

Wrapping up a Zealous Life - The Discovery of an Eighteenth Century Parish Priest's Will

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The day was 30th April 1743. The moribund parish priest of Nadur, Don Giovanni Andrea Falson lay on his deathbed, still in his full senses, directing notary Antonio Madlane to write down every detail of what was to become of his worldly possessions. Falson passed away a few hours later on 1st May at the age of 73 after spending roughly half of his life, at the helm of the Nadur parish.

Context

Falson steered the eastern-most parish of Gozo through thick and thin. Born on 23rd September 1670, probably in Għarb, Giovanni Andrea was baptised on the same day by Don Giovanni Antonio Camilleri, Archpriest of the Gozo Matrice.¹ At that time, the rural settlement of Għarb was still part of this parish. His father Ignatio, the son of a meat seller called Carolo, hailed from the area known as 'il-Belliegħa' in Rabat, just beneath the Castle, while his mother Antonia was most probably from Għarb as well.² Ordained to the priesthood on 23rd October 1695, the young priest immediately commenced his pastoral ministry in his presumably home parish of Għarb, established as a separate parish on 29th August 1679. Not long after, he assumed the responsibility of being the assistant parish priest to Don Giovanni Maria Camilleri. Among other responsibilities, he oversaw the construction works of the new parish church of Għarb, which started in 1699. This skill would later on become an asset for the young priest.³

Across the island, Nadur experienced the death of its first parish priest, Don Bernardo Haber in 1705 and eventually between 1705-1706, Falson was entrusted with running the parish as vicar-curate. In 1706 Don Ignatio Hagijs, from Valletta, was chosen to lead the parish. This only lasted for around two years, and his tenure was brought to an abrupt end by serious accusations he faced (Bonnici, 1984:163-164). In

1708, Bishop Davide Cocco Palmieri promoted the young Falson to lead the Nadur parish as its third parish priest. He was then thirty-eight years old and ready to take on the responsibility of the largest parish of Gozo in terms of territory, encompassing today's Nadur, Qala, Għajnsielem, Imġarr and the island of Comino, and with a total population of around 600 people (Bonnici, 1984:163-164). Figures from a 1715 Status Animarum indicate a booming population with 400 adults and a relatively high figure of 200 who were enlisted as being young (Bonnici, 1984:163-164). By the end of his life, the population increased to 1,143 persons.⁴

The presence of the Hospitaller Order of St John in Malta since 1530 brought about more stability and security in terms of defence from foreign threats (Fiorini, 1993:309). This, no doubt, was a catalyst in the ruralisation of Malta and Gozo, and contributed towards the clustering of new villages near the coast. In Falson's parish, the government constructed a tower, known vernacularly as Ta' Sopu between Daħlet Qorrot and San Blas between 1667 and 1680, while more coastal defences were commissioned in the first half of the eighteenth century around Ramla l-Ħamra and another redoubt at Ras il-Qala in 1731-1732. The memory of 1688, when Cocco Palmieri established the parish, and therefore automatically recognised the status of a new village, was still fresh in the minds and hearts of the parishioners. Following the tenures of Don Bernardo Haber and Don Ignatio Hagijs, who had laid the foundations of the infant parish, it was Falson's turn to prove Cocco Palmieri right in entrusting him with this ministry.

Falson's Tireless Work in the Parish of Nadur

Immediately, Falson's name appears in the parish registers, administering the day-to-day sacraments of baptism and marriages, joyful occasions in

¹ Gozo Cathedral Parish Archive, Bapt., 3 (1646-1673), f.340.

² Gozo Curia Archive, Capitula, Processus super erectione Collegiatae Insulae Gaudisii, f.53r.

³ <http://www.għarbnat.com/history/history3.html> (accessed on 5th June 2017).

⁴ This figure was derived from a Status Animarum during the first months of parish priest Don Salvatore Grech on 1744 (Bonnici, 1984:198).

their own right, while presiding over funerals and internments in the parish church. The liturgy was an essential part of his ministry, with daily masses, annual feasts, processions and other devotional activities. Every main altar in the church was run by its own procurator, while two confraternities – that of the Holy Sacrament, founded as early as 1690, and that of the Holy Rosary in 1705 – assumed a central role in the spiritual and social improvement of the parishioners. During the leadership of Don Giovanni Andrea, the latter confraternity commissioned the first ever statue of the new parish – that of Our Lady of the Rosary. It was carved entirely out of a mulberry trunk. The statue was later transferred to the present parish church where it still goes around town in the annual Holy Rosary procession held on the first Sunday of October (Bonnici, 1984:191).

