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## The Maltese *Festa*

### A Historical and Cultural Perspective

It is a fact that Christianity was well-rooted in Malta by the time the Order of St John arrived in 1530. In earlier centuries there was usually an absentee Bishop, apart from some religious orders and institutions together with a Tribunal of the Inquisition usually presided over by the Vicar-General of the diocese responsible for the island's spiritual needs. The attachment of the Maltese community to the Church was so great that it often enabled the diocese to act as a separate, if not an independent entity in Malta, throughout the rule of the order of St John. Such a situation was attained practically in all pre-industrial societies where religion has always been looked upon as a symbolic code of communication and a focus for social organization. In fact, organized religions have generally always had to come to terms with the existent economic and cultural divisions of society (Smith 1986: 26-29).

#### **Religion and the people**

The rural aspects of life conditioned the way people perceived time and space. Every activity, including time, was seemingly saturated with religion. The divisions of night and day remained largely ecclesiastical. It was the church bells that proclaimed a succession of prayers and services from morning to evening at recognized hours. It was customary to refer to the hours of the day in relation to the striking of church bells. Even the calendar spoke the Christian language everybody understood (Cassar 1993a: 444). Religion surrounded food with rules, rituals, and prohibitions and was eaten

partly on the Church's orders. People ate fat or lean according to whether the Church said so or not (Cassar 1993a: 445). Some may have rejected the over-dogmatizing attitude of the clergy, yet – Christianity was the major popular force for the early modern Maltese. Indeed, religion had very little to do with the theorization of norms and the so-called 'guilt culture'. Popular religion had much more to do with semi-magical practices, such as healing, divination, the evil-eye and love charms (Cassar 1993b, 1996, 2000b). Efforts on the part of the Catholic Church to eliminate such practices did not really succeed so that some forms of magical beliefs, like healing and trust in charms against the evil eye persisted into the twentieth century (Cassar-Pullicino 1947b: 35). The hold exerted by religion was perhaps related to the insecurity of life. As a salvation religion dealing with life after death, Christianity offered an escape from damnation in the all too likely event of a sudden or early death. This obsessive anxiety focusing on death reflects how people looked at it. Death was a phenomenon that pervaded early modern society and was a major talking point in both theological and political thinking among all sectors of society. The fragility of human life, widespread malnutrition, economic hardship, frequent famine and epidemic, influenced the religious life of the people in profound ways.

The cult of saints was particularly strong among the masses of the population. The Counter Reformation firmly restated the usefulness of invoking saints (Burke 1987: ch. 5). Devotion to the Virgin Mary increased in intensity, while some new saints emerged as well documented popular hero figures. Vincent de Paul exemplified compassion for the poor, orphans and prisoners; Charles Borromeo stood for personal ascetism and service to the poor, especially during plague epidemics (Mosse 1970: 171, 182). Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier, and Philip Neri were also assimilated in Maltese cults.

In the early seventeenth century, the cult of St Paul was further boosted, partly thanks to the presence on the island of the Spaniard Juan Beneguas, who revived the veneration for St Paul's Crypt (Azzopardi 1990: 69, 77, 80, 85, 157-158, 160-161, 165, 167-168, 195, 221, 232, 249-250, 356; Freller 1996: ch. 3), and partly to the foundation of the Jesuit College in Valletta in 1592. The Jesuits promoted studies on the Pauline cult where the Apostle's role as protector of the Maltese was particularly stressed (Borg 1978: 237-257; Ciappara 1989: 145-156). Other saints, notably Publius and Agatha, were venerated as co-patrons of the Maltese diocese. By the early eighteenth century,

the patrons of various parish churches were venerated at the parochial level, thus becoming symbols of their respective parishes. Meanwhile, the veneration towards the patron saint of the island, St Paul, grew so strong that by 1700 the Council of the Maltese commune issued edicts with such invocations as 'In the name of God, and the Glorious Apostle St Paul, our Protector' (NLM 23: fol. 13v: 29 Sep. 1701).

No saint was nearer to God, however, than the Virgin Mary, acclaimed by the fifth century Church as 'Mother of God' (*Theotokos*). With this concept the Church developed the Hail Mary (*Ave Maria*) into a prayer to be especially recited during times of great distress. So popular was the *Ave Maria* that its periodical recitation became a recognized way of measuring time (Thompson 1967: 58). Thus the Church involved itself in everything, both in the Middle Ages and even more so after the Council of Trent concluded in 1563 (Febvre 1982: 349; Cassar 2000c: ch. 8). In Malta the Jesuit College ensured the domination of religion over education.

Even the calendar spoke the Christian language everybody understood. Thomaso Xiberras pointed out that he had entered a tavern at the time when the church bells struck the *Pater Noster*, while Rosa Cumbo referred to a particular point in time in this way: 'Yesterday evening, after supper, around the striking of the first *Ave Maria*' (NAM MCC 23: 25, 31 Oct. 1708). Festa days were linked to various collective activities. Andrea Zammit of Żurrieq specified the time he was talking of as Easter time, the time the cotton crop matures (NAM MCC 611 fol. 133: 23 Nov. 1699). Vincenzo Mifsud referred to the olive harvest as the period after the *festa* of Our Lady of the Rosary (NAM MCC: 1706-1707 fol. 31). In essence the unity of the various strata of the population was possible through the profound ties of all the inhabitants – except the majority of slaves who were mainly Muslim – to the Roman Catholic Church. Malta was close to a theocracy as the three separate jurisdictions on the island – the Grand Master's, the Bishop's, and the Inquisitor's – all considered the Pope as their ultimate earthly head. The net result was that religion seeped deeply into all sectors of society with the clergy serving as the focus of social organization.

### **The social implications of processions**

The Maltese *festa* is normally associated with Malta's special attachment to the Catholic faith. Much has been said over the years

about the continuity of similar church festivals and one gets the impression that these changed very little over time. Indeed many associate *festa* celebration with an immemorial past strengthened by the general belief that similar manifestations are many centuries old and provide a link with Malta's past. But snippets of information from earlier periods provide us with a totally different picture. Traditions which appear to be ancient are often found to be quite recent in origin with some of them emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief period of time and established themselves with great rapidity (Hobsbawm 1983: 1).

The celebration of the *festa* as we know it began to emerge very slowly starting from the late sixteenth century but most of the modern day functions, especially the outdoor activities, with the exception of processions, may at the earliest be dated back to the late eighteenth century. Indeed most are much more recent. Nevertheless, it is the task of the historian to single out false continuities that emerge from the use of specific terminology to designate realities that differ from one epoch to the next. This is normal for all societies but one should perhaps be even more cautious in matters related to Catholic religious practices since the Catholic Church has tended to accentuate the permanence of its fundamental beliefs and its institutional framework over the centuries. Thus some may claim to know how a bishop exercised his role in antiquity, or a priest in the Middle Ages, by referring to those who exercise those functions in the church today (Gurevich 1988: ch. 2). However reasoning by analogy can easily lead to anachronism, particularly when identical words lead us to lose sight of changes that in some cases were considerably, if not outright, drastic. The development of the Maltese *festa* is possibly a case in point.

During the early years of the Order's stay in Malta the *festa* was a small affair. The elaborate and colourful manifestation of this Maltese tradition only began to emerge in the eighteenth century and reached its present form by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sporadic references to the celebration of the *festa* in the sixteenth century indicate that the activity was often celebrated thanks to the generosity of a local benefactor, and it often consisted mainly of the distribution of food or money among the poor of the village (Cassar-Pullicino 1956: 41). Mgr Pietro Dusina, in his Apostolic Visitation carried out between 1574-1575, reports that at the Church of *Santa Marija tal-Flajjar* in Luqa the rector

distributed unleavened bread – in Maltese *ftajjar* – to the poor (Micallef 1975: 32, 62). It appears that this kind of activity was customary in other villages. Georgio Tabone of Qormi, who served as sexton of the parish church of St George claimed that Don Vincentio Callus, the vice-rector, had not only introduced the Forty-hours devotion at the turn of the seventeenth century,<sup>1</sup> but he added that Don Vincentio distributed any alms that came his way. When these were in the form of bread – *guastelle di pasta*<sup>2</sup> – Don Vincentio kept a quarter of one *guastella* for himself and would then send Tabone to distribute it among the poor, blind and maimed of the village (AIM Crim. 23A case 299: fols. 217-18).

A reference to the celebration of the *festa* of St Agatha, given by the Apostolic Visitor, Mgr Pietro Dusina, gives the impression that some *festa* celebrations served primarily as merry-making activities. Mgr Dusina had learnt of the riotous merry-making which took place in the precincts of the church of St Agatha in Rabat (Malta) where a wake was kept all night long on the eve of the saint's *festa* (Pl. 5). The Apostolic Visitor ordered that, from then onwards, the gates of the church had to be kept closed one hour after sunset and thus avoid similar abuses (NLM 643: 56). Dusina's order can be interpreted in essence as an attempt to improve public morality and bring local religion under clerical control. But it was not only the issue of merry-making, which caused concern. There is also very early evidence of parish rivalries based on grounds of precedence between lay confraternities. Perhaps a most notable example is the one given by Alfredo Mifsud (1917-1918: 40 n. 1) which broke out between the parishes of Birkirkara and Naxxar in 1555.

<sup>1</sup> The Forty-hours devotion, known as *Quarant'hore*, was usually staged during the celebration of festas like carnival. The Jesuits and the Catholic Reformation Church encouraged such practices during non-Christian festivities. It consisted in the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament for forty continuous hours.

<sup>2</sup> In nineteenth-century Sicily the *guastelle* were a kind of flat bread which used to be filled with fresh cheese and other food items (*Nuovo vocabolario siciliano-italiano* 455). The eighteenth century Maltese erudite Gian Francesco Agius de Soldanis in his 'Damma tal Kliem Kartaginiz,' NLM, vol. 143 (i) fol. 214 refers to the *collura* which was popularly used by our ancestors and were still distributed to the people during the titular *festas* of saints (cf. Caruana 1903: 379). It may probably be assumed that the bread prepared in the villages was in the form of the modern *ftira*.

