

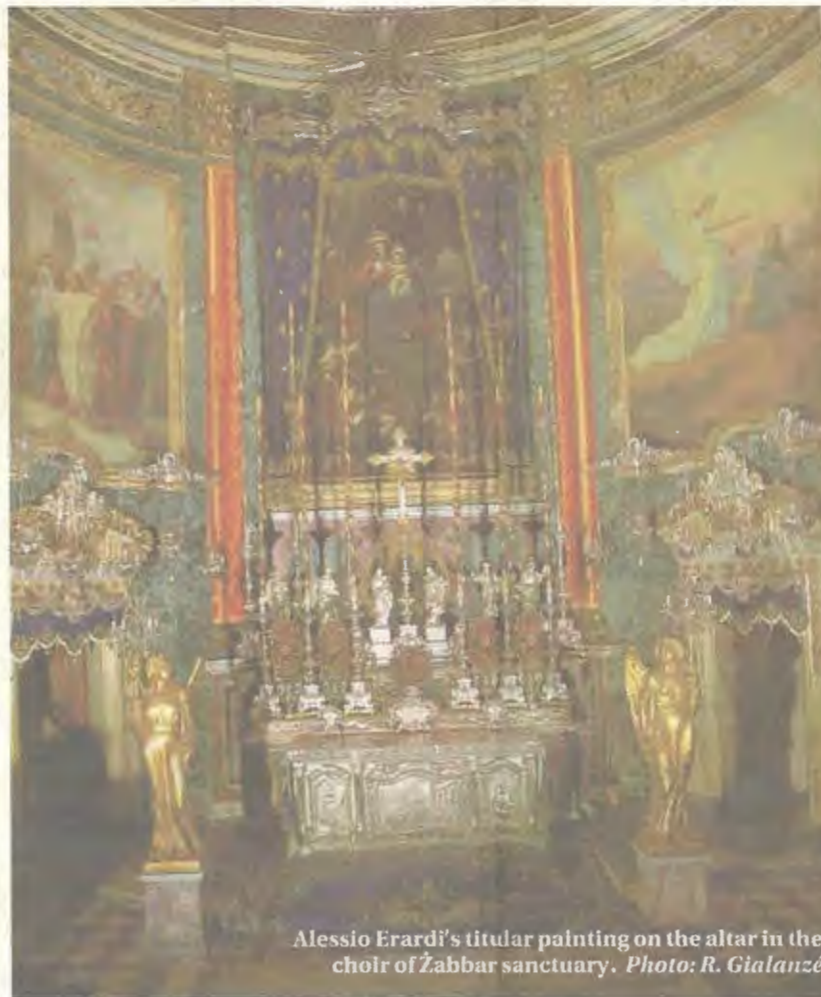
# 400th anniversary of Żabbar parish



Alessio Erardi's titular painting of Our Lady of Graces, Żabbar, 1616. Photo: R. Gialanzé



Detail of the titular painting of Our Lady of Graces. Photo: R. Gialanzé



Alessio Erardi's titular painting on the altar in the choir of Żabbar sanctuary. Photo: R. Gialanzé



The sanctuary's richly decorated vault designed by Tumas Dingli. Photo: Marquis Chev. A. Cassar De Sain



The Giovanni Bonavia facade of the Żabbar sanctuary in 1738 after its restoration in 2009-2010.

# Żabbar's constant development as a parish

**Carmel G. Bonavia**

The concept of the formation of Christian communities has passed through various developments. The seed sown by the Gospel, enlivened by the apostles and first disciples, began to grow in various grounds in different ages. In time these communities came to form part of lively cells around a bishop and surrounded by monasteries. Eventually they started to take on a juridical status which took years to be well defined.

The 1436 visitation by Bishop Senatore de Mello recorded 10 parishes in the island. Żabbar and its environs were dependent on the parish priest of St Catherine of Żejtun.

In his pastoral visitation of 1575, Apostolic delegate Mgr Pietro Dusina found approximately 60 households with a population of about 300 in Żabbar. In November 1615, Bishop Baldassere Cagliares found about 600 people, an increase that could be attributable to the increase in activity around the harbour area, including Żabbar, after the Great Siege.

