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Church Bells and Street Fighting

Birkirkara and Don Joannes Matheo Camilleri (1545-57)¹

In a country with a deep-rooted Catholicism such as Malta, cases and stories about the 'misbehaviour' of priests and clerics have always attracted the attention of one and all. One of G. Wettinger's most widely read works is in fact a paper on clerical concubinage between 1420 and 1550,² not least because of the on-going debate in Catholic countries as to whether or not Catholic priests should be allowed to marry.³ In late medieval and sixteenth-century Europe the clerical estate extended far beyond those in priestly orders and contained a vast underbelly of men who were technically clerics, but who in effect lived as laymen. The effect of this was severely to blur the line which in theory separated the clerical estate from the rest of society.⁴ In this vein, the unfolding of Joannes Matheo Camilleri's life presents a clear-cut example of those practices which the Tridentine Church would be vigourously addressing from the second half of the sixteenth century.

While extensive use has been made of notarial acts for the reconstruction of late medieval aspects of life, their use for the Early Modern period has so far been limited. Preference has usually been accorded to the Inquisitorial Records. In an attempt to depart from the main stream, this case study has taken as its backbone sources from the notarial records of Notaries Juliano Muscat, Giuseppe Deguevara, Antonio Cassar, and Placido Abela. Naturally, this does not mean exclusivity and the information obtained is complemented by a case from the Archbishop's Court, and another case from the Archives of the Inquisition. The cardinal point about notarial acts is that they were essentially private records. Although the notary was a public figure of great weight in society, his records were intimately private. Every act was the result of the coming together of different parties in front of the notary

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– sometimes because it was stipulated by the law, but often voluntarily – to record some aspect of their daily lives.⁵ Among the first duties of all notaries was to listen diligently. The notarial acts, written in Latin, do lose in proximity to the mother tongue, but they gain in proximity to the remembered experience of the individual, with all its specificity.⁶ That is why greater attention should be given to notarial records as sources for the reconstruction of social patterns in Early Modern Malta.

A Contested Accession

On 12 February 1545, the Noble Nicola Camilleri, father and administrator of the Noble Cleric (not yet a priest) Joannes Matheo Camilleri, presented to the Venerable Brandano De Caxaro, Apostolic Notary, an Apostolic Bull to be presented to the Reverend Matheo de Surdo to execute. Through this document Joannes Matheo Camilleri was to obtain the curateship of the parish of St. Helena and St. Mary of Birkirkara. Nicola Camilleri also wanted Brandano to present the Bull to Bishop Cubelles and read it to him (*notificare et legere dictas bullas apostolicas Rev. Don. episcopo melivetano*). In a separate entry of the same day, Brandano said that he would only read the Bull to the Bishop if Nicola Camilleri did not find anyone else willing to do it as he respected the Bishop.

Presumably Brandano must have had an itching of the troublesome career ahead of Joannes Matheo Camilleri and therefore wished not to get too associated with him. In a further separate entry of the same day, Nicola Camilleri ordered Brandano to proceed and read the Bull to the Bishop. He told Brandano that his excuse was frivolous (*responsione cum facta ex quo friviola*), and that, as both Public and Apostolic Notary, it was his duty to read out the Bull to the Bishop.⁷

The following day, 13 February 1545, the Noble Nicola Camilleri filed another protest. This time the protest was addressed to the Reverend Matheo de Surdo, canon and official of the dioceses. Nicola Camilleri reproached Surdo for not executing the Bull in the face of opposition by the Reverend Josepho Manduca, the Vicar-General of the dioceses. The following day, on the 14 February 1545, Matheo de Surdo said that he would obey and execute the Bull.⁸

A few days later, on 18 February 1545, the case got more complicated. A new protest was filed, this time by the Reverend Matheo Surdo against the Reverend Laurentio de Caxaro, because the said

Laurentio, on the orders of the Reverend Josepho Manduca, was stopping him (Matheo) from executing the Bull. Surdo told Laurentio to stop interfering, but apparently, Laurentio kept on defying Matheo because two days later, on 20 February 1545, Matheo filed another protest against Laurentio telling him not to interfere in the choice of the witnesses.⁹ Clearly, the lure of such an important office as that of curate of Casal Birchircara was attracting the attention and greed of different officials of the Curia. At this point we also witness the beginning of a life-long enmity between Joannes Matheo Camilleri and the Vicar General of the Diocese, the Reverend Josepho Manduca.

It is to be noted that, while the mother figure was more of a protector, fathers were often older, distant, but powerful figures who could do favours for their sons. Careers in the Church were an intrinsic part of the magnates' and bourgeoisie's search for social status and recognition. Thus the Noble Nicola Camilleri got his son, Joannes Matheo Camilleri, the profitable office of curate of Birkirkara.