One interesting feature that emerges from the data discussed above is the fact that the sixteenth and seventeenth century Maltese spent much of their time in the company of others and tended to participate in collective activities at the local level. In the festivity of the Holy Rosary of 1664 the widow Mariuzza Istra of Valletta was watching a procession near the church of Our Lady of Porto Salvo (modern day Merchants' Street) in the company of Giuseppa, a woman with a dark complexion. While waiting for the procession to pass by Giuseppa asked Mariuzza how she was getting on. Mariuzza complained that she was having difficulties to cope with life. Giuseppa realised that Mariuzza was not having much luck with her lovers and suggested she should consult a sorcerer who could help her attract lovers (AIM Crim. 72A case 71, fol. 467: 15 Aug. 1664). The passing procession did not seem to evoke much piety in the two women, who kept talking about their private lives, but they still felt obliged to participate!

One of the oldest devotional festivities held in Malta is that of St Gregory. In 1647 Gian Francesco Abela explained that there were many different opinions about the origin of the feast of St Gregory but everyone agreed that it was established as a public vow by the Maltese. For this reason many believed that it originated after the Moorish siege of Mdina in 1429 when it was believed that St Paul appeared on a horse brandishing his sword against the terrified Moors (Abela 1647: 366). In 1847 Stefano Zerafa came up with a different proposal and suggested that the annual votive procession stemmed from a vow made to St Catherine by the faithful who congregated at the church of Zejtun during a terrible storm that hit Malta in 1343. Zerafa (1847: 10-11) opined that it was only at a later stage that the procession began to be associated with St Gregory. Despite these assumptions, modern research has shown that the procession was not formally organized until 1543 when Bishop Domenico Cubelles (1542-1566) ordered a pilgrimage of penance from the Cathedral at Mdina to the parish church of St Catherine at Zejtun. The pilgrimage was organized in order to seek Divine assistance for Pope Paul III (1534-1549) who was about to summon the Ecumenical Council of Trent to carry out the necessary reforms within the Catholic Church began to meet on 1 November 1542. The Council was also meant to bring harmony and peace among the Christian European powers (Fsadni 1974: 120, 258-259; AAM AO

fol. 62-65: 229-236).<sup>3</sup> By 1771 the celebration of the feast of St Gregory had become a Maltese tradition. In a dispute between the Bishop of Malta and the canons of the Collegiate Church of Birkirkara it was claimed that the feast of St Gregory, held each year at the parish of Żejtun on 12 March, formed part of Maltese tradition in which all the regular and secular clergy, as well as the clerics, were duty bound to participate. Bishop Pellerano (1770-1780) complained to Inquisitor and Apostolic Visitor Mgr Mancinforte (1767-1771) that all clergy showed him respect except for the canons of Birkirkara. These never kneeled or bowed their head in front of him and complained that despite his continuous pleas the Holy See never took action against them (AIM Civ. fol. 264-266: 11 Ap. 1771).

By and large processions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries feasts were mostly reserved for strictly devotional services and they often included the exposition of the sacrament. There is no evidence when the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament, established at the parish of Porto Salvo in Valletta, started to organise the feast of *Corpus Domini*. However, Michael Fsadni shows that the feast began to be celebrated some years after the publication of a brief issued by Pope Clement VIII on 8 March, 1592. In his brief the Pope gave permission to the Dominicans to hold a procession with the Eucharist on the Sunday following the feast of *Corpus Domini*. Fsadni shows convincingly that by 1598 the procession was already being organised as an annual event (Fsadni 1971: 88-89).<sup>4</sup>

By 1642 the feast of *Corpus Domini* was being celebrated outside Valletta. The criminal records of the Inquisition tribunal contain a document in which we learn that Vincenzo Garin of Vittoriosa accused the 23 year-old Jew Isach Elia of Salonica for refusing to lift his cap, in sign of respect, when a procession with the exposed sacrament passed by him. Three 'Turks' had very recently been whipped for a similar offence. Isach Elia was denounced to the Holy

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<sup>3</sup> The notarial deed of notary Vincentio Bonaventura de Bonetis was drawn at the Bishop's curia on 12 March, 1543 in front of a number of witnesses. (R(egister) 206/7 fol. 74-v).

<sup>4</sup> Several documents quoted by Fsadni show that the feast was already being organized in the late 1590s. He refers, amongst other, to a small sum of money left by Agostino Seychell, the Procurator of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament, to organize the feast (Fsadni 1971: 88-89).

Office after a discussion that took place in the shop of Mastro Bendo Barbara, owner of one of the punished 'Turks,' in the presence of a group of Jews which included Isach Elia. But the Jew was not disposed to worship something which meant nothing to him. Not only did he object to take off his cap but worse still Elia had the courage to declare that the Eucharist was not God. Elia was obviously denounced for sacrilege to the Holy Office but most probably his gravest mistake was that during the discussion he poked fun and ridiculed his accuser Garsin who took his revenge by reporting the matter to the Inquisition (AIM Crim. 56A case 325, fol. 488: 20 Jun. 1642). The compilation of evidence from several witnesses against him shows that the society of Maltese Christians showed no mercy for Elia. The Jew was found guilty of having shown disdain to the Eucharist and on 11 July he was sentenced to a public lashing in the Vittoriosa square (AIM Crim. 56A case 325, fol. 497: 11 Jul. 1642). Considering the circumstances in which he lived Elia's exuberance was very unwise and speaking his mind had landed him in very grave trouble. The details of similar case-studies depict a society which urged everyone to maintain a united front of behaviour where participation in processions and the observance of special holy days was regulated by specific laws, rules and fines.<sup>5</sup>

Yet despite the harsh punishment of non-believers when it came to the veneration of the Holy Sacrament, Catholics seem to have felt a much stronger attachment to saints and their cults. This was because in essence the cult of the saints was an integral part of religious life and the veneration of a saint often covered a definite area. The saints' role was all the greater in that the notion of a miracle-working patron, to whom one could turn for aid and whose relics were located nearby in a church, found a much easier path to the consciousness of the common people than did the idea of a distant, invisible, and awe-aspiring God. Attitudes towards God the Father lacked that intimacy and sincerity which united the faithful with the local saint. The saint's image was therefore a result of the interaction of different tendencies. In the saint the ideals of Christian humility preached by the Church were embodied.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the collections of *prammatiche* and *bandi* issued in the period of the Order of St John.

Furthermore the saint worked for the good of a whole community rather than on behalf of the individual believer. This occurred primarily because early modern man was not an isolated individual, facing the world on his own. Rather he was a member of a group in which the moods, sentiments and traditions of his consciousness were rooted. It was primarily from collective beliefs and notions that early modern man drew his convictions, including criteria for truth and falsehood. Truth was what the collective believed, and he did not contrast his own personal convictions with the truth of the community. Moreover, belonging to the collective created in the individual the need to affirm those truths that were virtually important for that collective. In short collective values were conditioned by the aims and traditions of the group, and found their basis only in them. Such social psychology offered fertile soil for faith in saints, relics, miracles and of course, saints' images.

The evidence confirms that images of saints played an important role in Catholic societies all over the world. The Church urged the faithful to pray to the saints who would hear their prayers, and possibly intervene by producing miracles and intercede on behalf of the individual devotee. However the detailed descriptions discussed above suggest that miracle cures came at a cost and were by no means free. The dreadful outbreaks of plague which broke out in Malta between 1592 and 1676 may have been part of the pandemic cycle that devastated Europe and the Mediterranean during that period.<sup>6</sup> It was also a time of great hardship, particularly due to the perpetual warring activities between Christians and Muslims – a state of endemic war; frequent food shortages; inadequate knowledge of medical and health problems; the inability to cope with other incurable diseases; and other hardships. All of these were sources of continual psychological distress on all early modern Mediterranean societies, not least Malta. This sense of helplessness induced the people to seek refuge in religious images which may have served as a means to calm down general popular fears and at the same time instigate popular devotion. But above all religious devotion to holy images seems to have been intentionally boosted by the authorities who used it as a tool to politically control the masses and thus avert

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<sup>6</sup> Cipolla (1973: 15) points out that 'Between 1613 and 1666, Europe was devastated by a dreadful series of plague epidemics'.

outbreaks of disorder at times of particular hardship and social uncertainty.

The constant quest for saint's intervention reveals that their existed strong ties between the devotees and their saints. The saint was thought to have power over certain diseases and was likewise believed to punish those who insulted him by neglecting to fulfil their Christian duties or offended him in any other way. Thus the saint was in essence personalized and domesticated. His ability to mediate between the human and the divine led the faithful to believe that the saint responded to their needs and anxieties both at the level of the individual and at that of the community. His presence drove fear and anxiety from the believers. An example of this approach was manifested on the eve of the plague of 1676 in Malta. On 15 March of that year an old venerated statue of St Roque was seen to change expression and turn pale with fluid oozing out of a wound in the leg. Lorenzo Hasciac (1677: 86, 97), a contemporary Maltese author writing in 1677, remarked that this strange phenomenon was observed by the Maltese and regarded as an omen of the ordeal they had to go through.<sup>7</sup> The saint was thus identified with his or her image which, similar to relics, guaranteed the reality of sacred power. It was thought that since the image bore the saint's likeness then the image was actually the saint himself and the image took upon itself all the holy powers associated with the saint.

Miracle stories, and other supernatural interventions, established the wonder-working virtues of saints and are direct indications of what Catholics wanted from religion in this period. Religious feelings and excitement apart, the people needed help to cope with the difficulties of life particularly during times of particular distress. The importance attached to the intervention of saints explains the unceasing demand for relics as sources of healing, which the Catholic Church sought to regulate. The cult of relics was born in the East, but it had already acquired enormous popularity in the West by the early middle ages. On its part the church encouraged the practice partly because it did not have the power to oppose its quiet dissemination and partly because the cult was used to further its own ideological and material interests (Hermann-Mascard 1975).