His name is intimately linked with equipping the new parish church for liturgical and devotional functions. Besides large-scale projects such as proceeding with its construction – which had initiated in the 1690s, opening a new cemetery around the church – built between 1723 and 1729, and commissioning a new bell, several other additions were urgently needed. He ordered two new confessionals to be placed on either side of the church. By 1736, he managed to buy a new organ and placed it in the main balcony above the main door of the church and commissioned a new painting depicting Our Lady of Light, discussed infra (Bonnici, 1984:189-190). One of his final projects was the restructuring of the high altar in 1742, currently preserved in the north sacristy of the church.

The Integrity of the Human Being

The first half of the eighteenth century witnessed a generally downtrodden, financially-deprived population, although a section of the population was better-off than the rest.⁵ Rural life was generally harsh, short and highly dependent on climatic factors such as fluctuating rainfalls or droughts, the spread of disease and pests. One such instance occurred on 6th April 1743, just a few days before Falson's death. A hail-storm killed several animals, indispensable for work or nutrition, and destroyed crops, notably wheat



Our Lady of Light, 1736, St Peter and St Paul Collegiate Basilica, unknown painter.

and barley (Agius de Soldanis, 1936:122). This was coupled by a declining, yet still present, threat from Barbary pirate raids. When in 1733 one such raid composed of seventy-five pirates and headed by Bet-Kit from Sfax (modern Tunisia) who was acting for a converted Genovese called Mustafà, landed in the dead of the night in Ramla l-Hamra, an entire family of six people, save the eldest son who was sleeping a stone-throw away from the house, were carried to North Africa as slaves. Fortunately for this family, whose father was Giovanni Mercieca known as 'tal-Indju', a happy ending followed suit. Enslaved in the household of a kind Muslim woman, they seemed to have provided a very good image of their own religion, since this lady eventually converted from Islam to Christianity on her deathbed and after being so gentle and understanding when the Gozitan wife was about to

⁵ In a 1667 census, 63% of the population was enlisted as *capo di casa povero*, while the remaining 37% were better off as they enjoyed a regular income. The former were thus exempted from paying tithes (Bezzina and Muscat, 2007).

give birth to her slave child. After approximately two years, the entire family was redeemed from slavery and returned to Gozo to tell their story.⁶

Disease and child-mortality were high, mainly due to very poor hygienic and health conditions, aggravated by malnutrition (Cassar, 1993:445-449). Education was mostly inexistent and illiteracy was rife. On the other hand, society was composed of strong-family units and quite homogenous in terms of beliefs and religious practice (Cassar, 1993:445-449, and Bonnici, 1993:337). They accepted common values and worldviews, together with a shared history and identity. Preceding Abraham Maslow by more than two centuries, Falson understood well that his pastoral ministry could only be carried out after the parishioners' basic material needs were met.

Upon initiating a new project of commissioning a new bell for the newly built parish church in 1711, a collective effort was needed to raise the required funds. Sadly for him, when he drew up his will in 1743, the bills were still unsettled. Such was the building of the parish church which had started in the 1690s, and was still incomplete when he died.⁷ This clearly shows the deprived material conditions which afflicted the parish. Falson explicitly paid a sum of money to the slaves who worked on the casting of the bell, even though he knew perfectly well that it was a painful feat to raise enough money for the bell itself, let alone for added expenses such as was this (Bonnici, 1984:183). Nevertheless, his respect for human dignity made him go out of his way. Eventually he ended up paying a sizeable portion of the overall price for the bell from his very own pocket.

