

The Xaghra Monumental Church*

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Introduction

The village of Xaghra stands on a sprawling plateau which has been inhabited since prehistoric times. Evidence of this are the prehistoric remains that were discovered at various sites around the village. Most important and well-known amongst these are the Neolithic temples of Ġgantija. These temples, dating to 3600B.C., are among the oldest, if not the oldest free-standing structures on Earth. The Ġgantija temples are older than the pyramids of Egypt. Since 1980, they have been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The earliest inhabitants of the plateau were of course farmers and herders who chose the area for their settlement as it overlooks one of the

most fertile slopes and plains of the island with fresh-water springs which still survive today. It is believed that they erected this place of worship in their midst to make offerings and honour their dieties. The complex structure of Ġgantija, the excellent state of preservation of its materials - hard chalky coralline and the softer globigerina limestone - make it an excellent example of megalithic prehistoric art and architecture. The huge megaliths used in the building earned it the name of Ġgantija, derived from the Maltese for 'giant', reflecting the lore that the temples were built by giants.

With the coming of Christianity, various small chapels cropped up all over the village. These were generally erected by well-to-do families who were given permission by religious authorities to build these places of worship and endow them with benefices for their upkeep. Unfortunately, with the passing of centuries and due to other circumstances, many of these chapels fell into disuse and neglect, leading to their collapse and eventual disappearance. Among the reasons suggested were the frequent raids by corsairs who infested the Mediterranean and who chose



View of the interior of the Basilica, decorated for the titular feast of 8th September.



Church of St Anthony the Abbot that served as the first parish church.

*Adapted from: Refalo Rapa, J. (1969). *The Xaghra Monumental Church*. Gozo, The Orphans Press, pp. 116.

the bays of Marsalforn, Ghajn Barrani and Ramla as convenient landing places when they needed supplies of water and food. Very often, this included the plunder of anything that came their way, and worse still, inhabitants were carried off as slaves. This forced our earliest predecessors to move further inland and venture out only to tend their crops.

The First Parish Church

Around the 13th century, the rise in population of the village led the well-known Gozitan Noble family of Camire and Ħinzi to build a chapel in honour of Saint Anthony the Abbot at the area commonly known as Tal-Qaċċa. Thanks to constant care and maintenance by successive rectors, this old chapel still exists and still serves as a very active place of worship and liturgy for those who live in that area. In January of each year, a feast is celebrated in honour of the saint, and this includes a ceremony of the blessing of animals and pets brought over by their owners from all over the island.

As the village population was on the increase, on the 28th April 1667, the residents officially forwarded a petition to the then Bishop, Davide Cocco Palmieri, asking that their village be raised to the status of a Parish. This wish was granted a year later on the 28th April 1668, through the Apostolic Decree Cum in Prima with the Reverend Bernard Formosa from Rabat as the first parish priest. The Chapel of St Anthony the Abbot served as the first parish church.

The Present Parish Church

The earliest beginnings

The parishioners at the request of the Bishop started planning to build a new parish church which would better serve the population. This was to be constructed in the centre of the village on public land donated by Fra Gregorio Carafa, the Grand Master of the Order of Saint John. Some Sicilians residing in Xaghra helped the locals in building a larger place of worship at the site of the present church choir. This earned it the



The Parish Church of Xaghra before the dome was added.

nickname of ‘Tal-Isqallin’ (The Sicilians’). It was completed and started to function on 12th May 1692. At first it was dedicated to Our Lady of Divine Grace, but soon afterwards, on October 9th of the same year, it was dedicated to the Nativity of Our Lady.

Under the leadership of successive parish priests the people of Xagħra did their best to embellish their church and to adorn it with paintings, statues and liturgical objects. Several silver articles from the time survived the pillaging by Napoleon’s troops only due to the foresight of the then parish priest father Vincenzo Cauchi who advised the sextons to bury all precious objects. Unfortunately the scrupulous conscience of one of the sextons made him remove a silver effigy of Our Lady from its hiding-place and so it fell easy prey to the greedy soldiers.

The parish church as we know it

In 1813, Parish Priest Cauchi, at the venerable age of eighty, urged his 1200 parishioners to help him raise funds for the building of a larger church. Fr. Cauchi himself donated the first 500 Scudi while the plan was designed free of charge by his nephew, priest-architect Don Salvatore Bondi. The idea was to build a larger church at



The Basilica of Xagħra.

the site of the old one and then demolish the old part as soon as the new edifice was completed. However, events did not turn out so smoothly for the villagers. Soon after the laying of the foundation stone, plague broke out on March 17th 1814. In the course of this outbreak that only hit Xagħra, and which lasted until the 26th of July, 104 persons died, amongst whom were the Parish Priest and the sexton. The plague brought not only death, but poverty and misery. The new parish priest, Father Frangisku Gafà, tried to proceed with the construction works, but decided to distribute to the poor, the funds earmarked for building expenses. He himself died destitute on February 15th 1823.