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<sup>7</sup> The event was found to be remarkable enough to be repeated by Mgr Panzavecchia in the early nineteenth century (ACM Panz. 7, fol. 331v.).

The cult of saints was so successful that one modern historian argues that it was imposed on the Church by the faithful and popular influence determined the clergy's attitude towards miracles (Sumption 1976: 43, 53n.).

Interest in relics did not mean that contemporaries were indifferent to the holy lives of saints. Saints relics in particular were often concentrated in important churches in towns all over the Catholic world and were believed to be most valuable. Some relics such as the corpses of local saints were on display in churches where they were available to worshippers. On specific days, the clergy carried smaller relics in procession housed in reliquaries some of which were surrounded by special functions. But most relics were probably too small to be moved around and were kept in off limits areas in special areas within the precincts of churches although they likewise attracted great devotion from the laity.

Petitional and penitential processions, involving both clergy and laity, were often undertaken at the behest of the community as a response to natural disasters like plague, drought, hail storms and so on. They entailed the carrying of sacred images and sometimes relics of saints suggesting that ritual served as a defence against plague (Cipolla 1979). Celebratory processions, such as the ones held after liberation from catastrophic plagues, were also highly in demand. On its part, the Church pushed the belief that just as God could punish and then heal individuals, He could likewise heal an entire society. God's wrath was thus frequently judged as the cause of plague epidemics, as it was of any other natural calamity. In short, devotion to saints and the belief in miracles was a fundamental part of Catholic religiosity, which was shared at all levels of society. The bodily remains of saints, in particular, attracted the devotion of entire communities since early Christianity and entire communities would unite around the protection offered by the venerated saint.

In Malta after a small outbreak of plague in 1655, the Order's government stipulated that a thanksgiving mass and Vespers ought to be held on 26 November 1655, a day dedicated to St Andrew. The ritual was to be solemnly celebrated by the Prior at the Conventual Church of St John, for the liberation from plague. The images of the Saviour and that of Our Lady kept at the church of Our Lady of Victory were to be taken out in procession in which the Grand Master would participate (NLM AOM 259, fol. 138-v n.e.: 26 Nov. 1655).

Evidently the whole ritual was thought to be part and parcel of the salutary effects to be expected from similar devotions. Probably the spirit in which similar religious activities were offered was in themselves the product of the power of Jesus and the Virgin. However it would be incorrect to interpret religious activities simply as offerings to obtain deliverance from plague, or as a token of thanks. Indeed the spirit in which they were offered was itself the product of the power of the saints and the Virgin who, it was acknowledged, intervened through the power of God. But by organising festivities in honour of God and the saints the Order's government was making it clear that the more the community received from the saints, the more they should give. Popular devotion and divine response were thus not only consecutive realities, or rather cause and effect. They were thought above all, to be effects of the power of the image.

Processions were also held with some frequency during the great plague outbreak of 1676. On 14 April processions were organized from every parish of the island. That same day a special procession was organized by the Prior of the Conventual Church of St John in which the Grand Master, accompanied by all the members of the Order present in Malta, took part. The pilgrimage left the Conventual church for the chapel of Sarria in Floriana carrying in procession the venerated image of Our Lady and the relics of St John the Baptist and St Sebastian (NLM AOM 6402, fol. 289).<sup>8</sup> Another procession, accompanied by several relics, including those of St Rosolea, was organised by the clergy of the parish of St Paul in Valletta to the Capuchin church in Floriana on 17 April (ACM Panz. ms.121, fol. 14). Three more processions were held consecutively on 24, 25 and 26 May (ACM Panz. ms.71, fol. 399v.). The Eucharist was exposed in all churches and the rosary was recited at all hours of the day. Relics were venerated especially the relic of the Holy Cross; in its presence priests recited their prayers daily (NLM AOM 6402, fol. 282).

Processions were likewise held to placate God's wrath and the intercession of the saints at Vittoriosa on the other side of the harbour. On 3 March, the *festa* of the Holy Cross was concelebrated

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<sup>8</sup> Panzavecchia (ACM Panz. ms.121, fol. 14) writes that the procession was held on 15 April.

by no less than 60 priests – including the Dominican friars of the nearby friary of the Annunciation – at the church of St Lawrence. Solemn mass was followed by a procession with the relics of the Crucifix and St Lawrence and the statue of St Roque. Throughout the celebration the mass of the population let free their pent up feelings and began to cry, shout and lament in grief. Two months later, on 3 May, another special ceremony was organized at the Vittoriosa parish for which once again, all the secular clergy, the Dominican friars, and a large congregation participated. Those present vowed that from then on a procession with the Crucifix, the relic of St Lawrence, and the statue of St Roque would be held annually if God were to free the island from the plague which was raging throughout Malta and especially in Vittoriosa where more than half the population died of plague.<sup>9</sup> The prayers, vows, and processions did not seem to work well in Vittoriosa because some one thousand inhabitants were decimated by the plague including 46 priests and 30 clerics (NLM Libr. 632, 202-203 n.e.).

But what has been described as the largest pilgrimage after the plague of 1676 was the one organized by Mgr Fra Lorenzo D'Astiria (1668-1678), then Bishop of Malta, and the Cathedral Chapter on 22 April 1677. On this occasion the clergy, the confraternities, and a large congregation, walked in procession from St Paul's Bay to the sanctuary of Our Lady of Mellieħa (Micallef 1984: 125). Religious images attracted popular devotion and form the basis of healing shrines that attracted pilgrims and developed as a direct response to popular demand, as the great devotion to Our Lady of Mellieħa and other shrines suggests. Images of saints played an important role in Catholic societies and could produce miracles when the saint interceded on behalf of a devotee. One may hypothesize that devotion to sacred images coupled with the organisation of pilgrimages, and processions to placate God's wrath in times of hardship and natural calamities, led to the development of the *festa* as we know it.

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<sup>9</sup> Dal Pozzo (1715: II 4449) reports that the total population of Vittoriosa at the beginning of the plague in 1676 was 3,200. By the end of June when the plague came to an end the total number of dead had risen to 1,800. (See also Micallef 1984: 118.)

## Holiness and the value of relics

In Christian antiquity martyrs, through their passion and death, were seen to have a special relationship with Christ, and the celebration of their memory came to involve not simply a remembrance of the dead, but the petitioning of these special dead to continue to intercede before God for their friends in this world. With the toleration, and even active support of Christianity starting during the times of Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, persecution came to an end. From then on the holy men were those who lived a life of prayer and meditation closer to God rather than those who received martyrdom. Thus holiness became associated with goodness rather than martyrdom. Christians from all walks of life came to seek their assistance for all kinds of tribulations: cures; protection from oppression; assistance in settling disputes, and other matters. In return the faithful offered them veneration in the form of pilgrimages, vigils, prayers, and offerings either in a symbolic form like candles, votive offerings, and the like, or material, in the form of property or money (Geary 1986: 175).

The value attached to the special corpses that would be venerated as relics required the communal acceptance of three interrelated beliefs. The first is that the deceased person had led a holy life which had helped him become a special friend of God, in short, a saint; the second, that on his death the remains of such a saint were valued as sacred and treated in a special way; and the third, that the particular corpse, or portion thereof, was indeed the remains of that particular saint. Nonetheless the value of the relics of a saint was determined by the spontaneous popular devotion. This in turn depended upon the efficacy of the saint's miracles and the strength of his cult. Relics of saints were therefore much sought after by communities of Christians particularly since every altar, in every Church, was supposed to contain similar remains. Hence it was believed that if a dead person worked miracles that attracted an enthusiastic following, then that person deserved to be proclaimed saint and receive formal recognition from the Church. Conversely a person who lived a holy life depended on the following of others in order to achieve sainthood. Once relics had gained recognition, and came to be perceived as genuine and efficacious, their significance depended on the continued performance of miracles.

A similar reasoning induced the faithful to circulate relics as

valued commodities. At the same time the transfer of relics from one place to another necessarily breached the cultural context that gave a particular relic its value. Since it was impossible to transfer the meaning and function it had enjoyed in its old location it was believed that the relic had to undergo some sort of cultural transformation that would help it acquire status and meaning within the new environment. Relics were therefore transferred from one community to another with great solemnity. Festivities attached to the translation of reliquaries from one place to another were an essential requisite for which the faithful flocked in large numbers. In the Middle Ages relics circulated like other valuable objects, that is, they were either presented as gifts, sometimes they were stolen, or even bought (Michałowski 1981: 416). Indeed previous to the Lutheran Reformation relics were frequently sold. But this practice was greatly discouraged after the Council of Trent when the papacy began to take stricter control of the movement of relics. Indeed in the XXV Session the Council insisted that

... in the invocation of saints, the veneration of relics, and the sacred use of images, every superstition shall be removed, and all filthy lucre abolished.

The Pope remained the most important donor of relics because he had at his disposal a large quantity of remains of the early Christian martyrs. Rome sought to exploit her inexhaustible supply of relics in order to build closer relationships with the multitude of Catholic states in Europe. In this sense relics turned out to be a useful political tool in the hands of the papacy. Already in the ninth century the papacy had realised that by distributing relics it ensured that the recipient state remained subordinate to it thanks to the ties created in the distribution. The movement of relics often took place through the intervention of a middle man who took it upon himself to mediate on behalf of the ruler (Michałowski 1981: 404). This tendency was more valued in the post-Tridentine period when Catholics distinguished themselves, amongst other, through their devotion to the cult of saints and the importance attached to relics. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the middleman in Malta were often high ranking knights who, thanks to their intervention, stood to gain in prestige both in Rome and Malta. In a way therefore the exchange of gifts led to the establishment of personal bonds between the giver and receiver.