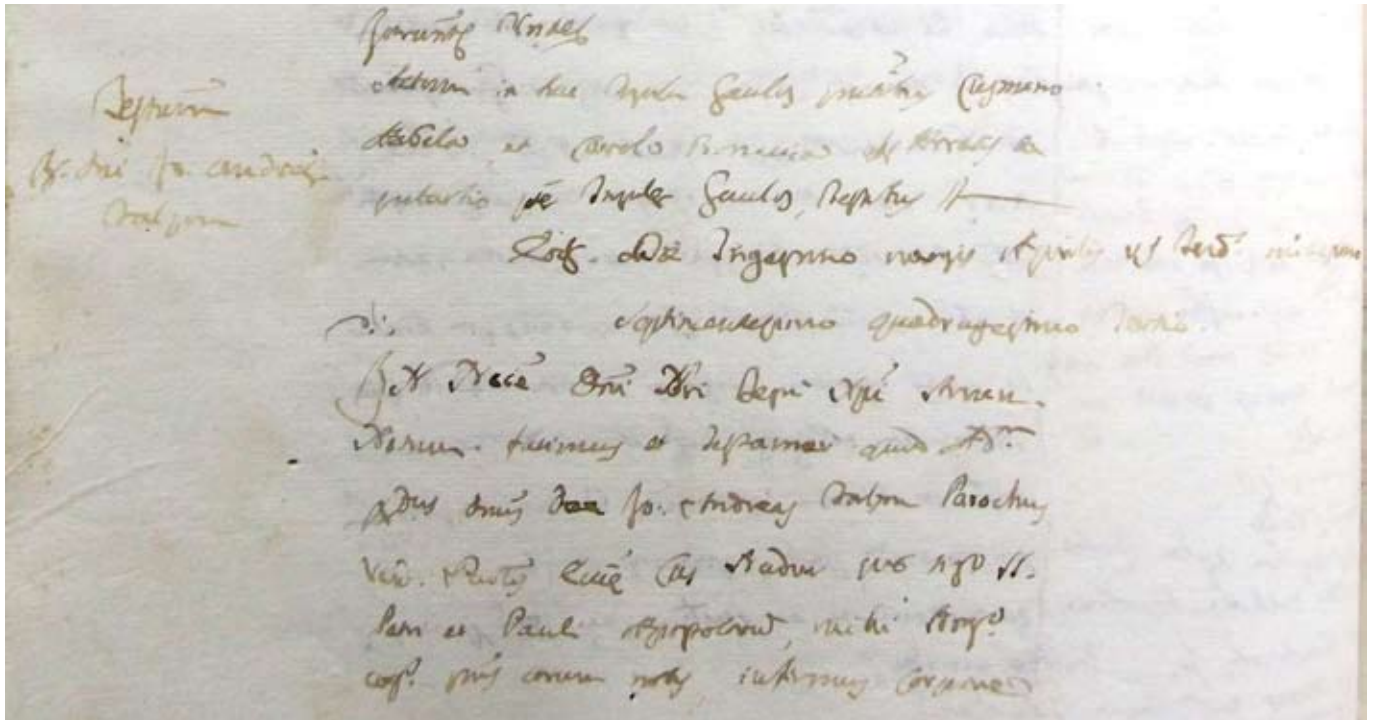
Acting proactively, and in a sense revolutionary by providing the fishing rod rather than the fish, Falson ordered that lands bestowed or owned by the parish were to be tilled by hired labourers. This ensured a means of living for several families under his care (Bonnici, 1984:183). Moreover, evidence suggests that he strongly believed in education as the key

to alleviate the material and social condition of the people. In 1721, he pleaded to the Ecclesiastical Authorities to grant him a licence to give children some basic education, namely grammar and other elementary subjects. This was to complement his duty as curate of teaching catechism on a regular basis. A similar licence was already granted to the parish priests of Xagħra and Għarb, while in Rabat this had already been in practice. Permission was officially granted on 22nd July 1722 (Borg, 1972:230-241). These were the birth pangs to a lengthy process of democratising education among the working classes. Later on in the eighteenth century the latter philosophy found Maltese advocates like the enlightened Michele Antonio Vassalli who filed an application in 1795 for the opening of a 'public and normal school of reading and writing in the Maltese language' – the only tongue used by the great majority of the Maltese working class people (Ciappara, 2006:75-76). These efforts by priests to educate children was also the start of a process of transition from informal to formal state-provided education in the following century.

Fusing together the spiritual with the material, the traditional feast of l-Imnarja, celebrating the martyrdom of St Peter and St Paul, was given importance during Falson's term, and thus provided an opportunity for the people to entertain themselves. As from 1720, the festivities started taking place in an ancient garden known as Il Boschetto, limits of Dahlet Qorrot and bordering another garden called Ġnien Musfar, with food, entertainment, dance, and races for people and for animals. The winners earned trophies which were funded from the rent of lands donated by Grandmaster Emmanuel de Vilhena. The highest dignitaries of Gozo, including the Knight-Governor of the island and members of the Università, attended this feast which took place after the solemn Vespers in the parish church dedicated to the saints (Bonnici, 1984:169-170); Mifsud, Pelagio, 152v; Agius de Soldanis, 1963:23; Agius Sultana, 2016:607). These celebrations continued to exist through the centuries that followed.

⁶ This striking narrative was documented by two contemporary history-writers: Giovanni Pietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis and Pelagio Mifsud with some variations. (Agius de Soldanis, 1936:121.) Also Malta Cathedral Archive, [Padre Pelagio], Notizia VII, Misc., 55, 152v.

