

FROM A SUFFRAGAN TO A METROPOLITAN SEE

WITH the conquest of Malta by Count Roger in 1090, the Island became dependent on the Rulers of Sicily. On July 10, 1154, Pope Hadrian IV declared the Maltese See, governed at the time by a certain Bishop Stefano, suffragan to that of Palermo, which was the metropolis of the Sicilian Kingdom.¹ And thus it remained for almost seven centuries.

Since 1098, the Kings of Sicily claimed and exercised the right to present to the Pope the candidates to be invested with the bishoprics within their dominion, Malta included.² This right of royal patronage was retained jointly with some other rights by the Sicilian Kings, even after the cession of the Island to the Knights of St. John in 1530.³

In 1797, during Bishop Vincenzo Labini's bishopric the title of Archbishop of Rhodes, which at the time had no residential Bishop, was joined to the See of Malta.⁴ This honour continued to be bestowed upon the Bishops of Malta up to the year 1928, when the Rhodian See was re-established in that Island.⁵

After the Treaty of Paris (1814), the only right which survived in the Sicilian Crown over Malta was the nomination of the Bishop. The British Government had already, since 1801, attempted to do away with this last remnant of Sicilian jurisdiction over the Island. At their instance, the Holy See ordered the temporary suspension of the Palermitan Archbishop's authority over the Maltese Church.⁶ This was followed by the dismemberment of the Maltese Religious Communities from their respective Sicilian Provincials during the second decade of the century.⁷

In 1829, Bishop Ferdinando Mattei, the successor of Mgr. Labini in the See of Malta, died. A controversy arose between the Crown of

¹ ABELA-CIANTAR, *Malta Illustrata* (III.I), Vo. II. p. 18.

² JUNGSMANN B., *Dissertationes Selectae in Historia Ecclesiastica*, Vol. V, p. 45.

³ ROYAL MALTA LIBRARY, *Manuscripts* — Deed of Cession.

⁴ ARCHIEPISCOPAL ARCHIVES, *Correspondence* 1796-1801, P. 1., f. 88.

⁵ *IBID.*, *Correspondence* 1928, f. 4.

⁶ *IBID.*, *Correspondence* 1802-04. Consalvi to Labini 4.x.1801, f. 356. Cfr. also BONNICI A., *Dismemberment of the Maltese See from the Metropolitan See of Palermo in Melita Historica*, II.3., p. 179.

⁷ LAFERLA A.V., *British Malta*, I., p. 116, fn. 2b.

Sicily and the King of England, as to who of them had the right to nominate or present the next candidate for the Bishopric. For 19 months the Maltese See remained without a Pastor, because of this collision of rights. This caused the British Government to drive home his policy of dismembering definitely the Maltese See from that of Palermo, in order to extirpate the last connection of the former with Sicily.⁸

During his Mission to Rome in 1829, Sir Frederick Hankey, the Chief Secretary to Government, made a formal proposal to the Cardinal Secretary of State Albani, for the direct dependence of the Maltese diocese, in ecclesiastical matters, on the Holy See.⁹ In 1831, both the Maltese and the Palermitan Sees happened to be vacant. The Governor Frederick Ponsonby asked the Papal Secretary, Cardinal Bernetti, to avail himself of this opportunity of the double vacancy to dismember the former from the latter See, by erecting it an Archbishopric.¹⁰ The Cardinal referred His British Majesty's desire to the Pope, who instructed the Secretary of the Consistorial Congregation to issue the respective decree of the dismemberment. The Pope, however, did not deem it advisable to erect the Maltese See into an Archbishopric, since it had no Suffragan Sees. He was only too willing to continue to honour the Bishop of Malta with the title of Archbishop of Rhodes *in part. infid.*¹¹ The Apostolic Letters for the separation were issued on June 21, 1831, four months after the Holy See had appointed the nominee of the British Government, Mgr. F.X. Caruana.

Less than six years after this dismemberment, the inhabitants of Gozo launched a petition to His Holiness Pope Gregory XVI to create a new Episcopal See at Gozo. They simultaneously asked King William IV to condescend to the erection of a Gozitan See with a residential Bishop, and begged him to present as their first Bishop the Archdeacon Salvatore Lanson, who had afforded the inhabitants much spiritual assistance during the plague and on other occasions. The petition pointed out several disadvantages which the Gozitans were suffering for want of a local Pastor.¹² The Archbishop was not contrary to the proposal, but he re-

⁸ BONNICI, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 179-180.