In the seventeenth century the devotion of the faithful addressed itself not only to tombs and reliquaries, where the remains of saints were hidden or enshrined, but also to sculpted images. Saints' relics were either represented in bust form, where the remains were covered in silver and precious stones, or else, they were given a human form and transformed into the shape of a person on his deathbed, the so called *corpo santo* (lit. holy body). The latter method soon became very popular since it reinforced an impression that life had just left the holy body and this presented an illusion of incorruptibility. The churches of Rome were full of these lifelike representations of the dead saint by the early seventeenth century. On their part the knights of Malta were only too keen to emulate the usages of that cultural centre and source of their inspiration.

There is ample evidence which shows the importance attached to relics by the Order's authorities in Malta around the middle of the seventeenth century. In 1644 Grand Master Lascaris supported the Benedictine monastery of Saint Maur in its quest for a relic of Saint Placido – patron of the Benedictine novitiate – from the Order's priorate of Messina in Sicily.<sup>10</sup> The Benedictines were to receive a part of the relic while another part was to be transferred to the Conventual Church of the Order in Valletta.<sup>11</sup> The collection of relics at that Church must have been quite impressive by that time and

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<sup>10</sup> Despite the official correspondence between the Grand Master and the Benedictines of St Maur, there existed a reliquary, with relics attributed to St Placido at the Carmelite church in Valletta some twenty seven years before. The witnesses that were summoned to comment on the character of the courtesan Sperantia di Lango included her neighbour Jannulla Barbiana. Jannulla described Sperantia as a charitable person who paid for the celebration of three masses per week and in spite of the fact that she led the life of a prostitute had presented donations to several churches. These donations included the payment of a sum of 25 scudi in order to embellish the reliquary of St Placido in silver and gold kept at the Valletta Carmelite Church. Thus anyone who could afford to pay was encouraged to embellish reliquaries even if the donors were notorious prostitutes like Sperantia di Lango (AIM Crim. 38A case 302, fol. 46v; 19 Aug. 1617).

<sup>11</sup> The despatch (NLM AOM 1552, n.p.) dated 17 July, 1644 addressed to the Reverend Father Superior General of the Congregation of St Maur refers to the wish of the Congregation to obtain '...quelque Reliques de St Placide et desirant vous complaire ie priay de magistrates de Mesine de me donner une particule de ce Sainte Corps – ie la separay en deux, en donnay une moitee a mon d. secretaire pour vous l'envoyer, et reservay l'autre pour notre: Eglise...'.

they were so important for the Order of St John that during a meeting of the council in June 1653 it was agreed to fix new walnut cupboards at the sacristy for their safe-keeping (NLM AOM 259, fol. 71 n.e.: 15 Jun. 1653).

The number of relics was bound to increase with time. A mere ten months after the Council decision of 1653, Inquisitor Federico Borromeo presented the Order with relics of his relative St Charles Borromeo, archbishop-cardinal of Milan and a protector of the Order. The relics consisted of a sleeve of red cloth from a habit belonging to the saint; a small part of his heart; and a piece of his intestine. The relics were conserved in an ebony box adorned with crystal glass and silver.<sup>12</sup> On the suggestion of the Italian knight Fra Vincenzo Rospigliosi – a nephew of Pope Clement IX (1667-1669) – in 1669 the Order began to commemorate the date of the consignment of St Charles's relics by celebrating a high mass each year (NLM AOM 1776, fol. 300 a-300 i: 23 Jun. 1669).

In the years preceding the outbreak of the great plague of 1676 several other relics were presented to the Order of St John through the intervention of powerful members of the Order. The influence of the knight Rospigliosi in Rome knew no bounds during his uncle's reign and it was utilised to the full to acquire relics from the centre of world Catholicism. On 1 July 1669, a mere week after his insistence on the solemnity of St Charles Borromeo, Fra Rospigliosi sent to Malta the *corpo santo* of Saint Clement Martyr. The body was at first kept at the chapel of Our Lady of Liesse at the Valletta harbour. But it was soon after taken in solemn procession, with the firing of petards, muskets, and artillery, to its resting place at the conventional Church of St John (NLM AOM 1776, fol. 300 i: 1 Jul. 1669). In the following year the Bailiff of Leon, Fra Giacomo de Cordon Evien, presented the Church of St John with a relic of St Francis de Sales consisting of a *mezzo corpo* (literally half body) in silver of the said saint. The relic had been authenticated by the Bishop of Geneva (NLM AOM 1776, fol. 300 i: 23 Jan. 1670).

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<sup>12</sup> According to NLM AOM 1776, fol. 300a: 7 Apr. 1654, '... una manica di drappo rosso di una veste del Glorioso San Carlo Borromeo, con una particella del cuore, et intestini del medesimo santo che fu già qui in terra Protettore della Religione, come hora vivamente confida in cielo, poste tutte le dette reliquie in una cassetta d'ebbano guarnita di Christalli, et argenti....'

Relics acquired by the Order of St John in the second half of the seventeenth century were normally carried in a solemn procession. However such *festas* typically involved abundance and excesses that were somewhat profane in nature including the setting off of lavish fireworks and deafening explosions. When in June 1676 the effects of the plague had abated, the chaplains of the Order of St John began to recite the seven penitential psalms in the Conventual Church before the relics of St John the Baptist and St Sebastian. But what is more important is that on 23 June a large part of the bodily remains of St Rosolea, encased in a silver half statue - *mezzo corpo* - arrived in Malta on board the Capitana galley of the Order from Scicli in Sicily. The man behind the acquisition was the Italian knight Prior of Roccella and future Grand Master, Fra Gregorio Carafa (1680-1690) (NLM AOM 262, fol. 57v n.e.: 23 Jun. 1676). Due to strict quarantine regulations, the government of the Order waited until 24 September to organize a public procession of deliverance from the plague. In this procession the relics of the Holy Cross, St John the Baptist, St Anne, St Sebastian and the recently acquired St Rosolea were carried through the main streets of Valletta to the sound of cannons and musket shots. The Grand Master ordered that the festivity of St Rosolea be commemorated every year with the celebration of a high mass (NLM AOM 262, fol. 62v n.e.: 24 Sep. 1676; NLM AOM 1776, fol. 300 ii-iii: 23 Jun. 1676).

Only a few more years were to elapse before another relic – that of St Toscana - arrived from the North Italian city of Padua. The relic of St Toscana was put ashore in July 1685. It was a very richly adorned reliquary and was first taken to the Grand Master's Palace chapel and from there in solemn procession to St John's conventual Church. Once again the procession was accompanied by the firing of muskets and the shooting of canon from the harbour cities' bastions (NLM AOM 1776, fol. 300 iv: 18 Jul. 1685).

But the keen interest in relics and *corpi santi* was not restricted to Valletta and specifically to the Order of St John. In the eighteenth century the Maltese parishes, sometimes represented by local confraternities, *corpi santi* were acquired by the highest authorities of Malta and were then presented as gifts to the various parishes. Thus for example Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736) donated an arm bone said to belong to St Philip of Agira to the Zebbug parish and an ostensory including a splinter from the cradle of Jesus to the parish of Lija.

Several *corpi santi* were brought to Malta thanks to the intervention of particular Inquisitors. One of these was Inquisitor Antonio Felice Zondadari (1777-1785) who managed to transfer the *corpo santo* of San Lucido to Malta which he then presented to the parish of St Lawrence in Vittoriosa in 1779.<sup>13</sup> The importance attached to the acquisition of *corpi santi* remained high towards the end of the Order's rule in Malta. The last Inquisitor Mgr Giulio Carpegna (1793-1798) managed to acquire a more significant relic of St Lawrence for the same church in 1797.<sup>14</sup>

Between the late eighteenth and first part of the nineteenth century devotion towards *corpi santi* seems to have reached its peak. During this period they were dressed up and transformed into 'sleeping' statues. Veneration towards the *corpi santi* during this phase of Malta's history was great so that *festas* were held in their honour

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<sup>13</sup> In 1779 the Confraternity of the Crucifix in Vittoriosa asked Inquisitor Zondadari, as Apostolic Visitor, to intervene on their behalf in the on-going negotiations with Rome to acquire a *corpo santo* from there. Thanks to Zondadari's intervention Vittoriosa received the remains of San Lucido which the confraternity dressed up as a martyred soldier. The parish priest of St Lawrence ensured that the *corpo santo* was translated to the oratory of the parish by procession. A procession was held on 11 April 1779 (Easter Sunday) from the Inquisitor's Palace where it was first kept to the parish of St Lawrence. On the occasion the two religious communities of Vittoriosa – Dominicans and Capuchins participated in the event. Three other parish groups together with the clergy of Vittoriosa, as well as another forty priests from Cospicua, were also present. On the occasion the Inquisitor walked beside the urn containing the remains of the saint accompanied by his retinue (the familiars). The procession passed through the main streets of Vittoriosa to the continuous ringing of bells and the firing of petards from Fort St Angelo (AIM Mem. 21 fols. 29v-32v.).

<sup>14</sup> The clergy of Vittoriosa had a small relic of St Lawrence but they wanted a more significant one. They petitioned to Inquisitor Carpegna to help them in their quest of a new relic. On 3 August 1797, a few days before the celebration of the *festa* of St Lawrence, Inquisitor Carpegna wrote to the Cardinal Secretary of the Holy Office in Rome, Cardinal Brusco. In his letter Carpegna asked the cardinal to intervene with the Pope for the clergy and people of Vittoriosa so as to help them obtain a new relic of St Lawrence (AIM Corr. 102, fol.186-v.). Rome had a positive reply to Carpegna's appeal. On 5 October 1797 Carpegna wrote to Cardinal Brusca that the clergy and people of Vittoriosa were overjoyed that a relic of St Lawrence had been shipped to Malta. The Pope had even decided to send a relic from one of the churches dedicated to St Lawrence in Rome. In his letter Carpegna pointed out that in Vittoriosa a festive procession was being organised for the occasion (AIM Corr.102 fol.194v.).

and it became common practice to name children after the saint. Thus, for example, the name of the Capuchin church at Kalkara is officially dedicated to St Barbara. However when the friars managed to obtain the *corpo santo* of Santa Liberata, devotion towards this saint was such that the church was, and still is, popularly known as the church of Santa Liberata. The emergence of similar devotions are clear evidence that the veneration of relics, which had reached Malta of the knights from Rome in the seventeenth century, and immediately taken up by the Mdina Cathedral Chapter,<sup>15</sup> and the Malta harbour cities in the late eighteenth century, was later absorbed and adopted by the outlying villages.

