

ANNIVERSARY FEATURE

University founded on Christian principles

250 years ago, Holy See sought to ensure it promoted Catholic faith in Malta

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Our Alma Mater, 250 years old this year knows its origin to a magisterial decree of November 22, 1769, promulgated by Grand Master Emmanuel Pinto by which he founded both a university and a college.

It must be said, however, that in the preceding centuries, Malta did not lack institutions of higher learning even though they did not carry the hallowed title of a university; the various subjects that were then taught (including oriental languages for prospective missionaries destined for the Near East) and the standard of learning imparted, especially in the field of theology, can be fairly said to have been comparable to the level of any foreign contemporary university.

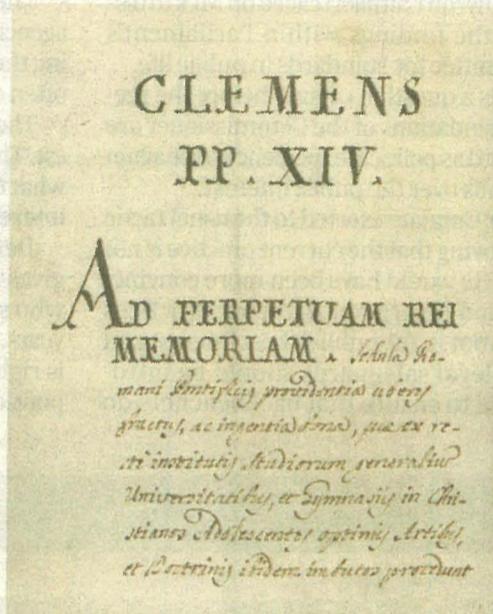
Being precursors of what was to come, they ought to be named: the *Collegium Melitense S. Antonii*, established by the Franciscan Conventuals in 1561; the *Studium Generale* of the Augustinian Order, based at their Rabat Convent of St Mark in 1568; the Jesuits' *Collegium Melitense* in Valletta, which in 1727 became the *Academia*; and the *Studium Generale* of the Dominicans, instituted in the form of a university in 1729 at their convent of S. Maria of Porto Salvo in Valletta.

Yet it was the *Collegium Melitense* which, following the expulsion of the Jesuits from Malta on April 22, 1766, became the foundation stone for the University in Malta. Needing the highest authority that could be mustered for such an initiative, Pinto presented his plan to found a university to Pope Clement XIV.

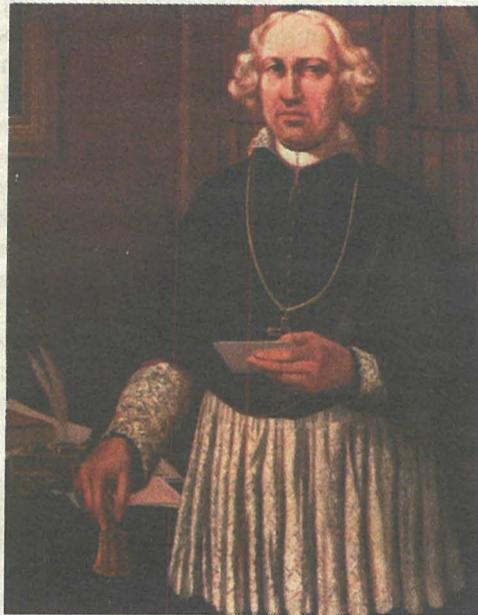
The Franciscan Conventual Pope consented to Pinto's plan for the new educational programme addressed to young aspirants of the Order of St John as well as to Maltese youth. By means of the brief *Sedula Romani Pontificis*, dated October 20, 1769, the Holy See authorised the institution of the university and the college, conceding the authority to confer academic degrees to successful pupils.

On the same date, another brief, *Solliciti Nos quidem*, regarding the funding of this newly-established university, authorised the Grand Master to utilise all the property and resources of the lately-expelled Jesuits for the maintenance of this institution.

A further brief of January 26, 1771, *Maxima utilitas*, authorised the investiture of the doctorate through the hand of the Inquisitor (as Papal legate) or of a Knight Grand Cross.



