 scudi and 8 tari for every cantaro. The sellers were requested to appeal to the Council whenever they thought that the payment received was not according to justice. A strict command of the Council stated that any member of the Order who refused to sell his rice, was to be immediately imprisoned and there expect a lawsuit. 37

Violent Attempts against famine

On account of the continual increase of penury, the galleys of the Order went out of the harbour in search of any vessel loaded with grains. Without admitting any exception, they had to oblige any grain carrying vessel to enter the harbour. The Knights had to ask for help from all those whom they met across the sea, even far away from Malta. 38

On Christmas Day 1647, the galleys received the order to look for freighters along the coasts of Sicily. 39 On December 28, the Council decided to elect some Commissioners with the duty of taking charge of a new trip of the Order’s galleys because, at the end of 1647, famine was becoming more and more oppressive. 40

35. “Die XX mensis Decembris 1647... hanno prorogato per tutto Lunedì prossimo, che si contaranno li venti tre del corrente mese”: Ib., f.106v.
37. “...che sopra il soprapiù che pretendono del prezzo stabilito di quattro scudi et otto tari per cantaro, ricorrano al medesimo Venerando Consiglio, che li farà complemento di giustitia. E parimente, con un altro simile scrutinio, di palle hanno ordinato che se alcun Religioso si mostrerà renitente in consegnar detto riso. si mandi subito in Castello, e Sua Eminenza deputi Commissarii per formargli il processo”: Ib.
38. “Die eadem (December 20, 1647). Considerando la penuria grande in che si ritrovano queste Isole senza nessuna speranza di frumenti... hanno deliberato che si dia ordine al Venerando Generale delle Galere per via d’una feluca o fregata, che ritrovando al suo ritorno qualsivoglia sorte de vasselli carrighi di frumento, senza eccettuare nessuno, li procuri condurre in questo porto, et che havendo notizia che sono alcuni in alcuna parte della costa, permettendocelo il tempo, e le provisions vadi a cercarli per il sudetto effetto di condurli in porto”: Ib.
39. “Die XXV mensis Decembris 1647... incontrando nel viaggio alcun vassello carico di frumento, lo conduca, e parimente che mandi la feluca per pigliar lingua se nelli caricatori della costa di Sicilia è alcun vassello caricando, e subito venire a darne aviso”: Ib., f.107r.
40. “Die XXVIII mensis Decembris 1647... hanno giudicato conveniente deputar Com-
During those extreme sufferings, while looking for provisions, the galleys of Malta, sailing at the vicinity of Messina in Sicily, met some Christian corsairs and plundered them as often happened at those times. Some trouble arose because the galleys attacked were Venetian and Sicilian for it was forbidden for Christians to attack each other. This fact, however, was not unique. At the end of December 1647, when the situation did not inspire any hope, in a very dangerous period to sail the seas, the Knights decided to sail even up to Civitavecchia, to look for provisions. If, on their way, they were to meet any cargo, they had to do their best to persuade its crew to carry everything to Malta in order to help in its dire need.

The Knights felt also constrained to care for a proper rationing of bread among the inhabitants of Malta; four Knights took care of the city of Valletta; Isla, Birgu, and Bormla were under the charge of one Knight each.

The intercession of Inquisitor Pignatelli

The records of the Knights of Malta are completely silent about the role of Mgr. Anthony Pignatelli, in this particular problem. But from an
examination of the original correspondence of the Inquisitor with his Superiors in Rome it appears that on January 4, 1648, Pignatelli, in his twofold function of Inquisitor and Apostolic Delegate for the Maltese Islands, explained to the Papal Secretary of State in Rome the miserable situation of Malta. While the harvest had not been productive, the troubled situation between Christians and Moslems across the Mediterranean Sea caused the problem to become even more serious. Since nearby countries could not help as they usually did, the Inquisitor informed the Secretary of State about the difficulties of the Knights in endangering their galleys by sending them to Civitavecchia. During the winter season, the danger was very great on account of storms and assaults by Moslem corsairs. According to the Inquisitor, the distress of the Island had reached its climax; the provisions could not last more than a fortnight. All the inhabitants were living with thriftiness just as if they were under a siege. The Inquisitor added also that God alone could save the Island from starvation.

Mgr. Pignatelli had also written to Mgr. Treasurer in Rome to see whether something could be provided. While the victuals were very badly needed, no answer was received. As an effect of this, Pignatelli acted on his own responsibility and authority. Since he was also the head of the Reverenda Fabbrica of St. Peter, he had in custody all the payments of many pious legacies in the diocese of Malta. Whereupon, hoping that the Secretariat in Rome would approve his dispositions, Pignatelli handed to the Knights all the money still preserved in Malta, with the obligation that they return it according to the requests of the Ministers of the same Fabbrica in Rome.

