The Monumental Church of Nadur

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Introduction

Nadur is one of the larger villages of Gozo. Yet up to mid-nineteenth century, its territory was more than double its present extent. It still included the bordering villages of Qala and Ghajnsielem with Mgarr Harbour. Even Comino, lying in the narrow channel that separates Malta from Gozo, was considered to be in the territory of Nadur.

Nature has been extremely generous to Nadur. The village stands on top of a magnificent plateau some 160 meters above sea level. The name itself recalls a centuries old tradition. It derives from the fact that, in olden times, sentries watched day and night in order that no vessel might dare invade our islands with hostile intentions. The coat of arms of Nadur is a sun rising from a blue sea on a gold field. As Nadur lies to the east of the island, the most beautiful aurora can be observed from its heights. It is also for this reason that Nadur can be called the village of the rising sun. Its motto is inspired by the toponym – Vigilat, that is Vigilant. Gozo and beyond can be observed and guarded from Nadur.

Erection of the Parish

Today, the main attraction of Nadur is undoubtedly its magnificent Basilica dedicated to the apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul. This wonderful monumental temple evokes to memory centuries of old historical facts.

Over 300 years ago, in 1688, the Bishop of Malta and Gozo Davide Cocco-Palmeri (1684 – 1711) created four new parishes for Gozo. One of them was that of Nadur. At that time, in the heart of the village there was no church that was big enough for parochial functions for over 500 inhabitants. The only church that still existed up to some years before, was that of St John the Baptist, in the area known as It-Targa tan-Nadur, on the outskirts of the village, when one goes down towards Victoria via the present Rabat Road, locally referred to as Triq Tax-Xajma. By 1630, it was in a disastrous structural state, and it had to be closed down.

For some years, under the care of the first parish priest of Nadur, Bernard Haber (1689 – 1705), the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in the
outskirts of Qala, but in the territory of Nadur, carried all parochial duties. Not later than 1695, a new parochial church, dedicated to the Princes of the Apostles was constructed, as decreed in the document of the erection of the parish, on top of the Nadur hill.

According to legend, a donkey, loaded with stones, owned by a holy man named Girgor Buttigieg, pointed out the site where the church was to be built, by stopping stubbornly on the highest top of the Nadur hill.

In truth however, the church’s site was determined by a generous donation of the ground on which it stands by Grand Master Gregorio Carafa (1680 – 1690). In fact, the site was described by Bishop Cocco-Palmeri himself more than a year before the election of the first parish priest of Nadur.

A Monumental Church

The population of Nadur increased without any interruption. After less than a century since the decree of Bishop Cocco-Palmeri, it was more than three times as much. The first parochial church resulted to be too small for the residents of the parish of Nadur, with its territory extending to the present villages of Xewkija and Xaghra, nearly a third of the area of the eastern part of Gozo. In a period of poverty, Parish Priest Salvatore Galea (1743 – 1778) engaged the Maltese architect Giuseppe Bonnici (1707 – 1779) a Capomastro of the Order, who was employed on various projects erected by the Knights of St. John, such as the Castellania in Valletta, the two fountains in Palace Square, Valletta, and his masterpiece, the Custom House in the Valletta Marina in the Grand Harbour, to prepare plans for the building of a new and much bigger church on the same site as the first one.

Bonnici was also involved in the re-modelling of the interior and the facade of the church of St Publius in Floriana, the churches of Saint Augustine, Santa Barbara and that known as

The Nadur Parish Church.
Ta’ Leisse, all in Valletta, the church of the Immaculate Conception in Cospicua and the church of Saint Bartholomew in Tarxien. It is rumoured that Bonnici made use of a model of the church designed by Fra Giuseppe Grech, a lay Capuchin, who also designed the churches and convents, belonging to his Order, namely that of Santa Liberata in Kalkara, Malta, and that of Our Lady of Graces, on the outskirts of Victoria, Gozo, on the way to Marsalforn.

Construction on the church began on 28 September 1760. Its foundation stone was laid on 17 December of that year. The master mason was Mikielangelo Pisano who unfortunately, died while the church was only half finished. This new church, built in the form of a Latin cross, unaisled and with a three-bay nave, the choir and two transepts, had a two-storeyed facade. Two belfry towers were attached to the arms of the transepts. Construction dragged on for forty-four years. It was blessed on 24 June 1804 by the next parish priest Francis Sapiano (1778 – 1812), and consecrated on 12 May 1867 by the Apostolic Administrator (1867) of the newly erected diocese of Gozo, Mgr Paolo Micallef.

Soon after, the church was granted the title of a Collegiate in 1894, Archpriest John Camilleri (1881 – 1910), planned for its enlargement. In 1882, the same archpriest had brought from Marseille in France, a beautiful titular statue made of papier-maché, by the firm Galard et Fils, that represents the patron saints of Nadur.

Archpriest Camilleri, with the help of his nephew Martin Camilleri who was to succeed him as archpriest, decided on enlarging the church to its present form, by the construction of the aisles, dome and facade, all designed by the Maltese architect Francesco Saverio Sciortino (1875 – 1958). This work was carried out between 1906 and 1914. The cross crowning the dome was placed
on 24 September 1913. The whole masonry work was finished in 1914. The harmony in style and proportion of the whole church hides the fact that it was designed in two separate parts. The Nadur church can be described as an architectural gem on the Italian Renaissance style on its exterior and splendid baroque in its interior.