⁷ It is rather ironic that just a few years after Falson's death and after decades of building the first parish church, in 1760 parish priest Don Salvatore Galea laid the foundations for a new larger parish church, due to the ever-increasing population, and eventually demolished the previous one (Bonnici, 1984:193).



The initial lines from the will.

The End of Falson's Term and Life

At 73, Don Giovanni Andrea was still carrying out his work to the best of his abilities, and his name persistently appears in the baptism, marriage and death registers of the parish. That is, until a few days prior to his death. The first sign of ill-health was Michele Muscat's baptism on 22nd April 1743 which was recorded by Don Domenico Cassar, his assistant. In a matter of a few days, his condition seemed to have deteriorated rapidly and on 30th April he summoned notary Antonio Madlane to his house, together with seven witnesses, all hailing from Nadur. Those were Don Publio Vella, Don Francesco Tabone, Don Gregorio Attard, Andrea Speranza, Angelo Camilleri, Michel'Angelo Tabone and Pietro Portelli.⁹ Time was ripe to distribute his material possessions before taking his last breath, which happened just a few hours later on 1st May 1743. His will saw the light 274 years later when it was discovered by the present author and published for the first time.¹⁰

Leaving a Legacy

This will is recorded in notary Antonio Madlane's manuscripts in the Notarial Archives, Valletta. It gives a detailed record of the parish priest's possessions, and a bird's eye view of Falson's personality. Despite not being born or raised in Nadur, he spent almost his entire priestly ministry in that parish, and became intimately attached to its people. The first orders concerned his funerary arrangements. He desired to have a modest funeral with his corpse leaving the parish house (which most probably was on the right side of the church) and proceeding towards the parish church, accompanied by six priests.¹¹ His death record was written by his assistant, Cassar, who also noted that the funerary rite was presided by himself.¹² On top of this, Don Giovanni Andrea chose to be buried in the parish church in which he officiated as parish priest, rather than his home parish, and his wish was fulfilled.¹³

As was the practice in those times, suffrage for a deceased person's soul was considered fundamental

⁸ Mifsud, Pelagio, 152v.

⁹ Notarial Archive Valletta, Testamentum Reverendi Domini Joannes Andreas Falzon, Antonio Madlane, R323, vol. 24, 135r.

¹⁰ For a transcript and translation (in Maltese) of the will, see Luminaria, St Peter and St Paul Parish – Nadur, June 2017, no. 126, 38-44.

¹¹ Testamentum, 132v.

¹² Nadur Parish Archive, Mort., vol. 1 (1689-1761), 85.

¹³ Ibid.

in order to accelerate the transition from purgatory to heaven. Towards this cause, Falson dedicated 100 scudi (€24) to be spent on masses for his repose and to be specifically celebrated in the same parish church. This was to be paid for using the standard rate of two tari (€0.04) per mass on each first, second and last days of each month, together with another one on the anniversary of his death. Little perhaps did he think that his actual death anniversary was to coincide with the first of these dates.¹⁴

Next on the list came his deceased family members. 110 scudi (€26.40) were to be spent on repose masses for his father Ignatio; his mother Antonia; his sister Maria; his grandparents Margerita Habela and Monsika Darmanin; Giovanna Maria Habela; Michael' Angelo Habela; Aloisio Habela; Adeodato Habela; Maria and Giovanni Maria Habela - 10 scudi each (€2.40). This sum was even larger than the 100 scudi he dedicated towards his soul's suffrage. The parish priest did not necessarily possess these lump sums in cash. In fact he offered some of his immovable property to be sold in order to finance these masses. Four annual anniversaries were set up by Falson himself, when these masses were to be held at the same rate of two tari per mass, namely the day of his own death; a day during the octave following the solemn memorial of All Souls for his parents; on 30th June for Giovanni Maria and Antonia Habela; and a day during the novena of the blessed Virgin Mary for his grandparents. For an unknown reason, Falson omits his male grandparents from both his maternal and paternal sides, and only mentions his female ones.¹⁵

From the spiritual realm, Falson then moved to the material one. 10 scudi were bequeathed to Giovanni Battista Hellul's children at the rate of two tari per scudo. These were to be handed over in the form of a legate. This family resided in Ħal Tarxien Malta.¹⁶ It is already established that the priest had relatives residing in Malta. Padre Pelagio Mifsud, a Capuchin from Ħaż-Żebbuġ, Malta, boasted of being related to him in a document describing Nadur and its two

most important churches: the parish church and the Immaculate Conception Sanctuary, dating to the years following 1764.¹⁷ 10 more scudi were bequeathed to Josepha Cumbo in regular instalments, starting in the fourth year following his death and for a period of ten years, with one scudo annually.¹⁸ All this money totalled 230 scudi (€55.20).

