

THE DISMEMBERMENT OF THE MALTESE SEE FROM THE METROPOLITAN SEE OF PALERMO

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The only right which survived in the Sicilian Crown over the Island of Malta after the Treaty of Paris (1814) was its pretension to the nomination of the Bishop of Malta. The best way to do away with this pretension was that of rendering the Maltese See independent of that of Palermo, to which it had been a suffragan for centuries.

Since the year 1801, Great Britain had expressed its view of not acknowledging foreign Metropolitan Powers in Malta, and the Holy See, in order not to compromise the Bishop or hurt the British Government's feelings, ordered the temporary suspension of the Palermitan Bishop's authority over the Maltese Church (1).

Earl Bathurst, the Secretary for War and the Colonies, had since the year 1813 instructed Governor Maitland to deny the Palermitan Archbishop his supremacy over the ecclesiastical affairs of Malta as positively as the pretensions of the King of Sicily to the sovereignty of the Island. It looked logical to him that, once the Sicilian King had lost all right of sovereignty over Malta, in order to avoid complications, the Diocese of this Island should no more be dependent upon that of the Metropolitan of Palermo (2).

The first step towards the attainment of this end was the dismemberment of the Maltese Convents from their respective Sicilian Provinces, which happened for the Augustinians in 1817, for the Carmelites in 1818 and for the Friars Minor in 1819 (3).

In 1823, at the request of Bishop Mattei expressed in two memoranda dated 8 November 1822, and with the intent of destroying the last link which tied Malta to the Crown of Sicily, Maitland proposed to the Court of Naples the exchange of the Maltese Bishop's property at Lentini in Sicily for some lands of the Benedictines of Catania in Malta, which gave a revenue of £300 a year free from the payment of any tax. The gross amount collected from the property at Lentini was about £1,500 a year, out of which burthens of £1,000 were paid at Sicily to the Court of Naples, and £200 in the expenses of collection and management: thus leaving the rough proceeds of £300. This proposal, however, did not meet the Neapolitan Court's approval (4).

In 1829, the year when the British Parliament enacted the Emancipation Act in favour of the Catholics of Great Britain and Ireland, Sir Frederick Hankey, the Chief Secretary to Government in Malta, was at Rome negotiating with Cardinal Albani, the Secretary of State to His Holiness Pope Pius VIII, about the nomination of the successor to the deceased Archbishop Mattei.

Hankey, availing himself of this golden opportunity, made to the Cardinal the proposal of the direct dependence of our Diocese, in ecclesiastical matters, to the Holy See.

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- (1) ARCHIEPISCOPAL ARCHIVES (A.A.) Vol. 1802-4 — Consalvi to Labini: 4. x. 1801, p. 356.
 - (2) HARDMAN, W., *Malta under the French and the British Occupation, 1789-1815*, p. 526.
 - (3) LAFERLA, A.V., *British Malta*: Vol. I, p. 116 n. 2b.
 - (4) R.M.L., *Despatches, 1829* — Ponsonby to Murray — 9. ix. 1829, p. 236; A.A. Vol. 1822, p. 398.

In his report to Sir Frederick Ponsonby, Lieutenant Governor, the Chief Secretary stated that, in his interviews with the Cardinal, he learnt that it would not be a matter of great difficulty to obtain the Pope's assent that the Bishop of Malta become independent of any Metropolitan whatever, and that the title of Archbishop of Rhodes, which had been enjoyed by Maltese Bishops since the year 1797, be conferred on the Archdeacon Caruana by the Papal Bull constituting him the new Bishop of Malta (5).

On the 17th of February 1831, the Lieutenant Governor addressed a letter to Cardinal I.C. Bernetti, the Papal Secretary of State, stating that it was His Majesty's desire to put an end to the dependence of the Bishopric of Malta on the Metropolitan See of Palermo, a dependence which — he wrote — had become incompatible with the new situation of Malta, and baneful to the interests of the Catholic Population of the Island (6).

By this time the Metropolitan See of Palermo had also become vacant. Ponsonby, therefore, asked the Holy Father to avail himself of the opportunity of the double vacancy and dismember the Maltese See from the Palermitan, by erecting it an Archbishopric. If, however, this dismemberment were to delay the expedition of the Papal Bull in favour of Mgr. Caruana, the Capitular Vicar who was strongly recommended by the British Government for the Bishopric of Malta, he suggested that such question be put aside for the time being (7).

Unfortunately, this despatch reached the Cardinal Secretary of State some days after the meeting of the Consistory, which put an end to the long widowhood of the Maltese See by appointing Mgr. F.S. Caruana Bishop of Malta (8).