In an answer to Pignatelli, the Secretary of the Papal State answered that he could not give his consent because the matter did not depend on him. So it would had been wise on the Inquisitor's part if he had informed Mgr. Treasurer about his intentions and determinations. The Papal

45. "La scarcezza dello raccolto, ch'è stata quest’anno nei luoghi circonvicini, ma molto più le gran torbidezze insorte nei medesimi, havendo prohibito il poter far qua le solite provisioni, si trova hoggi quest’Isola costituita in tali angustie, che già non ha viveri che per 15 giorni in circa": A.S.V., S.S. Malta, ms.7, f.188r.

46. "E qui si vive in tanto con quella parsimonia e rassegnazione che si costuma negli assedi. Dio sia quello che ci soccorra... Malta, li 4 gennaaro 1648... Antonio Pignatello": Ib.

47. "Mentre stavo aspettando in conformità delle mie istanze fatte a Monsignor Tesoriere qualche ordine intorno a buona parte del biscotto rimasto qui della Reverenda Camera, essendo sopraggiunta un’estrema angustia di viveri nell’Isola, come più a pieno ho accennato a Vostra Eminenza con altra mia, sono stato costretto di dar detto biscotto a questa Religione, con obbligo però di pagarlo costà in Camera a quel prezzo che da i Ministri della medesima sarà stabilito; et in tal conformità mi i Ministri della medesima sarà stabilito; et in tal conformità mi rimetto hora a Mons. Tesoriere i dovuti recapiti": Ib., f.189r.
A STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL 1647-1648

Secretary of State with whom Pignatelli was exchanging his views about that precarious situation of Malta was new to his office; he was Cardinal Pancirolo. 48 This Cardinal, during that catastrophic situation, did not propose any solution that could relieve the Maltese; he just expressed his sympathy and compassion for the problems of that difficult period. 49

In search of divine and human aid

Bread was being distributed in the Auberges; but from 4th January, 1648, no one was permitted to receive more than five small loaves a day. Besides during that period of penury, those who used to have their meals in the Auberges had to sacrifice one-fourth of their personal necessary food provisions for the common welfare. 50

The Grand Master and the Council were of the same opinion as Mgr. Pignatelli. The Island could not resist for many more days. As a result, the crews on board the galleys and all those who served on land began to receive a daily ration of two small loaves of bread that weighed about one pound each. Instead of the third loaf to which they were entitled, they received an equivalent in cash. The Captains of the galleys did not continue to receive their usual six loaves; during a period of a common need, they had to be satisfied with just two loaves and either half a rotolo of rice or its equivalent in cash. 51

48. Just few months before, and exactly up to the end of 1646, Cardinal Pamphilii, a nephew of Pope Innocent X, was the Secretary of State. In his duties, he had been soft and sluggish because he was more inclined to poetry and arts than to Religion and politics. Soon, during Pignatelli's period in Malta, he deposed his cardinal robe to marry the noble Olympia Aldobrandini, princess of Rossano. Then, Pope Innocent X substituted him with Cardinal Pancirolo: see: I. Ciampi, Innocenzo X Pamphilii e la sua corte. Storia di Roma dal 1644 al 1655 da nuovi documenti, Roma 1878, pp. 122-132; P. Piccolomini, Corrispondenza tra la Corte di Roma e l'Inquisitore di Malta in A.S.I., t.41 1908, p.47.

49 “Essendo materia pertinente a questo Monsignor Illustissimo Tesoriere quella di cui Vostra Signoria ha voluto per sua cortesia dar anco parte a me con le due sue lettere delli 4 del passato, ne ho prudentemente ragguagliato Monsignor sudetto, alla risposta del quale mi rimetto, compatendo molto all'angustia dei viveri nei quali Vostra Signoria mi significa trovarsì cotesta Isola per quella scarsezza di raccolto che fu univerale l'anno passato”: A.S.V., S.S.Malta, ms.82. ff.26v-27r.

50 “Die eadem (January 4,1648)... hanno ordinato et commandato che d'hoggi inanzi non si dia a nessuno nell'Albergie, etiandio a quelli che magnano nell'antianità, se non cinque pani ordinari al giorno, e con altro simile scrutinio senza discrepanza hanno parimente ordinato e commandato, ch'a i tavolanti, durante la presente penuria si tratenga pro rata il quarto del frumento solito darsi a essi tavolanti, al quali si rifarà detto quarto quando s'haverà frumento a sofficienza”: N.L.M., Arch., ms.258, f.108v

