

# The Ciantar Family of Gozo: The Għajnsielem-Xewkija Connection

GEOFFREY G. ATTARD

## Introduction

The second half of the nineteenth century is most probably the most important part of the 1800's in the history of the island of Gozo. It was during this period that the social, political and religious life of the island flourished to some extent and Gozo attracted the national news on a more frequent, not to say, regular basis. Various events took place during the last decades of the century; in 1864 Gozo became an autonomous diocese. Then, in 1887, Queen Victoria bestowed the status of 'city' to the ancient town of Rabat and it began to bear her name. In the 1860's the first musical societies began to take form and in 1881, two musical bands in Victoria were formally baptised.

## Ciantar: Its Gozitan Roots

According to Mario Cassar, Malta's foremost researcher on surnames and family names, 'Ciantar' was originally a Sicilian nickname which could have meant a professional jester. Later on it developed to become an occupational name referring to a singer (Cassar, 2003: 87). Delving deeper into the history of the surname, Abela mentions it under the name of Neygo

Ciantar in 1455 although a Federicus Ciantar was mentioned in the Militia list earlier on in 1419 (Cassar, 2003: 87). On the same note, the name of Count Giovanni Antonio Ciantar is often associated with Maltese History since it was he who wrote the renowned *Malta Illustrata* and published it between 1772 and 1780 establishing himself as one of Malta's early modern historians (Schiavone, 2009: 583).

When it comes to Gozo, we know from parish registers of a Ciantar in 1562 and the total of references to individuals with this surname counts up to six (Vella, 2010: 195). It makes sense to conclude that the first Maltese Ciantar to inhabit the island of Gozo must have settled in Għajnsielem, the village nearest to Mġarr harbour that connected and still connects the small island with its sister island.

## The Three Ciantar Clerics

The parish records of Xewkija, the first parish to be erected outside the walls of the medieval town of Rabat, refer to a Pietru Pawl Ciantar who was born on the 17th of June 1835, the son of Pawlu Ciantar and Francesca nee' Grech (Borg, 1978: 36). He was baptised in the Xewkija parish



From left to right – Archpriest Pietru Pawl Ciantar, his niece Francesca, and his nephews Dun Pawl and Dun Salv Ciantar.

church; his father Pawlu hailed from Rabat, Malta and he used to cross over to Gozo to check over some property that the family had in Għarb<sup>1</sup>, the native village of his wife Francesca. Francesca's brother Dun Pawl Grech of Għarb, had served as parish priest of Xewkija from 1850 to 1854<sup>2</sup>.

Pietru Pawl grew up in Xewkija but since Gozo was not yet a separate diocese and had no seminary of its own, he proceeded to the diocesan seminary of Mdina to study for the priesthood. He was ordained a priest by Bishop Gaetano Pace Forno, a Gozitan by birth, in 1858<sup>3</sup>, only six years before the establishment of the new Gozo diocese. He was then chosen to be parish priest of Għajnsielem on the 8th of May 1864. It is interesting to note here that today, the Ciantar surname has disappeared from Xewkija and is only extant in Gozo in the Għajnsielem locality among folk who are distantly related to Dun Pietru Pawl Ciantar.

Dun Pietru Pawl was an able administrator and a zealous shepherd of souls. It was during his time that Pope Leo XIII honoured the parish priest of Xewkija with the title of 'arċipriet' by the decree of the 10th of February 1893. In 1904, renowned archaeologist Manwel Magri SJ supervised archaeological research in Xewkija where he found, in a field owned by the Ciantar family, the foundations of a pagan temple (Borg, 1973: 13-14). In 1905 he built the oratory next to the church; this oratory had to be pulled down to make space for the new rotunda in the 1970s.

Two of Dun Pietru Pawl's nephews became priests; Dun Pawl, son of his brother Nikola, was ordained on the 24th May 1879 and his other nephew Dun Salv, son of his other brother Michelangelo, was ordained on the 4th of October 1879 (Attard, F.P. et al, 2014: 1-18). They both served as *kappillani* or chaplains for Bishop Giovanni Maria Camilleri OSA, bishop of Gozo<sup>4</sup>. Dun Pawl Ciantar also served as chaplain to the Lazaretto Hospital in Xewkija besides helping out in his own native parish.

## Conclusion

The last person to carry the Ciantar surname in Xewkija was Francesca Ciantar, daughter of Nikola, who married Mikiel Zammit of Xewkija and thereby lost her maiden surname. Her one and only sister Marianna and her brothers Ġużepp, Ġanni, Salvu and of course Dun Pawl, remained unmarried. As stated, presently the Ciantar surname is only to be found in Għajnsielem, the picturesque village where Dun Pietru Pawl once served as parish priest for less than a year, before being chosen as the tenth parish priest of the Xewkija parish.

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Geoffrey G. Attard was ordained priest for the diocese of Gozo in June 2004. He graduated M.Th. in Ecclesiastical History from the University of Edinburgh in November 2005 and he graduated M.Lit. in Practical Theology from the University of St Andrews with a dissertation entitled "Climate Change and the Catholic Church" in 2008. He has recently published his dissertation in book form.

<sup>1</sup> This information was passed on to me by my maternal grandfather Ġużeppi Zammit (1913-1994), maternal grandson of Nikola Ciantar, brother of Dun Pietru Pawl.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> This information was passed on to the author by his relative Fr Serafin Borg OSA of Xewkija.