The Cardinal did not fail to refer His Britannic Majesty's desire to the Pope. The latter embraced the idea of dismembering the Maltese See from the Metropolitan of Palermo and of rendering it immediately subject to the Holy See. In conformity with this, he instructed the Secretary of the Consistorial Congregation to issue the respective Consistorial Decree. He did not, however, 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.* (9).

On the 12th of March, that is 11 days after the issue of the Papal Bull constituting Mgr. F.S. Caruana Bishop of Malta and Archbishop of Rhodes, the Cardinal Secretary of State addressed an Official Note to the Lieutenant Governor informing him of the Pope's intention to issue an Edict declaring the Bishopric of Malta directly dependent, in matters of Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction, on the See of Rome (10). The Lieutenant Governor gladly referred the satisfactory reply of the Cardinal Secretary of State to the new Archbishop (11).

On June 21, Pope Gregory XVI issued the Apostolic Letters whereby the Separation of our See from the Palermitan Metropolis was effected.

(5) *Ibid.* — Hankey to Ponsonby, 24. xi. 1829, pp. 293/4.

(6) A.A. Vol. 1833 — Ponsonby to Bernetti: 17. ii. 1831, pp. 274/5.

(7) *Ibid.*

(8) *Ibid.* — pp. 276/7.

(9) *Ibid.*

(10) *Ibid* and *Desps.* 1831 — Ponsonby to Goderich: 23. v. 1831, pp. 105/7.

(11) A.A. Vol. 1833 — Ponsonby to Caruana — 11. iv. 1831, p. 273.

The Bull was couched in the following terms:

“GREGORIUS Episcopus, servus servorum Dei — Ad perpetuam rei memoriam.

Ecclesias quae antiquitatis et divini cultus splendore in primis celebrantur, privilegiis augere de Apostolicae auctoritatis benignitate plurimum decet, ut inde maiores etiam stimuli populorum Religioni compareantur. Quoniam igitur episcopalis Ecclesia Melevitan. pluribus iampridem nominibus ac etiam titulo Archiepiscopali Rhodiensi insigniis, metropolitico iuri Archiepiscopatus Panormitani subiecta reperitur, eamque a metropolitana provincia seiungi omnium ordinum illius Insulae vota efflagitarunt, Nos graves ob causas postulationibus huiusmodi benigne annuendum censentes, et quorumcumque derogantes consensui, ex certa scientia et matura deliberatione Nostris antedictam Melevitanam Ecclesiam a legibus suffraganeatus, quibus Panormitano Archiepiscopatu obstringebatur prorsus eximimus ac liberamus, eandemque ex nunc in posterum Sanctae Apostolicae Sedi subiicimus, atque ita subiectam esse et nuncupari mandamus, omnibusque illam ornando praerogativis quos immediata id genus Apostolicae Sedi subiectio importat...

Datum Romae, apud Sanctam Mariam Maiorem, anno Incarnationis Dominicae millesimo octingentesimo trigesimo primo, undecimo Kalendas Iulii” (12).

The Bull was published in all Catholic Churches of the Diocese together with the news that His Holiness Pope Gregory XVI had also conferred at the new Bishop the titles of Domestic Prelate and Assistant at the Papal Throne (13).

Malta became henceforth immediately subject to the Holy See in spiritual affairs.

A gentlemen’s agreement was signed in March 1833, by Sir Fred. Ponsonby as Extraordinary Envoy and Plenipotentiary Minister of His Britannic Majesty at Naples and by the Prince of Cassaro, as Minister Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs on behalf of the King of the Two Sicilies. The latter, in order to avoid any further discussion on the right of nomination to the Bishopric of Malta and on the property of the Maltese Episcopal Mensa in Lentini (Sicily), animated by an unbounded deference towards his old friend and ally the King of Great Britain, and desirous to give evidence of his sincere friendship, renounced all the rights to the nomination of the Bishop of Malta and complied with the British proposal to exchange the Maltese Bishop’s property in Sicily for the Benedictines’ possession in Malta and Gozo (14).

Malta was henceforth uncontestedly directly dependent on Great Britain in temporal affairs, and immediately subject to the Holy See in spiritual affairs agreeably to the desire of the British Government (15).

(12) A.A. Vol. 1831-2, pp. 33/34.

(13) R.M.L. *Desps.* 1831 — Thornton to Goderich: 25. viii. 1831, pp. 225/6.

(14) A.A. Vol. 1833, p. 28.

(15) R.M.L. *Despatches* 1831 — Thornton to Goderich, p. 225.