### The celebration of the *festa*

It appears that towards the end of the seventeenth century even the celebration of saints' *festas* started to include a procession with a statue. In the words of Joseph Cassar-Pullicino (1947b: 36):

By the 1690s we read of the spreading practice of taking out in procession one and the same statue of Our Lady in all feasts dedicated to the Madonna, such as that of the Annunciation, Our Lady of the Girdle, Our Lady of the Roses, Our Lady of the Rosary, etc.

Joseph Borg (in D'Anastas 1996a: 71) confirms that a statue of Our Lady of the Rosary was commissioned by the Confraternity of the Rosary of Mosta and was taken out in procession for several Marian festivities in that village.

But processions with statues were not restricted to Marian devotion. Canon John Ciarlò has shown that the statue of St Paul, commissioned by the Testaferrata family from the Maltese sculptor Melchiore Gafà (1635-1667), was being carried in procession as early

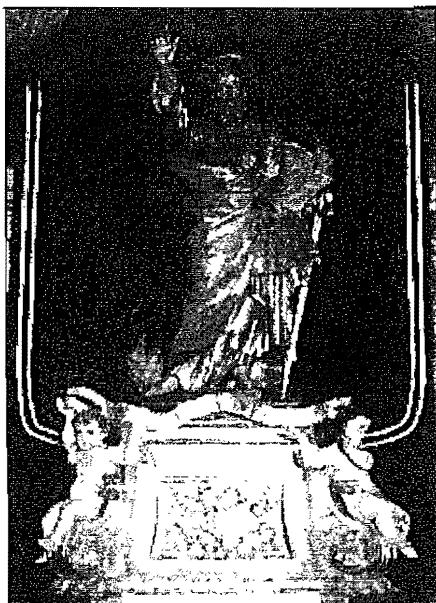
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<sup>15</sup> The Cathedral Chapter was presented with the *corpi santi* of the martyred saints Faustina and Acasta (mother and daughter), donated by Mgr Bueno in 1667. A year later the *corpo santo* of St Publius was donated by Canon Montemagni in 1668. The *corpi santi* of St Felice and St Costanza martyrs, donated by Bishop Molina, were deposited in the Cathedral church in 1678. In 1686 the Archdeacon Michele Bonnici presented the *corpo santo* of St Vincenzo martyr. In 1721 Bishop Cannaves donated the *corpo santo* of St Benigno, and finally the *corpo santo* of St Fedele was donated in 1756 (Ferris 1866: 84).

as 1690 (Ciarlò 1995: 42). Documentation for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reveals that the earlier statues used in Maltese processions were figures dressed in clothing like the old titular statue of St Nicholas at Siggiewi (Borg 1983: 108; Catania 1992: 101). We learn that the making of papier-mâché statues was probably introduced by Sicilian craftsmen in seventeenth century Malta but that it was only widely adopted in the second quarter of the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly by the mid-seventeenth century short weekly Friday processions with one statue, were carried through the streets of Valletta in Lent time right up to Good Friday, but these had developed into full-blown processions by 1673 (Aquilina 1986: 26-31). Evidently the cult of saints centred on a statue was well established in Malta by the late seventeenth century. Indeed Ray Debono-Roberts argues that the commissioning of titular statues and other initiatives may indicate that the construction of statues may be regarded as 'one of the social bases of these festivities' (2003: 387).

The earliest reference I have come across to the carrying of a statue of Our Lady in procession is that mentioned by David Davigno, in his deposition in front of the Inquisition tribunal in 1723. On that occasion Davigno – a Sephardic Jew from Spain then living in



Statue of St Paul by the Maltese sculptor Melchiorre Gafà (1635-1667). St Paul's Shipwreck Collegiate, Valletta, Malta.

© Carmel Cassar

<sup>16</sup> George Aquilina asserts that the technique was popularized by the barber-surgeon Saverio Laferla of Valletta who fashioned papier-mâché statues and cribs as a side-line to his medical practice until his demise in 1761. Aquilina shows that Laferla produced a set of Good Friday procession statues for Valletta between 1737 and 1742 (Aquilina 1986: 32-39).

Malta as a pseudo-Christian and serving as a soldier in Malta – declared to the Inquisition that he questioned the carrying of a statue of Our Lady during a procession by the Dominican friars in Valletta as a form of idolatry. That same night, however, he felt he was being strangled in his bed and decided to convert to Christianity and get baptized (AIM Crim. 108A case 7, fols.73-74v: 23 Nov. 1723).<sup>17</sup> The moral in this story seems to imply that the saint, Mary, had chosen Davigno – a Jew – to convert. Her patronage was meant to be. In this case rather than being beseeched for help by someone in need the Virgin was ridiculed by Davigno. The strangling in his bed may be interpreted as a divine imposition on the Jew to convert and a clear indication that the Virgin had come to serve everybody and not just the faithful Catholic members of the community. Similar visions, which led to the eventual conversion of a Jew, strengthened the direct bonds between the saint and each person of the community – whether town or village – beginning with the powerless.

It appears that the inclusion of the titular saint in parish processions on the day of the *festa* was a development of the eighteenth century. Thus, according to J. Micallef (1975: 125, 126, 129) the statue of St Andrew at Luqa was taken out in procession in 1781. The statue of the Annunciation at Tarxien was taken out in procession from 1829 (Borg 1973: 44, 80). However one cannot exclude that the popularity of *festas* was boosted in the eighteenth century thanks to the celebration of *festas* that were not in any way connected to religious festivals. J. Cassar-Pullicino (1976: 36-37) remarks that

The eighteenth century also saw the Order organizing popular festivities under all sorts of pretexts – the election of a Grand Master, the accession of a new pope, the yearly feast of the Order's Protector, Saint John the Baptist, the occurrence of a centenary such as that of the Great Siege, the birth of a son to some royal household in Europe connected with the Order – and each such occasion gave rise to street decoration, illuminations, fireworks, and other merry-making.

One popular *festa* in which the Maltese participated fully was that of the *Calendimaggio*. The *festa* of *Calendimaggio* originated

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<sup>17</sup> Davigno, then aged 31 years-old, was baptised at the Inquisitor's Palace in Vittoriosa after receiving instruction and given the name Martino Antonio on 6 January 1724 (AIM Crim. 108A case 7, fol. 75).

in Italy and attained great popularity in Malta by the early eighteenth century. Vincenzo Laurenza (1913: 187-195) suggests that the *festa* was introduced in Malta by Italian Grand Master Zondadari (1720-1722). Yet, Canon Agius de Soldanis (NLM Libr. Ms. 144: 107) recalls how a poem in Maltese written by the Maltese physician Giovan Francesco Bonamico (1639-1680) to honour Grand Master Cottoner (1663-1680) was meant to be recited during the *festa* of *Calendimaggio*. Such an assertion assumes that the festival was already being celebrated in the third quarter of the seventeenth century. The annual *festa* was held in the afternoon of 30 April in the Palace square, for which occasion, the Maltese elite organized theatrical representations, serenades and cantatas that were eagerly watched by the Grand Master himself. These performances were also widely popular among the lower classes that, we are told, attended in large numbers (Cassar-Pullicino 1976: 24). It seems that the modern *festa* as we know it – with its street decorations, illuminations, fireworks and similar merry-making – resulted from an attempt to emulate the spectacular activities held at Malta's cultural centre at a village level.

But there was yet another social occasion where people could meet and enjoy themselves. This was carnival. Carnival enjoyed popularity in Malta ever since it was first known to be officially held in Birgu (later also known by the title of Vittoriosa) in 1535. By the early eighteenth century, carnival balls attracted a large sector of the social elite to the Manoel Theatre (Cassar-Pullicino 1976: 21-25). Carnival merry-making was mostly confined to Valletta, but villagers from all over Malta came to watch, enjoy themselves, and sometimes participate (Cassar 1993a: 457). Carnival continued to play an important function during the British rule, and especially until the Second World War, when although not so spectacular as the village *festa*, it was a popular occasion which drew enormous crowds to Valletta. However as in the case of the rather solemn celebrations, spontaneous carnival merrymaking was likewise carried out at the village level particularly in some remote areas of the Maltese islands.

### **The Order of St John, St Paul and the cult of saints**

In the early years of the eighteenth century, the Order's government issued edicts and proclamations giving the impression that the

population was expected to participate in official celebrations that were often imposed on the people at large. The word imposed is here being used because on these occasions the urban dwellers were expected to illuminate their window sills with oils lamps and were even expected to adorn their windows and balconies with drapes and carpets especially if a procession was to pass from their street. Failure to comply could induce the payment of a heavy fine. Only the poor and destitute were exempted from adorning the facades of their homes. Proclamations published during the rule of Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736) are eloquent proof of this approach. In June 1722 the Grand Master issued a proclamation in which he gave permission to the general public to celebrate in his honour for two consecutive days (NLM Libr. Ms 429 vol.1, fol. 10). Some years later the same Grand Master issued similar proclamations for the celebration of the accession of Pope Benedict XIII (NLM Libr. Ms 429 vol.1, fol. 58) to the throne of St Peter and again in August 1730 he ordered festivities on the accession of Pope Clement XII (NLM Libr. Ms 429 vol.1, fol. 199). Similar proclamations were issued for the celebration of the *festas* of St John the Baptist – the patron saint of the Order - and that of St Paul – the patron saint of Malta (NLM Libr. Ms 429 vol.1, fols. 52, 158). Under the later Grand Masters, especially during the rule of Grand Master De Rohan (1775-1797), the people were encouraged to indulge more in such festivals.