The will then specified what was to become of his immoveable property. Falson divided these possessions between his relatives and his beloved parish of Nadur. Six individuals were appointed as universal heirs of this will. These were Ipollito Habela; Cosmano Habela; Giovanni Tommaso Habela; the children of Giovanni Battista Habela, deceased; the children of Grazia Camilleri, deceased; and the children of Valu? Habela.¹⁹ It is highly probable that these individuals were entirely selected from Falson's mother Antonia's Habela family. They were entitled to an equal share of one sixth each.²⁰

These universal heirs were bound to sell lands owned by Falson in 'Tal-Virtut', in Għarb. Furthermore, the dying priest prohibited the use of the *Lex Falcida* and the *Quarta Trebellanica*. *Lex Falcida* was an ancient law written by Publius Falcidius and used since Roman times. This law stipulated that an inheritor could only refuse three quarters of the bequest, and had to accept the other remaining quarter (*Quarta*).²¹ By prohibiting the *Lex Falcida* and *Quarta Trebellanica*, Falson ensured that his heirs accept, willingly or not, his bequest. It is highly likely that the reason behind this decision was to ensure that the money needed to pay for the repose masses and the bell were adequately raised from his possessions, and not from the heirs' pockets, as this would have been unfair.

As already referred to earlier, since 1711 Falson was busy raising money for the first bell to be cast for the new Nadur parish church. Despite an incoming flow of money during these first years, and a personal donation of 25 (€6) scudi, thirty-two years later the bill was still unsettled. He wanted to

¹⁴ Testamentum, 132r-v

¹⁵ Ibid., 132v – 133r.

¹⁶ Ibid., 134v.

¹⁷ Pelagio Mifsud, 160r.

¹⁸ Testamentum, 134v.

¹⁹ This name was not clear in the document and the most possible version of it was given here.

²⁰ Testamentum, 133r.

²¹ Testamentum, f.133 r-v

be responsible by not burdening his successor with debts and bequeathed a piece of land known as ‘tal-Vlece’ in Qala to be rented and therefore settling the remaining debts by paying 25 scudi annually from its generated rents. Falson’s worries were legitimate, since thirty two-years of collecting money for a bell were undesirably overstretched. He also ordered his universal heirs that should the land in Qala not generate 25 scudi annually, they were obliged to pay them from their own pockets! Upon the settlement of the bell-debt, the land was to be sold, and its proceeds channelled to finance the running of the side-altars of St Peter and St Paul’s parish church, divided in four equal shares: for the altar of the Holy Rosary; for that of the Holy Souls; for the altar of Our Lady of Light, and the last fourth for that of St Francis of Paola. All this was to be offered for his main preoccupation, that is, the repose of his soul.²² These altars were administered by procurators who were also responsible for organising the feast celebrations respectively. The altar of Our Lady of Light was that of the Immaculate Conception, since the small Our Lady of Light painting was commissioned to complement the former by Falson himself around 1736. He was perhaps one of the earliest disseminators of this devotion to our Lady of Light in Malta.

Another contributor towards raising the required lumps of money for the repose masses mentioned earlier on was a piece of land known as Ta’ Chiparem. Upon the fulfilment of the required masses obligations, this land was to be sold with the proceeds being shared between the universal heirs of his will.²³ Finally, the dying Falson had only one possession left to hand on. This consisted of a small garden in ‘Tal-Virtut’, Għarb, bequeathed to Ipollito Habela in the form of a legate.²⁴

Conclusion

Documentary evidence about Don Giovanni Andrea Falson portrays a caring and prudent pastor in charge of a growing parish, with the daily occupations of the parishioners being mainly agricultural or maritime in nature, and where life was harsh and simple. His proactivity in trying his best to alleviate the people

²² Testamentum, 133v-134r.

²³ Ibid., 134 r-v.

²⁴ Ibid., 134v.

from poverty and illiteracy while working tirelessly to run the parish on a daily basis, including the liturgical aspect, and the better equipping of the parish church, are perhaps the best biographical certificate of this priest. His will further testifies to a sense of responsibility and resignation of a dying priest who cared for his flock, settled his debts and unfinished projects such as the bell, without omitting his biological relatives. His love for the Nadur parish was forever immortalised by his deeds as well as by his burial in St Peter and St Paul’s parish church.

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