Before proceeding with this study a clarification ought to be made. The exact post which was held by Joannes Matheo Camilleri is somewhat enigmatic. In the documentation analysed, Camilleri was alternatively described as curate, rector and chaplain of Birkirkara. On the other hand, Ferris¹⁰ does not list Camilleri as one of Birkirkara's chaplains – in fact he doesn't mention him at all, while Vella¹¹ describes him as chaplain from 1545 to 1557. For the sake of consistency, and because the Apostolic Bull specified the post of curate, this will be the title adhered to throughout this work.

Rape and Scandal at Birkirkara

At the end of the day, Joannes Matheo Camilleri did manage to become both a priest and rector of the parish of Casal Birchircara. He also had a son by the name of Ascanio.¹² The (now) Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri soon proved to be a fitting successor to his predecessor, Don Joannes Pisano, who had been accused of illicit relations with Agatha Spiteri in 1542 and openly boasted of cuckolding more than ten of his parishioners (*haver facto cornutj ultra diechj personj dicta parrochis*). Don Joannes Pisano was in fact forced to resign from his post.¹³

Between May and August 1553 the people of Birkirkara found themselves caught up in the crossfire between the Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri and *presbiteru* Don Antonio Michalief. Reverend

Joannes Matheo Camilleri approached Notary Giuseppe Deguevara to file a protest against Don Antonio Michallef and his behaviour during two Sunday masses in the months of May and June. According to Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri, Don Antonio Michallef had postponed divine service (*ad missam celebranda ... postponendo divinij cultus*) and from the altar he had accused him (Camilleri) of having raped the daughter of his maternal uncle, that is, his own cousin (*exponentem de stupro ... ipse Reverendus rector stupraverit filiaz sui patruj*) using such diabolical language (*diabolis verbis*) that he scandalised the parishioners (*maximo scandalo ipi populj*) and horrified the Chaplain (*Reverenduz capellanuz ab horribat*). Don Antonio Michallef had therefore accused Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri of the double crime of rape and incest.

The Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri feared that his traditional enemy, Don Josepho Manduca – who was charged with investigating the case – might try to sideline the accusations against Don Antonio Michallef (*temere objectos silentio no pretermitttere tenore querelationis et lamentionis actus contra eusdem presbiteru domum Antoniu Michallef*). Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri felt adamant that Michallef had accused him of rape (*Infamia de stupro*) and that he had exposed his cousin to such infamy (*exponente filiam suj patruj stuprasserit diffament*). The following day, Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri chose the Honourable Nicolo Haxixe to read (*Lecta et declaram*) this protest to Don Antonio Michallef.¹⁴

As far as the acts of Notary Deguevara are concerned, the story ends there, and we cannot say whether the accusation of rape was true or mere slander. However, this was not the only instance where the Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri had disputes with the ecclesiastical authorities and his parishioners.

Church Bells and Street Fighting

No sooner had the dust settled over the alleged rape case that the people of Birkirkara once again found themselves the victims of another of Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri's quarrels, this time with Magister Johannes de Arena. Camilleri was ordered by the Maltese Episcopal Court to pay de Arena 10 uncie for the sale of a bell (*unis campane*) together with 1 uncia 1 tareno and 4 grani expenses. Camilleri refused to pay up and through his attorney Magister Luca Vella¹⁵ argued that this court order was null and void, since an appeal had been lodged with the superior Metropolitan Church.¹⁶

In the meantime, Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri reported that de Arena, with seven armed men (*manu armata*) violently forced the people of Birkirkara indebted towards Camilleri to pay him (de Arena) the Church taxes of first fruits (*premitie*) owed to Camilleri, smashing open doors (*buttandolj li porti*), robbing them of goods including their bedcovers (*il copri di lecti*). These Church taxes gathered by de Arena were however larger than the sum owed (and here we get an insight into the level of some prices in 1555), as in this island grain was sold at 4 tarenì per tumino, barley at 2 tarenì 8 grani per tumino, and cotton at 1 aquila per pesa.¹⁷

Palermo Intervenes

The Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri filed a protest against Don Jacobo Calleya who had sued Camilleri in the Episcopal Court causing his imprisonment (the first of a series of imprisonments). Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri argued that he had two sacks containing 2½ cantari of spun cotton in his Birkirkara house which he had sold to someone in Naples (*regno neapolis*) for 50 scudi per cantaro and he now applied for leave to let his attorney fetch the sacks to the buyer, which permission was denied.¹⁸

The vexations of Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri did not fall on deaf ears. The Archbishop of Palermo, Don Petrus de Arragona (*sic*) issued a decree in favour of Camilleri against the Bishop of Malta, and attacking the unfair behaviour of the Vicar General Josepho Manduca towards Camilleri, who has placed him in prison several times and had him interrogated by several priests on the Mass and his doctrine, thus forcing Camilleri to appeal to his Lordship. For this, he was put in irons (*carcerati in canteni*) and detained like an infamous criminal without any proof against him.