In seventeenth century Malta, the cult of St Paul developed into a symbol of Maltese identity embodying its hopes of salvation. It came about due to various factors crossbred and enriched with the passing of time. First in importance was the foundation of the Jesuit College, founded in 1592, which went on to promote studies in both local history and traditions, especially the Pauline cult (Borg 1978: 237-258). The Order's perpetual Holy War against the Infidel Muslims made the Knights resemble St Paul for they too had the mission to Christianize and possibly regain lost territory from the Ottoman Turks. Their arrival on Malta was accidental too! St Paul was shipwrecked on Malta, seemingly by an act of providence. The Order accepted Malta only after having lost Rhodes (Cassar-Pullicino 1983: 23-26). Finally the Knights saw in St Paul a counterpart of their patron, St John the Baptist. Both saints had led a highly adventurous life, endured myriad hardships, and both ended up as martyrs (Bugeja 1990: 217). The effect of the popularity of the

Pauline cult is evinced by the introduction of new cults of saints. The cult of St Paul in Malta, together with the ideology of the Marian cult, stretches back to the late Middle Ages rooted in late medieval Christian universalism.<sup>18</sup>

During the seventeenth century, the cult was extended to the more general veneration of particular saints, notably saints Publius and Agatha,<sup>19</sup> and those other saints to whom Maltese parishes were dedicated.<sup>20</sup> By the eighteenth century, the patron saints of the parishes came to embody the virtues of the village concerned. Thus, the cult and celebration of associated festivities helped define even further the boundaries of local communities within tiny Malta. Such a situation was in response to



St Paul's Grotto, Rabat, Malta.

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<sup>18</sup> The earliest evidence of a Marian cult goes back to 1274 when the church of the *castrum maris* (later Fort St Angelo, Vittoriosa) is known to have been dedicated to Santa Maria (Buhagiar 1983: 1).

<sup>19</sup> The cult of St Publius was propagated in the early seventeenth century (Luttrell 1977: 105-132; Borg 1978: 237-258). The devotion to St Agatha was strong in the mid-sixteenth century particularly after it was thought that the mounting of the statue of St Agatha on the walls of Mdina helped to repel a Turkish attack in 1551. Mastro Blasio Zammit was in fact accused of having doubted the efficacy of this remedy and was reported to the Inquisition Tribunal (AIM Crim. 3 B fols. 626-627: 18 Jun. 1575). Zammit's reputed crime was first mentioned in Cassar 1985: esp. 212).

<sup>20</sup> In most Maltese parishes the cult of saints, particularly those of St Nicholas, St Catherine and St George, were already well established by the fifteenth century (Wettinger 1969: 85-86). In 1575, the Apostolic Delegate Mgr Dusina, visited an approximate total of 414 churches in the Maltese islands. A break up of church dedications shows that the Virgin under various attributes and titles had 168 churches dedicated to her followed by St Nicholas, 32; St Catherine of Alexandria, 16; St John the Baptist, 14; St Paul, 14; St George, 13; The Saviour, 10; The Holy Spirit, 1; All Saints, 1; and 145 churches were dedicated to 47 different saints (Buhagiar 1979: 64).

the conception of the Maltese as a distinct people, a motif that gained ground, particularly, as it led others to the acceptance of the notion that Malta never gave up its Christianity since the time of St Paul.

Therefore, the veneration of saints came to stand more than ever for the symbolic expression of an ethnic consciousness, already moulded by the religious concepts of the seventeenth century. It may be argued that the notion of 'Malteseness' assumed a continuity between past and present, firmly binding the Pauline cult with Maltese ethnic consciousness. But political propaganda by the state glorified the exploits of the Knights, and particularly Grand Master La Valette, as the protagonists of the Ottoman Siege of Malta of 1565. The aim clearly was to justify and strengthen the Order's strategic position on the island and to ensure that the loss of their own fellow people was interpreted as a sacrifice to a higher cause. Patriotic resistance became identified with the religious motive and the struggle against the Muslim inevitably assumed the nature of a Holy War (Cassar 1954: 133). This 'ideal' motive was still strong in the eighteenth century, when a protracted crusade against the Moslem 'infidel,' enemy of both the Maltese and the Order, could unite the people and the Order in a common aim (Cutajar and Cassar 1985: 42; see also Cassar 2000c: 228-235, 246-253). Agius De Soldanis gives a valuable insight of this feeling in one of the dialogues he prepared for the revised manuscript version of his *Della lingua punica* (1750), entitled *Nuova scuola della lingua punica*. It records the dialogue held between two ladies of rank, whom he describes as 'puliti,' and refers to the fear of a Turkish invasion in 1760. One of the ladies is made to say:

I could never believe that they (the Turks) will come. Istanbul is too far away from Malta. The Cross (the Order of St John) frightens them. They never managed to win against us.<sup>21</sup>

The Maltese came to share common assumptions, based on the cult and celebration of associated festivities that helped to define even further the boundaries of local communities within tiny Malta. Such a situation was created in response to the conception of the

<sup>21</sup> Original: 'Ma nistar nemmen li jiġu. Stambur wisq bghid minn Malta. Is-salib bezziegħi. Qatt ma għamlu l-prova meta ġaduha magħna' (NLM Libr. 144, fol. 195; Cassar-Pullicino 1947a: 122).

Maltese as a distinct people – a motif that gained ground, particularly, as it led others to the acceptance of the notion that Malta never gave up its Christianity since the time of St Paul.

It is thanks to a general belief that the Catholic faith was the one and only ‘true’ religion, that the Maltese developed the ritual cult of saints and the eventual celebration of the *festa*. In this setting the parish clergy were to play a fundamental role in propagating the cult of individual saints and spreading the devotion towards them amongst the faithful.

### *Corpi Santi – St Vittorio and Naxxar in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century*

Perhaps the most detailed description of a *festa* celebration that has reached us from the eighteenth century recalls the translation of the remains of St Vittorio to the north-eastern village of Naxxar. The advent of the relics to Naxxar and their eventual re-modelling into a *corpo santo* were fortunately recorded in great detail by the parish priest Don Giorgio Fiteni in the back pages of the baptismal register for the years 1627-1745. The text has recently been transcribed and translated into Maltese and published by Paul Catania. We learn that the relics were sent from Rome to that parish through the intervention of Inquisitor Mancinforte in 1770. The remains of the saint were temporarily venerated in relic form at the parish of Naxxar until 1785 when parish priest Fiteni, with the help of another Naxxar priest, Don Gio Battista Grech, took the relics to the house of judge Pasquale Borg in Valletta. At the judge's house the skeleton was rebuilt by the surgeon and painter Giuseppe Grima aided by Signora Anna, the judge's wife. The relics were thus transformed and remodelled into a human form. The Bishop of Malta was then asked to put his seal of authenticity on the *corpo santo*. The authentication ceremony, held at the house of the Borg's in Valletta, was followed by a great reception and many devotees are said to have visited the home of judge Borg. Fiteni remarks in his detailed memoir that several of those present obtained graces through St Vittorio's intervention.

The newly created *corpo santo* remained exposed in Valletta for several months, where apparently popular devotion towards it continued to increase and the relic continued to be popularly venerated, until 21 September 1786 on which date it was taken to

the parish priest's house at Naxxar. Once again parish priest Fiteni felt obliged to comment on the shower of graces received by the people of that village on the arrival of the *corpo santo*. Those Naxxar villagers who were especially favoured by St Vittorio were expectant mothers; particularly those facing a difficult childbirth. We are told that these women had an easy delivery after drinking water mixed with the dust from the saint's bones. Others suffering from a limp also received special graces. One such man, mentioned by the parish priest was called Battista. Battista had a wooden leg and walked supported by two crutches. After having prayed to St Vittorio, Battista reportedly threw the crutches away and walked without any aid despite his wooden leg! Others are said to have been healed from eye pains and the parish priest declared that even the blind could see after praying to St Vittorio. Several others are said to have been cured from other diseases. Many votive offerings were presented to the saint on that occasion, particularly consisting mainly of candles, gold and silver as well as in the form of sums of money, cotton, wheat and maslin. The offerings of the poor consisted mainly of candles. Indeed so many candles had been lit, that night and day the *corpo santo* was uninterruptedly surrounded by candles and oil lamps. On the occasion parish priest Fiteni thought it was fitting to proclaim St Vittorio as protector of Naxxar.

But it took another year for the *corpo santo* to be translated to the parish church and this served as another spectacular occasion celebrated with great pomp by all the villagers. On 22 September 1787 the *corpo santo* was translated from the house of the parish priest to the chapel of the Immaculate Conception by twelve soldiers – to the firing of petards, squibs and flares – dressed in the livery of the ruling Grand Master De Rohan, where it was kept overnight. The festivities reached their peak on the following morning when a procession, led by the Bishop of Malta Mgr Labini, accompanied the transfer of the *corpo santo* from the chapel to the Naxxar parish church. The offering of a bouquet of flowers to the *corpo santo* by Bishop Labini marked the start of the celebrations for the day. A procession began with the intonation of the antiphony *Iste Sanctus*, accompanied by musicians and fireworks (Catania 1987).