Cagliares visited all the Żabbar chapels, starting from the one dedicated to St James the Great, which was serving as a vice-parish of Żejtun. Then he visited the chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Graces and 11 others spread all over the area. He noted that the people could satisfy their Sunday obligations at St James church which, however, lay far from the village centre. He was also struck by the great devotion towards Our Lady of Graces, especially when he was told of the great number of people, including dignitaries of the Church and of the Order of St John, who came in pilgrimage to thank God for graces received through her intercession, leaving their ex-votos.

This chapel was then the only one on the island dedicated to Our Lady of Graces and had enjoyed the deep devotion of the people for many years. He mentioned the great number of ex-voto paintings that hung in the church and ordered them to be placed higher so as to be out of reach of visitors. The collection is now exhibited in the parish museum.

Cagliares was very concerned about the Christian life of the community. In fact, when in the name of the villagers, Antonio Schembri

petitioned the bishop, he expressed their desire to appoint a parish priest to assist the sick and the dying. Several people supported his petition, which even mentioned the names of relatives or neighbours who had died without spiritual assistance, especially during the rainy season when it was very difficult to reach their area by any means of transport or on foot.

The bishop spoke to the Żejtun parish priest, Fr Matthew Burlò, who confirmed the villagers' complaints. It was decided to immediately appoint a rector for the chapel and to turn Żabbar into a separate parish. All this was in compliance with the decisions of the Council of Trent (1545-63) which, in its second decree of the 21st session (July 16, 1562), had ordered the setting of new parishes in areas that were difficult for a priest to reach.

On January 10, 1616, Fr Angelo Pontremoli, who was apparently well known and very dedicated to his flock, was appointed the first parish priest of Żabbar.

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Exactly on the 25th anniversary of the setting up of the parish, the foundation stone was laid for a larger church. The plan was entrusted to architect Tumas Dingli, who had acquired a

reputation in building parish churches and palaces. The new church followed the principles of classic architecture of the Renaissance but, according to Jo Tonna, Dingli gave "a unique trend during the transition from the Renaissance to the Baroque styles".

The church was almost completed within 50 years, which was a considerable achievement. This was mainly due to the substantial amount of donations received from parishioners and visitors.

In 1616, exactly 100 years after the establishment of the parish, a new titular painting of Our Lady of Graces by Alessio Erardi was hung in its place of honour to assist and guide the faithful. In 1738, the church was given a new façade by Giovanni Bonavia, who added splendour to the already beautiful sanctuary. On October 31, 1788, the temple was consecrated by Bishop Vincenzo Labini.

In the meantime, people living close to Xghajra, Wied il-Ghajn, Marsaxlokk, and the harbour, who suffered heavily from incursions by corsairs, increasingly turned to Our Lady in their prayers. Many still remembered what their ancestors had gone through during the Great Siege and other misfortunes. Most of the graces they received are documented in inventories and ex-votos at the parish museum.

The penitential pilgrimage of *Hadd in-Nies*, which used to be held on Ash Wednesday, continued to attract hundreds of people from all over the island. When it was transferred to the first Sunday of Lent, the numbers increased even more.

In the meantime, Pope Blessed Innocent XI (1676-89) extended the feast of the Most Holy Name of Mary to the whole Church to commemorate the victory over the Ottoman Empire at the Siege of Vienna on September 12, 1683. In 1733, the Sacred Congregation of Rites, during the papacy of Clement XII (1730-40), approved a petition by the clergy and people of Żabbar to use the same liturgical texts for the feast of Our Lady of Graces at Żabbar since this feast was also "in remembrance of the victory over the Ottomans obtained after the Siege of Malta in 1565".

Contemporary pastoral visits show the great development that the parish had undergone by the end of the 18th century. The population now numbered about 2,400, and 16 priests were serving the whole area. There were several con-

fraternities and associations in the parish, including the lay third orders or 'tertiaries' led by the Carmelites, the Capuchins and other Franciscan orders.

In 1797, a new statue sculpted in wood by Mariano Gerada replaced the one in Spanish style that used to be decorated with rich vestments for the annual procession. In 1802, Gerada sculpted another statue in stone, which can be seen some 100 metres down Sanctuary Street, marking the spot where the people of Żabbar resisted a French battalion during the insurrection of 1798.

