

Of Humour and Satire in Clerical Circles: A Gozitan Perspective

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Introduction

The Church has played an important role in the social and cultural life of the Maltese nation since its very beginning. Even before the earliest records of an institutionalised church, religion had an important place in the life of our forefathers with such places as Ġgantija, Haġar Qim and Tas-Silġ proving the point. When the Roman Church became part and parcel of the life of the Maltese and the local church finding itself playing a rival role in contrast with both the Inquisition and the Order of St John, such an institution definitely became part of the social order; it was here to stay.

Gozo being such a small island with a small number of knights living here on a temporary basis and with the Inquisition having its headquarters in Vittoriosa, the church in Gozo hardly ever had a rival to put up with. Although it was only in 1864 that the diocese of Gozo was finally established, Christianity in Gozo is at least one millennium old. The *Tristia ex Melito Gaudio* document is a strong witness in favour of such an argument (Busuttil, Fiorini and Vella, 2010). It is in fact almost impossible to trace the roots of Christianity on the island.

The Gozitans looked up to the Church for guidance in matters both spiritual and temporal. Such can be deduced from the fact that it was Can. Saverio Cassar, parish priest of Victoria who led the Gozitan insurrection against the French. Nicholas Monsarrat's renowned *The Kappillan of Malta* as well as Oliver Friggieri's *It-Tfal Jigu bil-Vapuri* also attests to the importance of the role of the priest in Maltese society. Since the erection of the diocese of Gozo back in 1863, Gozo has thirteen parishes in its villages and two in Victoria. Until quite recently the island had a good number of priests although the number of vocations to the priesthood is dwindling of late. However it is important to notice that around 600 Gozitans priests and many other Maltese have been trained in the diocesan seminary which was opened in 1865 (Bezzina, 2013:7).

Ecclesiastical Proverbs and Sayings

This helpful introduction will definitely put into their proper context the following sayings and anecdotes which though not strictly particular to the island of Gozo, can certainly be identified with the Gozitan milieu. Gozo being populated with priests carrying the title of *monsignor* must have been the birthplace of the following satirical saying: 'What is the difference between a monsignor and an ordinary priest?' Then the reply follows: 'There isn't any. However, the monsignor is not aware'. Another satirical joke focuses on the canons' attire. The canons of the cathedral carry the mitre on solemn occasions. A cruel Roman proverb states that 'la mitra e la continuazione del'vuoto' ('The mitre is the continuity of emptiness'). The local joke asks the following question: 'How can you kill a monsignor?' The reply follows: 'Not by shooting at his heart but by shooting at his mitre'.

Another ecclesiastical proverb or saying that is quite common among the clergy of the Latin Rite is 'Fudge praealatum tamquam peccatum' which loosely translated would be 'Avoid prelates as much as you avoid sin'. This saying must have developed within the Roman Catholic Church since it is in Latin, the official language of Western Christianity for many centuries. The Roman Catholic Church is first of all a hierarchical church thus providing the ideal milieu for such dicta. This particular adage must have been coined in medieval society where nepotism, simony and other similar vices characterised the Curia and brought about the wrath of the Protestant Reformation which divided Christendom into two distinct parts. With the demise of conventional Christendom, Latin kept its importance only within the Catholic Church but the vernacular languages replaced it in the new Protestant strongholds.

A saying that I picked up lately from the locality of Żebbuġ, Gozo is as follows: 'Qassis li ma jafx ikanta bħal għaġeb li ma jafx jiskanta' meaning that

‘A priest who cannot sing is like a fussy person who does not fuss’. The translation into English does lose some of the sense that abides in the original phrase since in Maltese an ‘għaġeb’ is not simply a person who makes a fuss, but a human being who is capable of wondering. A better understanding can be gleaned from the fact that in the Maltese crib, the local *presepju*, one of the characters is the ‘għaġeb tal-presepju’. This character looks up to the skies and wonders at the stars. It is in this latter sense that the saying regarding ‘the fussy person who does not fuss’ has to be understood. Pope Pius X with his Motu Proprio *Tra le Sollecitudini* of the 22nd November 1903 restored Gregorian chant as the model for church music (Kelly, 1986: 314). It was after the publication of this instruction on sacred music that Gregorian chant became compulsory in seminaries training candidates to the Catholic priesthood.

A joke with clerical connotations that is not easy to decipher its place or time of origin is related to the Breviary which is the official prayer book for priests and religious; its formal name is ‘the Liturgy of the Hours’. A priest and a married man were travelling together on a boat when the priest asked

the gentlemen what would be the first object to throw from the boat if he were given the opportunity to do so. The man answered by saying that he would throw away his wife. The man then asked the same question to the priest who said that he would dispose of his breviary.

A very cruel saying regarding the clergy which I have heard being uttered more than once in various sacristies in Gozo and which I assume must be also popular on the main island of Malta refers to the difficult character of the Catholic priest. ‘Il-qassisin darba biss ftiehmu: biex joqtlu lil Kristu’.¹ I could not find this saying in any collection of proverbs or sayings of the Maltese language. It refers to the condemnation of Christ before the Sanhedrin. Strictly speaking the Sanhedrin was made up of the Pharisees and the Sadducees but not all of them belonged to the priesthood. However the saying of which I speak tends to consider the Catholic priesthood as the legitimate inheritor or at least the equivalent of the Jewish priesthood.

Conclusion

The above are only a specimen of the various sayings related to the priesthood that have managed to survive to present times. I hope that in the near future some student of ecclesiastical folklore would make it his aim to collect a greater variety of dicta related to the theme before it is too late to do so. I am certain that such a study would be both interesting and engaging to those who are prepared to take it in their stride.

Reference

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¹ It is believed that it was Prof. Mgr. Pietru Pawl Saydon who coined this saying. Buttigieg, A. (1980). *Mill-Album ta’ Hajti. L-Għażla tat-Triq*, Vol II: 63. Malta: Edizzjoni Klabb Kotba Maltin.