Parish priest Fiteni gave intricate details of the proceedings of the procession which was led by a band consisting of fifes and tambourines. The standard of the confraternity of the Rosary followed by a large number of members of the said confraternity

came next. Then came the standard of the confraternity of the Sacrament accompanied by an even larger number of members from that Confraternity. Next came musicians playing bassoons, flutes, and other musical instruments, who marched in front of the saint's standard. The standard depicting on one side saints Joachim and Anne accompanied by the young Virgin Mary and on the other side St Vittorio was shown receiving his martyrdom. It was executed by the painter (and surgeon) Giuseppe Grima who had originally reassembled the bones into a *corpo santo*. Then came the Cross of the clergy with an acolyte on each side and the large number of priests that accompanied the cross hailing not only from Naxxar but even from other parts of Malta. Parish priest Fiteni felt the need to point out that both the members of the clergy and the confraternities carried large candles each weighing half a rotolo, and walked in great devotion with their heads bowed down. Six of the clergy were wearing a cope and were continually intoning verses from the hymn *Deus Tuorum Militum*. The *corpo santo* of St Vittorio was carried by four priests under a canopy of red damask. Bishop Labini came next accompanied by four canons of the Cathedral including the archpriest of the Cathedral Church, and Don Giorgio Fiteni, with lit candles in their hands. When the procession arrived under the triumphal arch, the *corpo sacro* was deposited under the arch to the playing of music. The procession then continued to the parish church. The *Te Deum Laudamus* was intoned, one verse being sung by the clergy and another one by the crowd of faithful present. On arrival at the parish church a prayer to the saint was recited together with the *Pro Gratiarum Actione*. The Bishop then gave his blessing to those present and prepared to say mass assisted by the four accompanying canons. Sung mass was then concelebrated by parish priest Fiteni who was assisted by several members of the Naxxar clergy. The Bishop assisted from a throne, purposely prepared for the occasion, and after the reading of the gospel gave a homily in Italian in which he praised the virtues of St Vittorio.

Vespers were sung that evening and were followed by a sermon on the martyred saint in Maltese by the archpriest of the Cathedral, Don Alessandro Tei. On its conclusion the parish church bells rang the first Ave Maria at which the church itself, the arch, and many private houses were lit with oil lamps while petards were shot and church bells rang. The octave continued for a whole week starting that Monday during which a sang mass with sermon was said each

morning. Every afternoon the Vespers were recited followed by another sermon, while every evening the village was lit and petards were fired. Bells rang and petards were fired each time the church bells rang at recognized hours for the daily prayers.

On the last day of the octave Grand Master De Rohan gave permission to hold three races — one for fillies, one for donkeys, and another one for horses, which were held to the playing of fifes and tambourines. A large crowd gathered for these races directed by representatives of the Mdina Town Council who were also responsible for the distribution of the cloth banners (*palji*) to the winners. The popular celebrations for the martyr saint St Vittorio thus came to a close. However the church festivities were only concluded on the following day when the clergy, carrying lit candles, participated in a solemn procession within the parish church during which the *corpo santo* was transferred from the main altar to that of Our Lady of Sorrows. The *corpo santo* was then fumigated with incense to the singing of the antiphony *Iste Sanctus* and the urn containing the *corpo santo* was devotionally put under the altar.

The case-study of St Vittorio suggests that the most attractive thing about the saint was his ability to work miracles. In this he employed his 'magical' capabilities to help his worshippers, easing their lives, healing their illnesses, averting natural calamities, and freeing the unfortunate and the powerless from oppression. In return the saint required veneration; obedience to the church authorities; and gifts in the form of candles, money, and votive offerings. The saint, endowed with human features was active among ordinary human beings and served as a bridge between a distant and incomprehensible God and ordinary mortals. Each locality adopted its own saint, who became an integral part of the community and to whom people would resort to whenever they required help beyond human power. Miracle-working characteristics left the greatest impression on the ordinary folk. Thus a saint would enjoy popularity and veneration if he performed miracles. On its part, the church insisted that the main feature of a saint was his righteousness and privileged position with God. However, the clergy could not oppose the universal need for miracles even because faith in miracles yielded enormous riches to church foundations most of which were used to endow charitable institutions, the embellishment, or the building of new churches. However, since the saints' supernatural actions were not easily distinguishable from popular magic, the two activities

were associated with each other in popular consciousness. The church naturally claimed a monopoly on the performance of miracles, and excluded all other activities as magical. Nonetheless she was induced to elucidate the difference between the genuine miracle and popular magic. But in this she was not very successful.

The use of saints' relics sometimes calls to mind the use of pagan talismans. In reality the majority of the Maltese population did not really distinguish between amulets, which were strictly forbidden by the church, and holy relics. Why did the church forbid the use of magic potions, and punish those that resorted to sorcerers for healing the sick, while at the same time agreed that dust from the saint's relics possessed healing properties? Fine distinctions of this sort were of little consequence to the masses of the faithful. Thus most people did not consider the combination of popular magical beliefs and church practices and rituals as erratic, and still less heretical. The border dividing Christian magic from *maleficium* was unclear to the masses of the faithful.

Another claim for the miracle-working function of relics was the saint's contact with the faithful. By performing his feats in a given locality, in the case of St Vittorio the village of Naxxar, the saint accordingly belonged to its inhabitants. The faithful and the saint thus came to form a single association within the limits of which, blessings, prayers, miracles, and gifts – in the form of candles, gold and silver votive offerings, or otherwise – circulated. This association was thought to be indissoluble, and neither the saint's worshippers nor the saint himself had the right to break off contact. Relics were thus believed to ensure a saint's services for a particular community and it explains why



Procession with a *corpo santo* at Żejtun in the early 1960s. © Sandra Debono

a lively traffic of these popular goods continued to thrive in Catholic communities well into the modern age. This unique situation induced parishioners to consider the saint as their own property and boasted of his miracles. The relations between the saint and the faithful were thought to be of mutual fidelity and aid. In this perpetual activity the clergy played the fundamentally powerful role of go between.

### **The *festa* under British Rule and at present**

But the *festas* were radically transformed in the nineteenth century under British colonial rule when band clubs were formed and fireworks began to play a more dominant role. This does not mean to say that music and fireworks were introduced in the nineteenth century. Actually by the late eighteenth century it had already become customary in the Maltese villages to hire musicians from Valletta and the Harbour enclave to participate in the local processions. These mainly consisted of pipers, tambourine players, trumpets, clarinets, and oboes, and the total number of players usually ranged between five and seven. In 1882 Don Salvatore Ciappara claimed that music playing was introduced for the first time at Żebbuġ in 1777 during the procession held in honour of St Philip. The previous year a triumphal arch, designed by the artist Rocco Buġiagħar, had been set up. In 1781 the musicians who participated at the feast of St Philip were five in all – two clarinets, two horns and a bassoon. By 1790 their number had increased to nine (D'Anastas 1999: 163). Żebbuġ was not unique. The feast of the Assumption held in Mosta in 1780 was accompanied by trumpets and a tambourine and in 1785 the number of musicians amounted to four individuals. Similarly the procession of the Holy Sacrament at Rabat was accompanied by trumpeters brought from Valletta during the years 1786-1788 (D'Anastas 1996a: 75).

However the detailed description on the festivities held in honour of St Vittorio at Naxxar in the 1780s suggests that music playing during processions was already relatively widespread at the time. Noel D'Anastas has shown that the feast organised by the archconfraternity of St Joseph in Rabat two decades before, that is in 1763, included music playing and a fireworks display. Nevertheless D'Anastas argues that music playing during processions dates back

to the late seventeenth or at least to the dawn of the eighteenth century. The number of musicians varied from year to year and from one town, or village, and another. In 1763 the musicians consisted of a group of four pipers and a tambourine who accompanied the procession. By 1765 the musical band for the feast of St Joseph at Rabat consisted of two pipers and two tambourines. These musicians passed through the streets of the town, or village, from where the procession was meant to pass in order to attract the attention of the faithful. The custom was still kept alive in the early British period when the musicians employed for the activity were recruited from among the rank and file of the British regiments (D'Anastas 1996b: 74-77).

Despite the popular participation in the *festa* activities one cannot ignore the role played by the parish clergy who continued to control practically all social and religious activities held in the village, or town community. It may be argued that the position of the clergy was rather strengthened under British Rule (1800-1964). The Maltese politician and journalist, Herbert Ganado, relates an anecdote of his life experience as a young man in the 1920s. Ganado explains that when he was invited by a friend to the Siggiewi village *festa*, his father's friend asked him whether he had first been to see the parish priest. The man insisted with the young Ganado on the assumption that while the village doctor, lawyer, notary, pharmacist, police inspector, and sergeant all enjoyed an important social status, the parish priest was the undisputed head of the local community.

Festivities in the honour of the village saints became more elaborate and complicated throughout the British period. Village *festas* contained a combination of the primitive rituals of the sixteenth century *festa* and the elaborate celebrations organized by the Order. The changing social and political conditions of the nineteenth century inevitably helped to transform the village *festa*.

But the role of the village *festa* gained ground especially after the appearance of the band clubs

... which have proved to be the mainstay of the *festa* institution ever since. Parallel with the setting up of rival band clubs in most towns and villages... there was the breakaway movement in the villages which resulted in the celebration of secondary *festas* in quite a few parishes, the process being greatly encouraged and facilitated by the creation of new cults inspired by the apparition of Our Lady at Lourdes in 1858 and the

recognition to St Joseph as the Protector of the Church in 1879 (Cassar-Pullicino 1976: 37).<sup>22</sup>

Band clubs soon became very popular, and by the end of the century they had become a major social feature in both Maltese towns and villages. Although they were originally non-religious associations, bands soon became identified with parish rivalries and these were best expressed during the village *festa* (Cassar 1988: 108-109; Frendo 2004: 216-217).

Every Maltese village was, as it still is, placed under the patronage of a particular saint. During the nineteenth century, a *festa* in honour of the village patron saint began with fireworks on the eve of the *festa* day (Mac Gill 1839: 33). Horse and donkey races were sometimes held while, on the *festa* day itself, young and old attended Mass in the morning and abstained from all manual labour. Time was spent in wholesome amusement, singing, and dancing to guitars. Naturally food was of better quality on *festa* days (Mac Gill 1839: 33).