The Interior Decoration

The paintings of the main vault of the church, the choir, the two transepts, the four pendentives, the dome and in both side aisles are the work of the Maltese painter Lazzaro Pisani (1854 – 1932). They have as their theme a phrase from St. Paul’s Apostle in the first letter to the Corinthians; *Spectalulum facti sumus mundo, angelis et hominibus* (1 Cor: 4,9). This phrase, selected by Archpriest Martin Camilleri (1910 – 1921), who was the mind behind the grandiose extension and decoration, is written in the frieze inside the dome and means: “We have become a spectacle to the universe, the angels and man alike”. Inside the dome there are paintings and eight stained-glass windows in honour of the Apostles Peter and Paul.

The four pendentives represent the four continents, namely: Europe – shown in the figure of Emperor Constantine with the miraculous vision of the Cross; Asia – by St Francis Xavier baptizing a baby; Africa – by St Mark the Evangelist preaching to the natives and America – by Christopher Colombo showing the Cross to the pagans. The vault and both transepts are adorned with paintings depicting episodes that refer to the life of St. Peter and St. Paul. The apsidal cap of the organ at the rear represents the apostles Peter and Paul in their glory as judges of the Gentiles.

There are fifteen stained-glass windows – twelve of these represents the twelve apostles – in the nave, transepts and choir. These are flanked by paintings of popes, martyrs and doctors of the Church.

The architectural decorations and ornate sculpture are the work of the Roman sculptor and decorator Pio Cellini (1863 – 1930) who has other works of art in various churches in Malta, besides those in Rome, Spain and the United Kingdom.
The colour scheme of the interior of the church is pleasant and harmonious. The vault and pendentives above the main cornice are gilded and painted in such manner to be in tune with the lower parts. From the floor to the main cornice, the interior is encased in beautiful marble. This embellishment in the 1960’s was done during the term of office of Archpriest Mgr Michael Portelli (1951 – 1982). Of the same period is the pulpit, designed by Oscar Testa, another beautiful work of art in marble, depicting the story of our salvation. In the lower section there are our first parents, Adam and Eve, who brought sin and death into the world. This is shown in the lifeless and leafless trunk of the tree. In the middle section there are the twelve apostles who preached the gospel. Finally, in its upper section, there is the resurrected Christ, victor over death and author of our salvation.

Altar Paintings

In the centre of the choir there is the titular painting showing the encounter of the Apostles Peter and Paul in the Roman underground prison of Mamertino prior to their martyrdom. The author of this painting is unknown but we are assured that this belongs to the school of Mattia Preti. It has been attributed to Gio Paolo Chiesa, a pupil of Preti. The two large lateral paintings in the choir are the work of Don Carlo Zimech, a Maltese priest who hailed from Haż-Żebbuġ. Other painters who have altar pieces in the Nadur church are Don Francesco de Dominici, Rocco Buhagiar, Demetrio Farrugia, Gianni Vella and Giuseppe D’Arena, known as “Il Romano”.

The main altar, in the centre of the presbytery is the work of the Maltese artist Emvin Cremona (1919 – 1987) representing the typology of the Eucharistic sacrifice. Around the altar there are four episodes from the Old Testament depicting different types of sacrifices. On the anterior of the altar are the marble figures of Abel and Cain and that of Abraham offering his son Isaac. On its posterior we find Noah after the deluge, offering his sacrifice and the High Priest Melchisedech offering bread and wine.
On an altar in the south transept, there is the ‘corpo santo’ (holy relic) of Saint Coronato Martyr. This relic, of an unknown victim of the harsh church persecutions in Rome, in the early years of the history of the church, was donated to the parish priest in 1763, and has since then been given a pride of place by being venerated on top of an altar, rather than placed underneath it. The parish named this martyr the secondary patron of Nadur.

Throughout the years, the parish of Nadur received many titles, namely: a matrice or mother-church when the parish of Ghajnsielem (1855) and then Qala (1872) were dismembered from its territory. It became the seat of the third Collegiate of the Diocese of Gozo on 19 September 1894. Nine months earlier, on 19 December 1893 the parish priest was bestowed with the title of Archpriest. The parish church was granted the title of a minor Basilica on 26 June 1967.

Two distinguished personages, Michele Francesco Buttigieg (the first Bishop of the new diocese of Gozo) and Archpriest Saverio Cassar (head of a provisional government during the French occupation), were born in the territory of Nadur, and baptized in this parochial church.

**Conclusion**

“No history of Maltese architecture would be complete without an honourable mention of the parish church dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul of Nadur, Gozo”, wrote Leonard Mahoney in his book ‘5000 years of Architecture in Malta’.

The twenty-eight metre high dome rising harmoniously on the Gozo skyline plays a crucial part in the composition of our monumental church and catches the eye of local and foreign travellers being ferried between Malta and Gozo. The shape of the dome, a landmark for Gozo, was the first in our islands and paved the way for other architects to copy or imitate.

It is worth mentioning that an artistic photograph of the facade of our monumental church is exhibited at the Imperial Institute of London – a living witness to the many visitors from great and big nations that even in a small village on a tiny Mediterranean island called Gozo, one finds a monumental work of art that is as worthy as those find in places and cities more bigger and famous than Nadur.

This monumental church, built through the generosity and faith of our forefathers, is clearly no less the pride of the present day parishioners. May our patrons, Saint Peter and Saint Paul, from their celestial abode, shower on our parish abundance of heavenly grace to help us continue in our walk of faith as we have done for these last 324 years.

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Ceiling painting in the Nadur church.

Joseph Muscat qualified as a Registered Mental Nurse in Shenley Hospital, near Radlett, Hertfordshire, UK, in 1968. He also has a Diploma in Psychiatric Nursing from the University of Malta (1992). Before he retired, he was a Departmental Nursing Manager at the Gozo General Hospital. Presently he does voluntary work in the Nadur Parish Office.