Construction works got under way again under the new parish priest, Fr Michael Buttigieg, from Qala, who served the parish for 25 years before being moved to Rabat, and eventually was to become the first Bishop of Gozo. Fr Buttigieg himself donated 2100 Scudi, while 4731 Scudi were donated personally by the Bishop of Malta, Mgr Publio Maria dei Conti Sant who also passed on another 1000 Scudi accumulated from a vacant



Fr Michele Buttigieg, 7th Parish Priest of Xagħra and later first Bishop of Gozo.

post of Canon. The old church was pulled down on November 20th 1850 and part of the new church started to be used for religious services. The blessing ceremony was held on August 10th 1851 and Pro-Vicar Canon Tomaso Pace officiated.

The whole new structure was completed by February 14th 1855 when it was ceremoniously blessed by the Vicar General, Mgr Vincenzo Chapelle. In all, it had taken 40 years to build, and involved a lot of voluntary work by the parishioners. It was consecrated by the Bishop of Gozo, Mgr Pietro Pace. (By this time Gozo had become a diocese separate from Malta, and Mgr Pace was the third Bishop of Gozo).

Building of the dome

The parish church which the villagers were so proud of, was still without a dome. It was the 11th parish priest and first archpriest of Xagħra, Fr Giuseppe Diacono, who coordinated this arduous task. Work was entrusted to Wigi Vella, a master mason from Żebbuġ who finished the work in six months' time. Again, the people of Xagħra contributed handsomely in funds and voluntary work. An interesting anecdote goes that every morning, on their way to church, each man, woman or child carried something: a stone, some sifted soil, or a pail of water and left it in front of the church to be used by the builders during the day. When extra hands were needed, the church bell would sound and that was the signal for willing men to meet at the church and help. This was in effect the first cupola to be built in

Gozo, both in design and in height. Eventually, in 1957 the cupola lantern was refurbished, because erosion had rendered certain areas dangerous. The result was a higher and more aesthetically acceptable dome.

In 1913, the same parish priest, urged by the parishioners made further additions to the church building. Two domed chapels, one on each side of the high altar were built. One was dedicated to the blessed Sacrament and the other to the Holy Crucifix. Small domes on each side-chapel in the aisles running along the sides of the church were also built. The mason in charge was a local, Giuseppe Azzopardi, and the architect was Ugo Mallia. The six chapels along the aisles are dedicated to Saint Laurence, the Blessed Virgin Mary of Light, the Shipwreck of Saint Paul, Saint Maurice, Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Our Lady of Victories (Il-Bambina), while the altars in the transepts are dedicated to St Joseph and Our Lady of the Rosary.

Paintings Found in the Parish Church

The Parish church of Xagħra boasts the works of several well-known artists.

The main altar-piece, dated 1744, showing the birth of Mary, is the work of Carlo Gimach and has been recently restored.

Rokku Buhagiar produced the painting of Our Lady of the Rosary (1767), the altarpiece in the right transept.



The recently-restored small domes and lunettes in the left apse (Virginio Monti).



The main altar-piece showing the birth of Mary (Carlo Gimach).

Francesco Zahra painted the two altar-pieces showing Our Lady of the Carmel and Our lady of Divine Light. (Around 1770)

Giuseppe Bonnici left us the two paintings hanging in the left transept, one showing the Flight to Egypt and the other, the Dream of St Joseph. (1857)

In the opposite transept, Antonio Falzon has the two corresponding paintings, one showing the Crowning of Mary, and the other the Annunciation. (1861)

One of the most notable artists whose works grace the church is Giuseppe Cali (August 14, 1846 – March 1, 1930). Cali, a Maltese painter, was born in Valletta of Neapolitan parents and educated at the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Naples under Giuseppe Mancinelli. He was a prolific artist: almost every church of any consequence in Malta boasts a work of his. He was commemorated with a series of four postage stamps in 1996, and a coin in 2004. He left us three masterpieces. In 1894, he painted the two lateral paintings in the church choir, one showing the presentation of Our Lady



Choir Apse. Nativity of Mary. (Giuseppe Cali, 1921).



Right apse. Battle of Lepanto (Virginio Monti, 1923).

at the Temple, and the other The Immaculate Conception. In 1921 he produced the magnificent picture in the choir apse, which took him fifteen months to finish.