It seems that very little had changed by 1913. A popular pamphlet, published that year by Giovanni Battista Mamo of Luqa, relates how the Maltese villagers enjoyed themselves on *festa* days (Mamo 1913).<sup>23</sup> They preferred to pass their time near the sea, especially at Birżeppuġa, Marsaxlokk, Ĝhar Lapsi (off Siġġiewi), St Paul's Bay, and Mellieħa, and at other places where, among other enjoyments, they sang popular tunes (*għana*). A most popular form of *għana* consisted of a flying contest between two men. This usually ended up with a brawl, in which people pelted each other (Mamo 1913: 7-8).

On important festivities, people from various areas would congregate at the village that was celebrating its *festa*. Mamo cites as an example the *festa* of Mellieħa, the northernmost village in Malta, yet he mentions how people from Valletta, Qormi, Żejtun, and other places congregate on such occasions. The majority, however, came from the two villages of Qormi and Żejtun which were noted for their love of *għana*, as were those of the Valletta *Manderaggio* and of Cospicua (Mamo 1913: 10). One can best

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<sup>22</sup> See also Boissevain 1965: 91-92.

<sup>23</sup> This pamphlet was kindly brought to my notice by Mr Nathaniel Cutajar.

appreciate how keen the people were to visit such places if one keeps in mind the rudimentary system of transport. Mamo recalls that, on this occasion, his uncle came with the mule-cart at two in the morning to wake him up. From Luqa to Mellieħa it was a long journey, and they arrived at dawn. He also mentions the food they carried with them: two three-*rotolo* loaves of bread, made of mixed barley and wheat (maslin); a kerchief full of goat cheeses; half a dozen turnips; a jar of home-made wine; dried figs; and other items. Despite the difficulty to reach their destination, people from all areas of Malta flocked to the participate in the *festa* according to Mamo (Mamo 1913: 11).

Since the Second World War the *festa* celebrations have changed drastically. The great event of the *festa* is still the procession with the patron saint's statue through the streets of the town or village. The interior of the church is still decorated with rich swathes of damask, and the silver and gold treasures are polished and put on display. Yet there is much more glare and noise in the modern day *festa*. Feverish preparations for the *festa* are fanned by the rivalry of the band-clubs of which there are at least two in most villages. During the week preceding the *festa* 'friendly' bands are invited to participate in the village celebrations.

There is an unmistakable festive air about the village during this time with bells ringing merrily and continuously. The streets are hung with flags, banners, paper decorations and wooden pillars with life sized *papier mâché* statues. Many houses in the town, or village centre, are neatly white-washed for the occasion. And the balconies, in particular, are decorated with damask drapes and the image of the saint. Improvised food-stalls sell nougat and *imqaret* (deep-fried date filled pastries), or *pastizzi* (ricotta and pea baked pastries). These have recently been over-shadowed by hamburger and chips stalls, hotdog stalls, as well as other modern fast food items. But no self-respecting *festa* would be without fire-works usually costing the village thousands of Maltese liri. The fireworks – which in the eighteenth century were prepared by the artillerymen of the Order's army, or else commissioned from nearby Sicily for the great occasions – had since the last two decades of the nineteenth century been produced by Maltese craftsmen aided by a number of volunteer helpers for the *festa* (Cassar-Pullicino 1976: 37). Months before the *festa*, a dedicated band of men start working on the fire-works in earnest. They mix chemicals, prepare designs and pack

the petards. They finally put the prepared petards in brown packages for storage. The results of months of dangerous work and thousands of Maltese Liri (local currency) collected from the villagers on a door-to-door basis are displayed on the eve and on the *festa* day. Each year a novel combination of colours and shapes is put up as a dazzling aerial display amidst the admiration of the on-lookers. But perhaps the most awaited spectacle are the street fireworks. These are set on poles which are fixed inside holes in the main village square. They are set-up a few hours before they are let off, an hour before midnight on the eve of the *festa* celebration, each one a tantalizing array of shapes and models.

Modern day *festa* celebrations have been elaborated further to include a noon-band march and parade on the *festa* day in which many demonstrate and drink heavily. While on the day after the festival a one day outing, *xalata*, is organized towards one of the beaches. This outing is an elaborate form of picnic, and many participants travel to the chosen beach on decorated cars and buses amid loud singing and music playing. They spend the day swimming and feasting. It is the *xalata* which really terminates the *festa* activities.

In 1935 the Church authorities took steps to reduce the importance of the secondary *festas* which began to compete with the titular *festas*. The parish priest had to approve the organization of these festivities including the decorations, fireworks, and band marches while the police faithfully followed his instructions. Despite similar restrictions by 1961 the number of band clubs had gone up to 56 shared between thirty odd villages and towns. Nineteen localities had rival band clubs and there emerged rival *festa* celebrations (Vassallo 1979). This issue has most recently been discussed at some length by Raymond Saliba, an expert of *festa* celebrations in Malta, who points out that in spite of the growing opposition from the Church Curia over the last few decades, some of these rival parties were originally encouraged by parish priests themselves. Saliba argues that these rivalries are now well-entrenched in some Maltese localities and cannot be changed overnight as some parish priests would probably wish to see. Furthermore one needs to be realistic and appreciate that the modern *festas* are more than just the religious celebrations they were originally intended to be (Saliba 2004: esp. 181-183).

Several prohibitions on *festa* activities in recent years have shown

that official Church quarters consider the modern *festa* activities discussed above with contempt, often subversive, at times immoral, or perhaps simply boorish. But one must not forget that for the clergy, the people are the laity. Indeed since the closing session of the Council of Trent (1564) the people were often seen, explicitly or implicitly, as 'Them' as opposed to 'Us'. In the centuries following the Council, and indeed until quite recently, 'Them' included a large majority of illiterates. However matters have changed drastically over the last half century. In an age when most of the clergy study at a university and gain a degree, those associated with the celebration of 'unacceptable' *festa* activities are, in general, those who lack degrees, in short the uneducated. However it is wrong to associate active participation in village *festa* activities with the lesser educated because *festa*-fans hail from the rank and file of Maltese society and they form a much larger audience which includes even lay graduates.

### **Conclusion**

The intention of this general overview of *festa* celebrations in Malta is to show how over time the activity has been transformed from a simple religious activity into an elaborate social performance. One can say that cultural adaptations over time have played an important role in the drastic change of the *festa*. Over the years several entities have tried to 'reform' the *festa* celebrations and the way the ordinary people perceive popular culture in Malta.

We have seen how during the early phase of the Order's rule the cultural distance between the parish priests and their flocks was not very great. The priests had not yet been trained in the seminary – indeed only from 1593 were priests trained at the Jesuit College and it was only in 1703 that a proper seminary was set up. Yet this traditional culture, however stable it may appear in retrospect, was not static.

With the passing of time one comes across attempts by canon lawyers and theologians, as well as apostolic visitors, or indeed inquisitors, who tried to introduce some form of control in the organization of religious festivals. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the newly trained parish clergy played a fundamental role in teaching the rudiments of the church to the

largely illiterate mass of the faithful. They not only tried to 'purify' popular religion but were even able to regenerate new devotions, particularly towards the sacraments, processions and the veneration of saints. Traditional popular culture eventually succumbed to the changes that were introduced in the later years of the Order of St John in the Harbour towns around Valletta. It resulted from the influence of the Great Tradition (that is the culture of the city as the cultural power-house) on village life. In fact villages went on to absorb and adopt elements of city life in such a forceful way that they made them their own. The architectural boom that spilled from the new city into the surrounding countryside during the rule of the Order of St John had such a great impact on the Maltese countryside that by the eighteenth century most villages could boast of a parish church that was built on a magnificent scale (Mahoney 1988: ch. 8). The resilience of traditional popular values was thus undermined by technological and economic change.

There was also a trend to transform the concept of leisure. We have seen that official festivities were celebrated with great pomp in Valletta and the Harbour towns and how they were often imposed by the publication of edicts and decrees. By the eighteenth century the dominance of the Harbour area over the countryside was so complete that villagers began to celebrate their parochial activities and *festas* on a grander scale. Thus it appears that the *festa* was already becoming influenced by the political and commercial changes of high culture in that century. At the same time we see the elites deliberately distancing themselves from popular culture, withdrawing, for example, from participation in carnival and other festivals.

In the nineteenth century, under British Protestant rule, the Church enjoyed a dominant position in Malta. It was a state of affairs which led to a situation where the Maltese maintained a cool relationship with the British (Protestants), mixing very little until the 1930s. We have seen how the islanders continued to depend directly on the local priests, making the Church the centre of village life, and the parish-priest its first citizen. On their part the British authorities, whose main concern was to keep matters under control in their island-fortress, respected the position of the church hierarchy and they made it a point not to interfere in church matters. Thus under the British Protestant government the Catholic ritual was given predominance in important state functions; religious

instruction, according to the Catholic principles, was imparted in all Maltese schools; and canon law was indiscriminately applied to all Maltese with respect to marriage. Consequently civil marriage and legal divorce did not exist in British Malta. One may say that the local church hierarchy and the British government managed to develop a *modus vivendi* thanks to which the Church enjoyed a privileged position (Cassar 2000a: 40-44). Despite the impact of the new industrial work rhythm introduced by the British to run their Island-Fortress efficiently, Maltese traditional activities were not really affected and instead of reducing the traditional *festa* they kept on adding and elaborating their activities. This tendency applies to all parts of Malta including the countryside where the commercialization of agriculture, and improved communication systems, had helped transform local popular culture. In the villages the *festa* was by then being organised on lines similar to those held in the major towns.

In post Independence Malta, the rapid growth of the tourist industry became the main reason for the popularization of popular culture. In short the *festa* activities became mostly associated with leisure and economic gain. What we can say for sure is that the concept of leisure has changed radically from earlier times. Leisure as we mean it today is a by-product of industrial capitalism. The popularization of the traditional festivities among the locals, and the visiting foreigners, are part and parcel of the social preconditions and consequences of a changing value system that has also helped, directly or indirectly, to transform the way the Maltese celebrate their *festa*.

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