

NATIONAL

First ban on religious functions since 1813

Not since the bubonic plague of that year has the Church felt the need to impose such tight restrictions

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The ban on all religious functions in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak will go down in history as the first in Malta since the bubonic plague of 1813.

The Church has not since felt the need to impose such tight restrictions even through other serious epidemics such as cholera, small pox, Spanish flu and other cases of bubonic plague, historian Simon Mercieca told *Times Malta*.

In a joint statement, Archbishop Charles Scicluna and Gozo bishop Mario Grech last Thursday announced the suspension of all religious services including Mass, as well as catechism lessons, although the churches have remained open.

Catholics have been given dispensation from Sunday Mass. Funerals are not exempt either: only a blessing ceremony at the burial place may be held and only in the presence of close relatives. Priests will offer Mass for the souls of the deceased behind closed doors.

Meanwhile, the faithful are being urged to follow daily Mass at 9.30am on TVM 2 or on the internet at Knisja.mt and Newsbook.com.mt.

In 1813, the order for the immediate closure of all churches was given through an edict issued by Bishop Ferdinando Mattei on May 24.

With Sunday Mass obligation lifted, the faithful were urged to recite the holy rosary at home.



An ex-voto painting of the plague showing the hospital in Valletta. (Anna Lungaro, Sanctuary of Our Lady, Mellieħa)

An hour-long Eucharistic adoration session was ordered behind closed doors in parish churches and chapels of religious orders twice daily at 9.30am and 4pm.

Mass was held behind closed doors and the church bells tolled three times to signal inhabitants to unite in spirit and prayers from home.

Mercieca noted that during the first outbreak of cholera in 1837, the people continued to behave normally despite the seriousness of the situation.

“The church bells tolled three times to signal inhabitants to unite in spirit and prayers from home”

He cited Sarah Austin (a renowned translator and wife of English legal theorist John Austin) who was in Malta at the time, saying the Maltese, “ate, drank, rode, bathed and did everything exactly as usual”.

In more recent times, such as World War II, the Church cancelled external events such as village feasts and the Good Friday processions. However, even at the height of the blitz, there was no ban on religious services.

The plague of 1813 was the first time civil authorities imposed a form of a lockdown.

Valletta, the three cities, Qormi, Żebbuġ and Birkirkara, which were the worst hit localities, were cordoned off by soldiers to isolate their inhabitants and anyone breaching the curfew was ordered shot.

Restrictions were lifted early in 1814 when, on January 29, Malta was declared free of plague, although Qormi remained in quarantine till March and it was not before September that the plague was eradicated from Gozo.

By that time, the epidemic had caused 4,500 deaths from a population of 100,000.

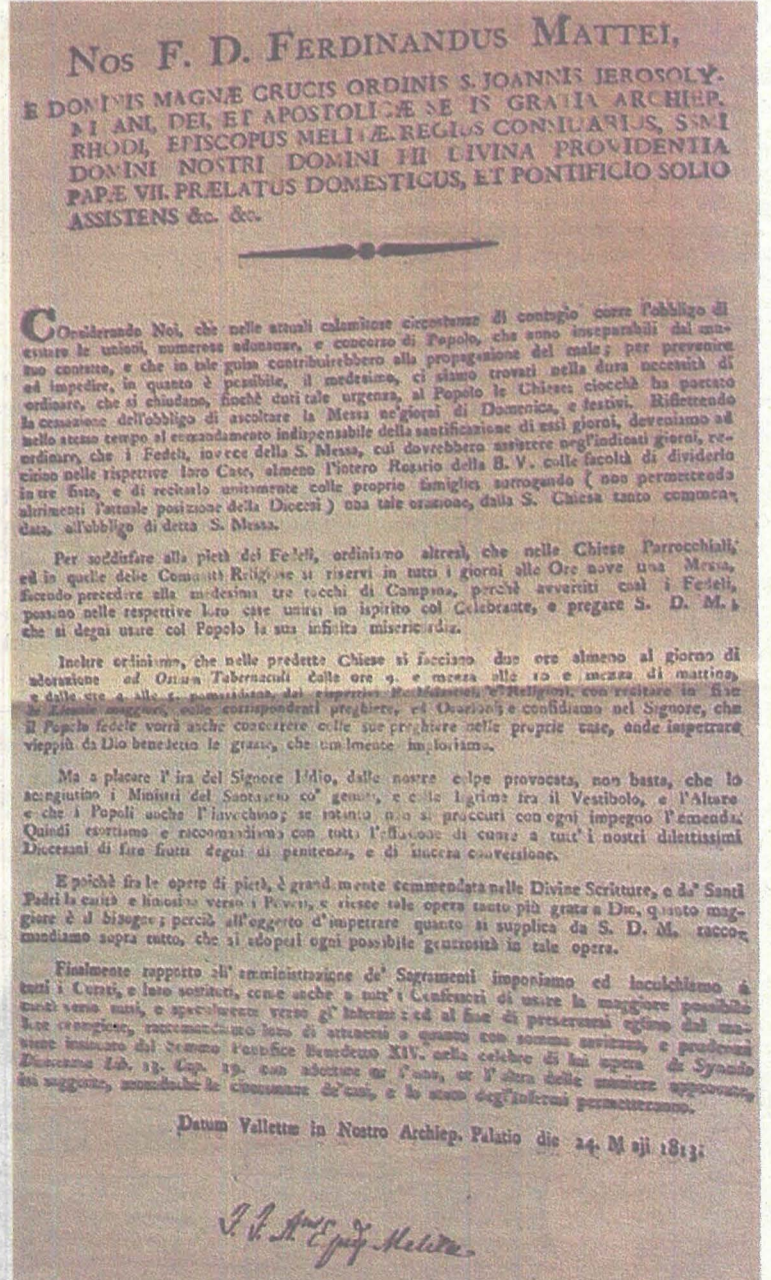
The plague of 1676

Before 1813, Bishop Laurentius Astoria had issued a similar edict in 1676 in the wake of the African plague, which went on to kill 11,300 people.

The prohibition of Mass was related to the curfew introduced by the Knights of St John.

Some of the symptoms of this disease were not very different from those of COVID-19. At the time, Maltese doctor Gio Francesco Buonamico described them as being severe headaches, acute pain in the knees, red and burning eyes, delirium, sleeplessness, temporal blindness, coma and convulsions.

Drawing parallels with the ongoing controversy on whether to order a lockdown, Mercieca said Maltese doctors had wanted to impose a full and mandatory quarantine. However, the health authorities refused.



The edict issued by Bishop Ferdinando Mattei on May 24, 1813, banning religious functions. Source: Archivescoval Archives Malta