The altar-pieces of the Martyrdom of St Lawrence and the Arrival of St Paul are both by Cali's son, Ramiro. He painted these in 1915.

In 1918, Ganni Vella painted the altar-piece in the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament and it shows the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

To Virginio Monti (1852 -1942) a well-known Italian artist whose works are found all over Italy, in London and even in the U.S., was entrusted the huge task of painting the church ceiling, the dome, the small domes, various lunettes and other paintings in the choir and the two side-chapels, and last but not least the apses on the left and right transepts as well as that above the main door. In all, there are 112 paintings by this artist or his bottega, accomplished between 1922 and 1932. We shall not list all these, but one cannot but mention the two apses in the transepts, one depicting the thanksgiving of Grandmaster La Vallette after the siege of Malta of 1565, and the other the Battle of Lepanto of 1571.

Virginio Monti was also responsible for the design of a set of twenty stained glass windows which were eventually produced by an Italian



One of the stations of the Via Crucis. Picture is in Mosaico Veneziano (Ditta Favret, Pietrasanta, 1962).

firm and won the first prize at an international fair held at Bari.

Statues, Marble Works and Other Works of Art or Precious Objects in the Basilica

Amongst the things that strike the eye when one enters the Xaghra parish church are the marble works all over the place: marble flooring and marble altars, marble balustrades and also various marble statues. A beautiful marble pulpit replaced a wooden one in 1955, commemorating the first centenary of the blessing of the church. All walls and pillars are covered in marble inlaid with gold. The pictures forming the Via Crucis are made of "Mosaico Veneziano" in a marble frame. The marble organ loft is itself a veritable work of art.

Of course, as one would expect, there are a good number of statues for the devotions of the parishioners. A wooden statue of Our Lady of the Rosary, by Natale Morello dates from 1849. It was recently restored and can be found in its niche in the church sacristy. The devotion to the

Passion of Our Lord prompted the acquisition of a whole set of statues depicting various moments of the Passion. Eight of these form the original set ordered in 1914 from the Italian firm Luigi Guacci. Two statues that earn the admiration of all, both produced in France by the firm Galard & Fils are those of St Joseph and the Bambina. The latter is of course the titular statue, since the church is dedicated to her and the titular feast held each year centres around the devotion to the Nativity of Our Lady. This is popularly known as Our Lady of Victories since at various points in our Nation's history, we have witnessed the intercession of Our Lady on or near the day of the celebration of her birthday. This beautiful statue was crowned with gold and precious stones at a solemn ceremony in 1973, a hundred years from its arrival in Xaghra.

Various gold and silver objects are also present, most of them connected with the liturgy and rightly so. Some of these treasures date from the 18th century. The parishioners were always blessed with saintly parish priests who passed on



Our Lady of the Rosary (Wood, Allesandro Farrugia, 1849).



Jesus crowned with thorns. One of the original set of eight statues brought over in 1914. (Ditta Luigi Guacci, Lecce).



Titular statue of the Bambina (Galard et Fils, Marseilles, 1873).



Solid silver tabernacle, design by Romano Buttigieg (Flli. Germonio, Varese, 1967).

solid values. Jesus in the Eucharist was and still is, as it should be, the focus of our faith, as we believe that He is the Master of the House. In fact back in 1830, even when burdened with building expenses, they still ordered a gilded door for the tabernacle. In 1967, through the initiative of Fr Benjamin Attard, a solid silver tabernacle was installed in the chapel dedicated to the Blessed Eucharist and where Adoration is organised on a daily basis.

The Parish Church of Xaghra enjoys various honours bestowed on it along the years. It was created a Collegiate in 1898 and the canons enjoyed the privilege of wearing a pectoral cross. The parish priest was to be called an Archpriest. In March 1963, Pope John XXIII bestowed the title of Apostolic Protonotary on the parish Archpriest, with the title of Monsignor. Pope Paul VI raised the Collegiate Church of Xaghra to the status of a Basilica on August 26th 1967. On 8th September 2003, the Basilica became spiritually affiliated to the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, thus having the same privileges of this major Basilica, including several plenary indulgences on special Marian feasts.

Conclusion

As the clock on the church facade which was assembled in 1885 by the Maltese clock-maker Mikelang Sapiano, still tirelessly strikes the quarters and the hours, let us pray and hope that the hearts of the parishioners of the Bambina will keep on loving God and the Bambina as tirelessly and fervently as those of their forefathers.

Fr Julian Refalo Rapa was born in Xaghra in 1924. After the death of his wife, he started a 4-year course at Beda College, Rome which led to his ordination to the priesthood in 1991.