The above document shows Pope Clement XIV'S authorisation for the setting up of the University. Centre: Roberto Ranieri Costaguti (1732-1818) was elected to be the University's first rector. Right: The original coat of arms of the University of Malta. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MALTA



An important clause in the Holy See's confirmation decree for the institution of the University (indeed, a *sine qua non*) was the inclusion of the Faculty of Theology; for, in the prevailing current circumstances, only the teaching authority of the Church, diffused into such institutions of learning, could guarantee the correct transmission of the Humanities and of the Sciences to their pupils by professors and lecturers, themselves instilled in the precepts of Holy Mother Church.

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So much so, that the first of the papal briefs, the *Sedula Romani Pontificis*, required that the laws and regulations to be drawn up for the newly-established university were subject to Rome's review and had to be expressly confirmed and approved by the Pope himself. Moreover, the direct link between the Holy See and the University required that at the commencement of each academic year, the masters, readers, doctors

and other professors of the Arts of the College and University were wholly bound to profess the profession of the Catholic faith according to the articles formerly proposed by the Holy See.

Recalling the foundations of other universities way back to the Middle Ages, this new university was meant to give an all-round education to its students. Graduation by students, and thus the taking up of a career, could only be achieved after long years following the standard curricula of the *trivium*, *quadrivium*, rhetoric and mastership.

In instituting the University, the Grand Master's intention was not limited solely to furthering the education of the brother chaplains, clerics, or conventual deacons of the Hospital of St John but also to benefit the young men of the city (of Valletta) and of the whole island of Malta, at least for those who were so minded and showed ability and willingness to be so rightly instructed and educated.

The Holy See accepted this recommendation, opening up an even more widespread education in the Maltese archipelago, then so sorely needed. And to further entrench the Holy See's foundation for this university in the Catholic faith, the Pope granted the licence and the authority to one person established in an ecclesiastical dignity to draw up the rules and regulations of the College and of the University.

In fact, it was the renowned Catholic orator and humanist, Fra Roberto Ranieri Maria Costaguti (1732-1818), elected to be the first rector of the University, who drew up the *Constitutiones* governing both the College and the University and which were later promul-

gated by a magisterial chirograph of May 22, 1771.

The principles underlying the *Constitutiones* laid the foundations for the education of those able and willing young men not only to follow a civil career in the legal, medical and other professions then prevailing, but also to enhance the ecclesiastical life of its future priests in their pastoral duties, both in regard to the chaplains of the Order as also to those pertaining to the secular clergy.

It is interesting to note that during their studies, students aspiring for the *Collegium Cappellanorum* were expected to live under a Rule of Life, segregated from the rest of the population. Moreover, the curriculum was intended not only to focus on a main profession or career, but had to cover a wide spectrum of education to serve as a foundation for their later specialised career.

The second part of the *Constitutiones* regarded the University of Studies. The rules sanctioning the curriculum of studies and the lessons that were to be delivered by every teacher and professor were established by the *Edictum Magistrale* of Pinto, dated November 1, 1771.

The first stage was, of course, the Elementary School, in which students were first taught to read and write Italian and Latin, the two main languages then prevailing in Malta both in the civil and in the ecclesiastical *curiae*, as also the medium in which the educational books then available were written. Complimentary to the languages was calligraphy and arithmetic.

There then followed the *Grammatica*, in which the basic principles of morphology and syntax in Italian and Latin, mainly through

the reading of the most celebrated of the classical authors were taught. History and geography were subjects that were also taught concurrently.

When these initial stages had been successfully accomplished, the student was allowed to join a programme of studies leading to a Master of Arts degree. These included the study of philosophy (comprising logic, metaphysics and ethics) as also physics and mathematics. Only after attaining this degree was the student allowed to continue his studies in the Faculties of Theology, Law or Medicine.

The *Sedula Romani Pontificis* demanded that at the end of their studies, students were to be awarded a degree conferred in public, not only attesting to their ability in the subject of their choice, whether it was law, theology or medicine, but also as an attestation of their uprightness and moral character as demanded by the University's Constitution. Such official conferment opened up a new horizon in the civil and ecclesiastical milieu for an ever-growing number of Maltese youths studying in their own home country, instead of the select few who, at great expense and toil, used to travel abroad to achieve the same standard.

Being a living institution, our University evolved through the centuries and secularisation became a mainstay of its existence. However, the Faculty of Theology still attests to that early idea of the University of Malta being a Christian institution.

Rev. Francis Bonnici is author of *The Academic Formation of Maltese Priests in the University of Malta 1838-1938*, published earlier this year.