The Metropolitan court ordered Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri to be released and, through its notary Vincenzo Polizzi, agreed to Camilleri's request to have all the material relating to Camilleri's case, including the information on the alleged rape, sent to the Metropolitan court. At first the Maltese Court refused to release Camilleri and even sent its steward to confiscate all the goods found in Cailleri's home, including the sacks of cotton and many other things. Eventually the Maltese Curia had to let Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri go, after five months in jail, but he was still being impeded from leaving Malta.¹⁹

Negligence and Protestant Influence?

Notary Antonio Cassar, on behalf of the Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri, after Mass, read out to his parishioners the list of accusations they were hauling at him:

- People were dying without being administered last rites;
- Corpses were left in Church for 2 or 3 days without permitting them to be buried;
- Being late a day or two in administering the sacraments to the sick;
- Causing scandal in the way in which he exposed the host in a wooden box on a frame on the main altar (*una buxula de lingo supra el scambello dilo cono dilo altare*);
- Making Holy Oil himself;
- Telling his congregation that it was not a sin to eat fat, meat, eggs, cheese and cheeselets on the prohibited days citing the gospel which says that not what enters from the mouth pollutes man but what comes out of it.

Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri naturally denied all these accusations and he left the island to pursue his case in Palermo, requesting his parishioners to present proof of their claims in writing within ten days and be willing to appear in the Metropolitan Court to make their accusations.²⁰

By the time the Knights of St. John disembarked on the shores of Malta in 1530, the island's population had been streamlined into a community with an overall homogenous character. With the expulsion of the Muslims in 1249 and the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, the remaining community was, to a large extent, native to the island and Christian. Malta had its traditions and way of life as is evidenced by the phrase *juxta usum melite*,²¹ however, the presence of the Knights in Malta now exposed it to Protestant influences and the fact that the Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri was questioned about his doctrine and was accused of dismissing the days of prohibition, points to a real concern among the local hierarchy about Protestant infiltrations.²²

Murder Most Horrid

The animosity that had been growing between Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri, his parishioners and his fellow priests, finally spilled over in a bloodbath. According to Ascanio Camilleri, his father Reverend

Joannes Matheo Camilleri was murdered by Don Jacobo Calleya and others one August night in 1557. Ascanio found his father's dead body upside-down in a well (*viddi che donno Matheo Camilleri mio padre qua morto dentro lo puzzo co lo capo In giu', et li piedi In su*). Ascanio Camilleri uttered these words as he gave witness in front of the Inquisitor and Apostolic Delegate Mgr. Pietro Dusina on 12 April 1575, 18 years after the murder of his father.²³

The testimony given by Ascanio Camilleri is fascinating on a number of levels. First of all, it is fascinating as a story, with its details, intrigues and violence. The story of Ascanio is made even more interesting by a number of reported speeches which we are told were uttered in vulgar Maltese (*Udi io tabarni*²⁴ *ala maltese*) but which were unfortunately written down in Italian. This is Ascanio's description of that faithful night:

My father and I were in bed. I was not yet asleep and I had a little candle. The rooms were at the top of the stairway. I heard noises in the house and Maltese being spoken ... strangers had broken into the house. I heard them say in Maltese, 'Come on let's kill this ass'. Then I heard again in Maltese, 'He has a son, and if he should hear or see us, we have to kill him'. These words frightened and confused me until I was overtaken by sleep ... The next morning I was woken up by knocking on the door. When I went out onto the balcony (*l'apraco* ?) I saw Mastro Agostino Calleya who upon seeing me went away satisfied (*sene ando sodisfatto*). I began calling my father but was answered instead by one Monica, who took care of the lamp in the enclosure within the chapel. She said 'Go to the well (*lo puzzo*) and you will find your father'.²⁵

Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri's life came to an end in a well. He was succeeded by Dun Giuseppe Bellia who, according to Mgr. Dusina, had two concubines, one of whom lived at Birgu (Mgr. Dusina described her as *una grassa*; they must have had their liaisons in one of a number of properties which Bellia owned in Birgu).²⁶ With her he spent four days of the week to the detriment of his parish.²⁷ The story narrated by Ascanio had a strong dose of sadism in it: thus, Mastro Agostino Calleya was satisfied (*sodisfatto*) to have awoken the young Ascanio and caused him alarm about his father. Then there is Monica's

black-humoured way of announcing to the young boy that his father was in the well. Near the end of the testimony Ascanio also reported how he had been told how pleased (*comi compari piaciuto*) Don Jacobo Calleya was about the death of Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri.²⁸

In retelling such an account of bloodshed, which must have left sorrow, terror and regret in its wake, I found I was sometimes laughing.²⁹ But for the victims in such stories there must have been little to laugh about which leads to the second observation about this testimony which is related to its structure. Turning a terrible action – such as the murder of one's father – into a story is a way to distance oneself from it, at worst a form of self-deception, at best a way to pardon the self.³⁰ Ascanio must have forever been haunted by a sense of guilt at not having lifted a finger to help his father.

Thirdly, such a case, taken together with what went on before, provides interesting particulars about small-island power setups. On one side one finds the enemies of Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri: Bishop Cubelles and the Vicar General Manduca on a diocese level, Don Antonio Michallef, Don Jacobo Calleya and Dun Giuseppe Bellia on a parish level. On the other, his supporters included his father, his son, and Archbishop Petrus de Arragona of Palermo.

With the local Church hierarchy – from the Bishop downwards – ranged against Ascanio and his dead father, the young man could hope for very little justice and understanding. Ascanio alleged that when the authorities of the Città Vecchia went to Birkirkara, the Bishop ordered that the body of his father be left in the well. Although Mastro Agostino Calleya was imprisoned, the Bishop did not hang him (*non li fece haver corda*) as was expected in such cases. Moreover Ascanio also alleged that the Bishop had promised the rectorship of Birkirkara to the person who first brought him news of the demise of Reverend Joannes Matheo Camilleri.³¹ In such circumstances, and probably following his father's example, it seems only natural that Ascanio's last hope for justice – and revenge – lay in the person of an outside authority like Mgr. Dusina, who was not involved in local power setups and networks.

Conclusion

Social relations were extensive, variable, and constantly changing.³² Even in a small island like Malta people lived their lives within different social settings which were nonetheless concurrent and overlapping. The people of mid-sixteenth century Malta were not a homogeneous

mass, but individuals whose experience of life was influenced by many factors: their gender, wealth, age, marital and social status and the type of community in which they lived.³³ The essentially private nature of notarial acts helps to highlight all of these aspects in a very intimate way. The lives, actions and interactions analysed in this case-study show the existence of a vibrant popular culture in mid-sixteenth-century Malta, existing outside the limelight of the *histoire evenementielle*. Furet argued that the only way to reintegrate the masses into history was through demography and sociology, through numbers and anonymity. However, as Ginzburg argued, the characteristics of particular social strata within a specific time-frame can be discerned in the typical or atypical behaviour of individuals handpicked from the masses.³⁴ In this vein, the case study of Joannes Matheo Camilleri encapsulates a whole array of social relationships – father and son, notary and client, lower clergy and higher clergy, and priests and parishioners. These formed the rhythms that determined the pattern of daily life in pre-Tridentine Malta.

This paper does not want to give the impression that clerical squabbling and concubinage were restricted to Birkirkara. Similar patterns existed throughout the island and in other Catholic lands.³⁵ However, such an example from the clergy as that of Joannes Matheo Camilleri must have caused great annoyance among the laity. With the advent of the Inquisition, Malta was to enter the main currents of the Counter-Reformation.³⁶ Dun Giuseppe Bellia was to be followed in 1594 by Dun Filippo Borg, described as one of the first great products of the Counter-Reformation in Malta. For the first time in a century Birkirkara had a rector who was celibate.³⁷

Notes

¹ This paper is an expanded version of the case study about Joannes Matheo Camilleri found in E. Buttigieg, *Fifteen Years Into Hospitaller Rule: A Study of the Acts of Notary Juliano Muscat, 1545*, (B.A. Hons., University of Malta, 2002), 68 – 71.

² G. Wettinger, 'Concubinage among the Clergy of Malta and Gozo, ca. 1420 – 1550', in *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, vol. vi, no. 4, (Malta, 1977), 165 – 88. During a lecture at the University of Malta on 25 April 2002, Wettinger said he believed that his paper on clerical concubinage was the most widely read of his works.

³ M. Laven, 'Sex And Celibacy in Early Modern Venice', in *The*

Historical Journal, vol. 44, no. 4, (Cambridge, 2001), 866.

