

Ġorġ Gauci: The Talented Craftsman and Carpenter from Gozo

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Introduction

Nicknames still play an important role in our islands especially when one is trying to make a find-out about a particular person. Gozo, being the smaller island of the archipelago, with a community where people know each other well, nicknames are still commonly used. Ġorġ Gauci, the renowned craftsman whose name is attached to the parish Basilica of St George in Victoria, was and still is referred to now that he has passed away, as Ġorġ ta' Frallillu.

Ġorġ Gauci was born in Library Street, Victoria on the 23rd of May 1926, the son of Wiġi Gauci and Marija neè Tabone. Ġorġ was the third child among five, the others being Ġużeppi, Francesco, Nazinu and Dolora. When he was still a young boy, he frequented St George's Parish Church on a daily basis and was also an altar-server. While attending school in Victoria, he showed a special ability in all types of crafts. Although an intelligent student, his preference was for manual rather than academic pursuits. When still a teenager, he began to work as an apprentice carpenter with Emanuel Sacco, a carpenter from Victoria, brother of Canon Carmelo Sacco and father of Canon Joseph Sacco, both

of Victoria. He spent twenty-five years working with Sacco; later on he set up his own workshop which was situated in St Ursula Street, in the area known among the people of Victoria as "wara ta' Ghedrin". He spent the last part of his working life as a carpenter employed with the government.

Family Life

Ġorġ married Vitorine Vassallo at St George's Basilica on the 7th of October 1962. At this point in time, he was already the most sought after carpenter by the Archpriest of Victoria, Mgr Michael Cefai, later Vicar-General of Gozo. Mgr Cefai carried the title of Archpriest of the Cathedral Church, which is the fourth ranked dignity within the Collegiate of the same Cathedral, as well as Parish Priest of St George's in the old town of Rabat. Therefore, enjoying the confidence and trust of such an important prelate involved quite a lot of work.

Ġorġ had already been instrumental in the excavation process that led to the building of the side chapels of St George's Parish Church. He became so much involved that on one occasion he accidentally found himself buried under some stones and was fortunate enough to survive. One has to keep in mind that by helping out in the project of the enlargement of the church, Ġorġ was giving his input in favour of his own parish church, the church in which he was baptised, confirmed and even entered Holy Matrimony; this was the church of his forefathers. So zeal and love accompanied by a sense of belonging were never lacking. Ġorġ was about 36 years



Archpriest Mgr Michael Cefai conducting the Marriage for Ġorġ and Vitorina on 7th October 1962.



Mgr Giuseppe Farrugia celebrating nuptial Mass of Ġorġ Gauci and Vitorine Vassallo on 7th October 1962.

the saint. Various portraits and sacred objects of the small church were transferred to St George's Basilica. Contemporaries of Ġorġ Gauci, including Francesco, son of Emmanuel Sacco, himself also a carpenter, who knew Ġorġ practically inside out, remembers Ġorġ helping out at St James' Church in Independence Square. The small church is renowned for its devotion for Our Lady of Sorrows.

old when he got married and the couple had three children: Louis (1963), Marlene (1966) and Ġorġ (1973). Ġorġ was a dedicated husband and a much loved father; quiet and reserved but a workaholic in the good sense of the word, and his company was sought by one and all.

Ġorġ's Love for Churches

Ġorġ had a special love for churches. Whenever he went abroad, the local churches were his favourite places of interest. It is understood that Rome was his favourite city with its multitude of churches and basilicas dotting every corner of the eternal city. So it is no surprise that Ġorġ was involved in the building of the canopy designed by Carlo Pisi of Rome for the parish church of St George.

When Ġorġ was married in the same church, only the four plinths for the standing columns were ready. Later on, Ġorġ helped Pisi to put in place the *baldacchino* which a much faithful but smaller copy of the tribuna at St Peter in the Vatican. Ġorġ served also as sacristan of the tiny church of St Joseph which used to stand in front of St George's Church. The small church was popular with Gozitan villagers who used to visit Victoria in the morning for their daily errands; many devotees used to enter the church to say a short prayer or to express their devotion for St Joseph. When the church was demolished to make space for St George's Square, the street leading from St George's Square to It-Tokk, now Independence Square, was named after

Ġorġ used to help the rector of the church in his preparations for the feast of the titular saint on the 25th of July. He practically served as sacristan during the weeks preceding the feast and Mgr Ġużeppi Farrugia known as Ta' Menzja, who served as rector of the church for many years, found in Ġorġ a right-hand man. Various people who knew Ġorġ well would narrate how his conversations always had churches as their main theme.