**"Żabbar suffered great damage during the war and many people had to be evacuated. The old vestry was destroyed but the sanctuary itself was not damaged even though bombs hit several nearby buildings"**

After repairing the sanctuary from shells fired from the Cottonera Lines, the people faced the plague of 1813 and later the cholera of 1885. These and other hazards encouraged the people to seek help from Our Lady more frequently and fervently.

The two local band clubs, set up before the end of the 19th century, both organised festivities in honour of their patron saints: St Michael the Archangel and Our Lady of Holy Doctrine (*tad-Duttrina*). Through the efforts of parish priests Fr Leopoldo Farrugia (1886-1918) and Fr Aloysius Catania (1925-35) both band clubs channelled their efforts towards the greater celebration of their common patron, Our Lady of Graces.

In 1926, new side chapels and the magnificent dome were built by the architect Giuseppe Pace, who lived in Żabbar. A new clock chiming the Ave Maria every hour on feast days, dedicated to Our Lady, or every four hours on ordinary days,



Logo marking the 400th anniversary of the parish.

was installed. The annual *Hadd in-Nies* pilgrimage was restored to its original penitential spirit.

In 1916, Dun Xand Cortis published the first ever publication in Maltese on Our Lady of Graces: *Sidna Maria tal-Grazzja. Titular ta' Haż-Żabbar*. Ten years later, E.B. Vella included Żabbar in his series of histories of Maltese towns and villages. Both publications helped to increase the devotion to Our Lady of Graces.

At the start of World War I, when the Poor Clares were exiled from Nazareth to France, they found refuge in Żabbar, where they stayed for five years up to 1920 in a disused convent of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. The 24 nuns found all the support they needed from the bishop, and above all, from the clergy and local people. From Żabbar, they moved to Sliema and later to their new monastery at St Julian's.

Other religious communities settled in Żabbar, bearing witness to the various charisms of their founders. The Ursuline Sisters have been present in the parish since 1923. The Dominican Sisters, through the efforts of Fr Felician Grech, OP, built a children's home in 1930. As with other religious in our islands, the sisters have also opened their homes to offer Christian charity to refugees arriving in Malta.

In 1985, the Sisters of St Joseph opened the Holy Family Institute in Mediatrix Square. In the meantime, many Żabbar men and women joined several religious orders and congregations,

The Żabbar people rise up against the French on October 5, 1798. A watercolour by G. Apap.



mainly the Capuchins, owing to the close proximity of St Liberata friary at Kalkara.

World War II (1939-45) brought havoc everywhere. Żabbar, being so close to Cottonera and the Grand Harbour, suffered great damage during the war and many people had to be evacuated. The old vestry was destroyed but the sanctuary itself was not damaged even though bombs hit several nearby buildings.

The clergy and the people felt the need to thank God for this outstanding grace, and on May 12, 1945, the first Saturday after the end of the war in Europe, a thanksgiving pilgrimage was organised with the statue of Our Lady of Graces through the main streets of Żabbar.

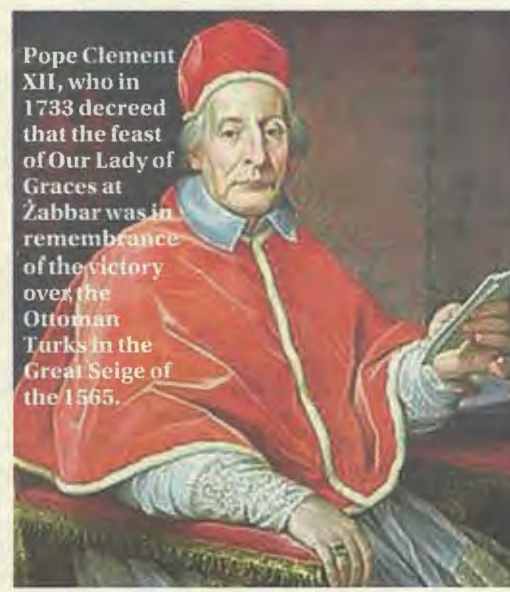
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To be concluded



A rare copy of Dun Xand Cortis's book published in 1926 on Our Lady of Graces, patron saint of Żabbar parish.



Pope Clement XII, who in 1733 decreed that the feast of Our Lady of Graces at Żabbar was in remembrance of the victory over the Ottoman Turks in the Great Siege of the 1565.