⁴ J. Bergin, 'Between estate and profession: the Catholic parish clergy of early modern western Europe', in M. L. Bush (ed.), *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification*, (London and New York, 1992), 68 – 9.

⁵ C. Violante, *Atti Privati e Storia Medievale, Problemi di Metodo*, [Fonti e Studi del Corpus membranarum italicarum], (Rome 1982). Note Violante's emphasis on the private nature of notarial records in the very title of his work.

⁶ N. Zemon-Davis, *Fiction in the Archives – Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth Century France*, (USA, 1987), 22.

⁷ N[otarial] A[rchives] V[alletta] [= NAV], Notary Juliano Muscat, R376/11, f.508-509v., (12.ii.1545).

⁸ NAV, Notary Juliano Muscat, R376/11., 509v.-510v., (13.ii.1545).

⁹ NAV, Notary Juliano Muscat, R376/11, f.517-f.518, (18.ii.1545).

¹⁰ A. Ferris, *Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, (Malta, 1866), [Facsimile Ed., 1985], 319.

¹¹ E. B. Vella, *Storja ta' Birkirkara bil-Kollegjata Tagħha*, (Malta, 1934), 500.

¹² Wettinger, 'Concubinage among the Clergy of Malta and Gozo, 169.

¹³ C[uriae] E[piscopalis] M[elitansae] [= CEM], A[cta] O[riginalia] [= AO], Ms 22, f.120, (13.xii.1542).

¹⁴ NAV, Notary Giuseppe Deguevara, R778/1, f.39-f.40, (3.viii.1553).

¹⁵ NAV, Notary Antonio Cassar, R160/1, 601v.-f.602, (9.viii.1555).

¹⁶ NAV, Notary Antonio Cassar, R160/1, f.602-f.604, (9.viii.1555).

¹⁷ NAV, Notary Antonio Cassar, R160/2, 172v.-f.174, (4.xi.1555).

¹⁸ NAV, Notary Antonio Cassar, R160/1, f.614-f.615, (12.viii.1555).

¹⁹ NAV, Notary Antonio Cassar, R160/2, f.273-f.278, (14.i.1556).

²⁰ NAV, Notary Antonio Cassar, R160/2, 381v.-382v., (6.iv.1556).

²¹ NAV, Notary Juliano Muscat, R376/11, f.611v., (19.iii.1545).

²² C. Cassar, 'The Reformation and Sixteenth-Century Malta', in *Melita Historica*, vol. x, no. 1, (Malta, 1988), 52.

²³ A[rchives of the] I[nquisition] M[alta] [= AIM], Processi IA, 'Contra donnum Jacobum Calliam', f.297- f.300, (12.iv.1575).

²⁴ V. Nicotru, *Dizionario Siciliano-Italiano*, (Catania, 1883), p. 835; Tabarni is an adaptation of the Sicilian adjective Tabariatu. Lingua tabarna means vulgar or heavy language.

²⁵ AIM, Processi IA, 'Contra donnum Jacobum Calliam', f.297- f.300, (12.iv.1575).

²⁶ NAV, Notary Placido Abela, R04, 167v.-169v., (23.ix.1558).

²⁷ G. Aquilina OFM and S. Fiorini, [Eds.], *Documentary Sources of Maltese History*, Part IV Documents at the Vatican, No. 1 Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Congregazione Vescovi e Regolari Malta: Visita Apostolica no. 51 Mgr. Petrus Dusina, 1575, (Malta, 2001), 68.

²⁸ AIM, Processi IA, 'Contra donnum Jacobum Calliam', f.297- f.300, (12.iv.1575).

²⁹ Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*, 114. Davis recounts going through these same sensations during her work on the pardon seeking tales.

³⁰ Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*, 114.

³¹ AIM, Processi IA, 'Contra donnum Jacobum Calliam', f.297- f.300, (12.iv.1575).

³² P. Ariès, 'Introduction', in R. Chartier (ed.) *A History of Private Life, III – Passions of the Renaissance*, (Cambridge Massachusetts, and London England, 1989), 3.

³³ A. Rowlands, 'The Conditions of Life of the Masses', in E. Cameron (ed.) *Early Modern Europe*, (Oxford University Press, 1999), 31.

³⁴ C. Ginzburg, *Il Formaggio e I Vermi – Il Cosmo di un Mugnaio del'500*, (Torino, 1976), xix.

³⁵ Laven, 'Sex and Celibacy in Early Modern Venice', 865.

³⁶ C. Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta*, (Malta, 2000) 225.

³⁷ G. Wettinger, 'Early Maltese Popular Attitudes to the Government of the Order of St. John', in *Melita Historica*, vol. vi, no. 3, (Malta, 1974), 258.