51. “Die septima mensis Januarii 1647 (1648) ab incarnatione... hanno deliberato et ordinato che durante la presente penuria si dia tanto alle ciurme di terra quanto a quelle delle galere due pani di sedici onze l'uno al giorno solamente, et in luogo
When human means did not prove enough to banish from Malta the terrible plague of famine, the Knights and the Maltese met together to beseech the intercession of God. On January 4, 1648, the same day that the Inquisitor had asked for help from Rome, the Council of the Knights of Malta ordered that a procession take place from the Conventual Church of St. John. Devoutly carrying all the relics of Saints, they implored God to shower his favours on Malta. 52

In the meantime, on January 8, four galleys of the Order were about to leave the harbour for Civitavecchia. Before weighing anchor, they were given further instructions. They were not to proceed up to Civitavecchia if not in case of necessity. If, on their way and particularly near Sicily, they were to be lucky enough to meet a favourable occasion, they could spend the winter there without proceeding any further. 53 Four days after, on January 12, 1648, the galley San Francesco was ordered to leave harbour; it had to be very well armed and make towards Sicily in quest of vessels laden with wheat. Four other frigates were sent to other coasts. 54

Malta relieved through manifest divine help

The Island needed at least 800 salme of grains. The captain of the galley San Francesco received an order that, on their arrival in Sicily, if any small vessel carrying wheat passed by, it had to be conducted to Malta in the company of just one trustworthy member of the crew from abroad the Maltese galley. If they had to meet a considerable cargo of grain, the Captain himself was given the charge to lead it to Malta. 55

The galley left the harbour towards the Sicilian shores. It was, however,
A STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL 1647-1648

lucky enough that, at a distance of about 20 miles away from Ma'ta, they met a large freighter laden with 2,000 salme of grains. The freighter had heavily laden its goods in Puglie. They implored them in vain to sell their provisions to the Maltese. They, therefore, pursued them and, at the same time, found a way to inform the Grand Master and the Council. The authorities in Malta, without any hesitation, sent other galleys to help. In the meantime, the Captain did not cease from doing his best to persuade the captain of that freighter to enter the Maltese harbour. 56

The other Maltese galleys arrived on the spot, and tried to help by pursuing that vessel. Unexpectedly, a great tempest arose, and that vessel heavily laden with grains, unwillingly sought refuge in our harbour. The Grand Master and the Council decreed that the Knights and the Maltese unload all the cargo of that freighter; everything had to be used for the public need of the island. Through that unexpected food provision, Malta, on January 20, 1648, was relieved from the imminent danger of perishing through famine. 57

The following day, a "Te Deum" as a thanksgiving to God was sung in the Conventual Church of St. John in Valletta. All the population deemed the fact as a miracle of Divine Providence. In fact, the freighter entered the harbour only because of the tempest. Probably, its pursuit by the Maltese galleys would have been inefficient. All the Maltese were also ordered to take part in a general procession and participate in the recitation of the Divine Office and in a celebration of a Holy Mass for the repose of the souls in purgatory. All

galera verso Capo Passaro... vi ritirirete a Porto Palo aspettando che con formenti o altre vettovaglie passino vasselli, i piccoli dell' quali a carico di persona pratica c'inviere te subito che il tempo lo permetta, dando poi voi medesimo il capo ad alcuno più grosso, che potessi capitare, avvertendo che il presente nostro bisogno sarebbe d'arrivare davanti ottocento o mille salme in circa": Ib., f.109v.

56. "Die decima quinta mensis Januarii 1647 (1648)... Ventì miglia al mare alla terza ampolletta della seconda guardia haveva incontrato uno di due mila salme, che ha caricato in Puglia, e ch'havendolo invitata a venir in Malta, s'havea messo in armi, et egli con la galera l'andava seguendo, L'Eminentissimo e Reverendissimo Signor Gran Maestro et il sudetto Venerando Consiglio... hanno deliberato et ordinato che subito parta la pollacca destinata per andare a caricare a Seculiana... per sollicitare il Capitano di detto vassello a venir in porto": Ib., f.111v.

57. "Die XX Januarii 1647 (1648). Stante ch'il vassello di frumento (in busca del quale sotto li quindecì del corrente si mandorno altri di questo porto) entrò hieri obbligato dal tempo quando meno s'aspettava, l'Eminentissimo e Reverendissimo Signor Gran Maestro et il Venerando Consiglio, con lo scrutinio delle palle senza nessuna discrepanza, hanno deliberato et ordinato che si piglii per servitio publico tutto quello che detto vassello porta": Ib., f.111r.
the inhabitants of the Island thanked God that, once again, Malta, through evident divine help, was relieved in its urgent necessities. 58

58. "Die XX mensis Januarii 1647 (1648)… unanimi voto hanno ordinato che oltre l'haversi hieri cantato l'orinno 'Te Deum laudamus pro gratiarum actione, del beneficio miracolosamente ricevuto nella venuta di detto vassello forzato solo dal tempo contrario, si facci una processione generale, et un Officio e Messa de Morti per le benedette anime del Purgatorio": Ib.

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