A Dedicated Craftsman

Ġorġ lived in a period when St George's Church was not only being enlarged but also embellished. Before the Second World War, Archpriest Mgr Alfons Marija Hili had supervised the building of the upper part of the church's dome. Since the Earthquake of Saint Iginio which had devastated Gozo on the 11th of January 1693, St George's had been without a dome; strictly speaking only its drum survived. The actual dome and lantern were destroyed. Vitor Vella, the renowned Gozitan mason from Żebbuġ, (Vella Muscat, 2009:157-158) had built it again and restored it to its former splendour. At the same time, the side chapels known in Maltese as the "navi" had been built, rendering Charity Street and St George Street – the streets on each side of the church – even narrower. Ġorġ was born and bred while these works were taking place. For Ġorġ and hundreds of other parishioners, this must have seemed as the golden

age in the history of their parish church. As he grew older, Ġorġ helped both priests and laymen in the embellishment process.

The Ambitious Project of the Dome and Side-Chapels

The project of the building of the side-chapels and the completion of the dome were supervised by Archpriest Mgr Alfons M. Hili. However, when Hili died in 1944, the work was not yet finished. The church's vault was about to be painted. A Roman painter, Gian Battista Conti, was chosen for this arduous task. Pawlu Pace, a Gozitan living in Rome, known locally as Pawlu tax-Xejxier was married to the daughter of Italian marmista Carlo Pisi (1897-1979), had commissioned Pisi to oversee the installation of the new marble within St George's Church. Pawlu Pace had taken up residence in Rome after having married one of Pisi's daughters, Gigliola; he was a cousin of the Bishop of Gozo, Mgr Giuseppe Pace and has been

described as 'the agent and intermediary of Pisi in Malta' (Sagona, 2007: 6). Ġorġ helped in this process and at a later stage, he was the right hand man of Maltese sculptor Giuseppe Galea of Rabat (Malta) who was in charge of the artistic decoration of the church's vaults (Galea, 2000).

Another ambitious project commissioned by St George's Parish Church for Carlo Pisi was the *baldacchino* or canopy for the same church which was a replica of Bernini's Baldacchino also referred to as the Altare della Confessione in St Peter's at the Vatican. Ġorġ Gauci was involved in the installment of the canopy; the four columns which hold the *baldacchino* are made of wood. Ġorġ helped also in the placing of the new baptismal font made in marble by the same Pisi and which was put at the back of the church on the right hand side entering the Basilica. A new high altar for the church was commissioned and made by Pisi in 1960 and it is made up of four kneeling angels carrying the altar table on their wings. Sagona states that the symmetrical marble work includes a portrait of the artist's daughter Gigliola shown as the left-hand angel on the front (Sagona, 2007:8).



Ġorġ Gauci (left) holding the 'Salib tal-Bażilika' which he carved out of wood.

The Making of the "Bredella"

The "bredella" is the square piece of furniture upon which a statue is put for the veneration of the faithful especially on the saint's feast-day or during the days preceding it. The "bredella" for the statue of Saint George was made by Ġorġ Gauci in 1967. The fact that the parish chose Ġorġ to carry out this important piece of work shows the high esteem in which he was held. Although Ġorġ finished the work in wood in 1967, there was still work to be done on the "bredella". Various bronze pieces were to be inserted in order to make it more attractive; the first pieces arrived in Gozo on Saturday, the 9th of July 1994 (Vella, 1997:85), a week before the celebrations in honour of St George which take place on an annual basis on the third Sunday of July and the preceding week. Small statues of saints connected with St George were made out of bronze by Maltese bronze sculptor Joseph Chetcuti. Chetcuti was helped by Anthony Xuereb, a parishioner and a maker of small statues. The statues were previously modelled by Chev. Alfred Camilleri Cauchi, a renowned Gozitan sculptor



Ġorġ Gauci standing besides the “bredella” which he made in 1967.

who lives in Malta. The project of the “bredella” was supervised by Mgr Anton Grech Vella, one of the most illustrious benefactors of St George’s Basilica.

Into his late eighties, George could still be seen spending long stretches of time at St George’s, either praying before the Blessed Sacrament or otherwise looking at the vaults of the church. Whenever he opened his mouth to say something, the subject would be related to the church which he loved and cherished and on more than one occasion, he expressed to the author his wish that the church’s vaults would be restored. He said more than once that since the church was painted in the first place, the vaults had never been restored or looked after and they were in dire need of restoration.

Conclusion

Ġorġ Gauci died on the 28th of December 2016 at the age of 90 years. He is survived by his three children Louis, Marlene and George. His funeral Mass took place at St George’s Basilica on Friday the 30th of December; Archpriest Mgr Joseph Curmi referred to St George’s as ‘Ġorġ Gauci’s second home’. Wherever one looks in St George’s Basilica, he is expected to see artistic works on which Ġorġ worked and dedicated his

time and energy. I believe I would not be guilty of exaggeration if I were to apply to him the epitaph that Sir Christopher Wren, the designer of London’s St Paul’s applied for himself; *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice* - If you seek my monument, look around you.

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