⁹ ROYAL MALTA LIBRARY, *Despatches* 1829 - Report Hankey to Ponsonby: 24.xi. 1829, ff. 288-291.

¹⁰ ARCHIEPISCOPAL ARCHIVES, *Correspondence* 1833 - Ponsonby to Card. Bernetti: 17.ii.1831, ff. 275-279.

¹¹ *IBID.*, *Correspondence* 1831-32, ff. 33-34.

¹² ROYAL MALTA LIBRARY, *Despatches* 1837: ff. 92-97.

mind the Governor that a dismemberment could not be canonically effectuated, if not during the vacancy of the See. After Governor Bouverie's suggestion, Lord Glenelg, the British Secretary of State, postponed the matter until a vacancy would actually arise.¹³ Indeed the dismemberment did neither occur during Mgr. Caruana's episcopate, nor during that of his successor, Mgr. Publio M. Sant.

In 1848, the Gozitans submitted another petition to that effect through the Catholic Governor Sir Richard More O'Ferrall. The Holy See took note of the petition and, in Mgr. Gaetano Pace Forno's Apostolic Bull of Appointment (1857), it was laid down that the Holy See could carve away any part of his See¹⁴. In 1860, His Holiness Pope Pius IX showed his inclination to meet the Gozitans' wish and to appoint a Bishop or a Vicar Apostolic in their Island. The British Government showed no objection to this.¹⁵

After being shelved for another three years, the issue was tackled again, this time with a more determinate purpose. Dr. Michele Buttigieg, Archpriest of the Gozitan Mother-Church since 1848, was ordained Titular Bishop of Litta and appointed Auxiliary to Archbishop Pace Forno. On September 22, 1864, he was proclaimed Bishop of Gozo.¹⁶ Thus was the See of Gozo dismembered from that of Malta and erected into an independent See directly subject to the Holy See. Thus it remained up to the end of the year 1943.

On the 23rd October 1943, the Holy Father, Pope Pius XII, deigned to depute Mgr. Michele Gonzi, who had been Bishop of Gozo for almost 20 years, Coadjutor with the right of succession to the Bishop of Malta Mgr. Mauro Caruana, and named him Apostolic Administrator of Gozo '*ad nutum Sanctae Sedis*', with the faculties of a residential Bishop and the title of Bishop of Lyrbe.¹⁷

With the death of Archbishop Caruana on the 17th December of the same year, Mgr. Gonzi succeeded to the Maltese See. Ten days later, the Pope conferred upon him the personal title of Archbishop.¹⁸ On the 1st of January 1944, an Apostolic Bull was issued elevating the Cathed-

¹³ *IBID.*, *Despatches* 1837 — Bouverie to Glenelg 26.i.1837, 29.i.1837, ff. 77-78; 276.v.

¹⁴ LAFERIA A.V., *op. cit.*, I. 247.

¹⁵ *IBID.*, I. 248.

¹⁶ ARCHIEPISCOPAL ARCHIVES, *Correspondence* 1864.

¹⁷ *IBID.*, *Correspondence* 1943, Rome No. 31.

¹⁸ *IBID.*, *Correspondence* 1944, Rome No. 10.

dral Church of Malta to the rank and dignity of a Metropolitan Church and granting that Church, its Archbishops, and its Chapter at all times the rights, priveleges, insignia, honours and prerogatives enjoyed by the Metropolitan Churches, their Pastors and their Cathedral Chapters, and imposing upon them all burdens and duties of other Metropolitan Churches.¹⁹

By the same Bull the See of Gozo, which since its erection in 1864 had been immediately subject to the Holy See, was declared suffragan to the Metropolitan Sees in Malta. The two See: e in the Sister-Islands started to form together the Maltese Ecclesiastical Province.

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¹⁹ ARCHBISHOP'S PALACE. The Apostolic Letter is reported in full in BONNICI ART., *Ingress Solenni ta' l-Arcisqof Mons. Gonzi*, pp. 4-7.