

THE OLD PARISH CHURCH OF OUR SAVIOUR AT LIJA

by

Mario Buhagiar

The old church of Our Saviour was the parish church of Lija for almost exactly one hundred years, between 1594 and the end of the 17th century. The church is of considerable antiquity and appears to date from the early 16th century. The first written account of it belongs to 1575 and is contained in the report of the pastoral visitation of the Inquisitor Mgr. Pietro Duzzina.⁽¹⁾ Duzzina visited Lija and the surrounding villages on the 1st of February 1575 and left an interesting report on all the churches in the district. Lija was then a rural hamlet containing eighty houses and about 400 inhabitants. It formed part of the parish of Birkirkara and had nine churches. Of these three were dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin and two to the Annunciation. The rest were dedicated to St. Andrew, St. Agatha, St. Peter and Our Saviour respectively. The most important church was that of St. Andrew which still stands though it was partially reconstructed in 1624.⁽²⁾ The church of St. Agatha and one of the churches of the Annunciation

(1) Pastoral Visitation of Mgr. Pietro Duzzina Ms. National Museum p. 74.

(2) A. Ferres "Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo" Malta 1866, p. 448.

were in such a deplorable state that they lacked even a door, so that Duzzina was compelled to forbid Divine Service being celebrated in them until they were provided with one. The church of Our Saviour, was, by comparison, large and decently kept. It had altars, a painting on wood, wooden doors and a pavement. It lacked, however, several other things necessary; had no rector to look after it; no pious burden; nor any revenue of any sort. By virtue of a legacy left to him by one of his ancestors, a certain Franciscus Magri, was however, bound to pay for the saying of mass on the feast days and to feed the poor. Magri had a tomb for himself and his family inside the church. The side altars were apparently found to be unfit, for Duzzina forbade mass being said on them.⁽³⁾

Lija was severed from the parish of Birkirkara and erected a separate parish on the 6th of February 1594 during the episcopate of Mgr. Gargallo.⁽⁴⁾ The church of Our Saviour had by this time apparently become the most important church in the village for it was chosen to be its first parish church. The first parish priest to officiate from it was one Mario Grech who led the parish for forty years. He died in harness in 1638.⁽⁵⁾

(3) Pastoral Visitation of Mgr. Pietro Duzzina,
op. cit.

(4) A. Ferres, op. cit., p. 443.

(5) A. Ferres, op. cit., p. 446.

In 1609, the parish was enlarged by the inclusion of the neighbouring hamlets of Bordi and Mann within its boundaries. These hamlets had formerly formed part of the parish of Attard but as they were nearer Lija, their inhabitants petitioned the Ecclesiastical authorities to integrate them within its parish.⁽⁶⁾

The church of Our Saviour, like all other early 16th century churches in Malta, originally consisted of a long rectangular nave. It is roofed with a fine barrel vault supported on arched ribs. Towards the end of the 16th century, however, probably as a result of increased affluence and the desire for more altar space, several parish churches were enlarged with the construction of a transept across their east end.⁽⁷⁾ In this they copied the Cathedral at Mdina which had been enlarged with a transept as early as 1420. The church of Our Saviour was, apparently, one of the first parish churches to be enlarged along these lines. Here as the old parish church of St. Gregory at Zejtun, the crossing of the main axis of the church with the newly constructed transept was made an excuse for a dome. Both at Zejtun and Lija, the domes are small and saucer-like, but while the one at Zejtun rises on a small squat drum and shows all the uncertainty of early design, the one at Lija rests on a tall drum thus enabling it to rise above the roof of the church and for the first time in

(6) A. Ferres, op. cit., p. 443.

(7) Hugh Braun "An Introduction to Maltese Architecture" Malta 1957, p. 9.

the history of Maltese architecture making it possible for the drum to become the church's chief source of light by the insertion of windows in it.

The addition of the transept made the church cruciform - a form that became standard in parish churches of the 17th and 18th century. Externally, the church is graceful and elegant. The west front with its fine late 16th century doorway, surmounted by a defaced inscription and the usual circular deep-eye, is one of the most pleasing of the early church facades in Malta. Doorways originally pierced the three sides of the nave and the north and south transepts. Of these only two - those on the west and south fronts of the nave - are still in use. The others have been blocked. All doorways, with one exception, are elaborate and two, those of the south front and the south transept are delicately carved. The more interesting of these is that of the south transept which is crowned with a canopy supported on beautifully scalloped brackets. The date 1605 is engraved on the canopy beneath a small carving in low-relief, apparently representing John the Baptist. Both date and carving are, unfortunately, very much weathered. Above the doorway rise three large, ornate corbels which originally must have supported a balcony. The doorway on the south front is also remarkable. It has an interesting frieze of delicately carved roses and chalices. The oldest doorway is that on the north front. It is a plain arched doorway, but the large voussoirs of the arch point to a considerable antiquity. The doorway to the north transept is interesting in view of its broken pediment and an inscription which reads as follows:

" CUSTODI PEDEM TUUM
 INGREDIENS DOMUM
 DOMINI
 1660 "

Inside the church are two items of special interest. These are the lavishly carved altar reredos and the 16th and 17th century tombstones. The intricate and delicate carvings of the reredos are reminiscent and in some details identical to the carvings on the portals and facades of Tumas Dingli's churches at Birkirkara and Attard and might, possibly, be the work of the same sculptor. Also reminiscent of Tumas Dingli are the niches on either side of reredos and in the drum of the dome. Those flanking the reredos were intended for a statue of St. Catherine and the Virgin and Child respectively. Through the efforts of the present parish priest, the statue of St. Catherine has been retrieved from a fireworks factory outside Lija and though much battered has been put back in its former niche.⁽⁸⁾ The statue of the Virgin has apparently been lost.

The tombstones are interesting because of their antiquity. The pavement of the church was used for burials since at least the late 16th century. In 1575, as pointed out above, there was at least one tomb belonging to Franciscus Magri and his family. When the church was elevated to parish status, it seems to have become

(8) Preserved in the church is another stone statue, of considerable antiquity, representing St. Lucy or St. Agatha. Like the statue of St. Catherine, this statue was rescued from the fireworks factory by the parish priest.

general, as was then the custom, for parisheners to get buried inside it. Burials continued taking place till relatively recent times. All tombstones are of globigerina limestone, but while the more recent ones appear to have been plain, the older ones were inscribed and decorated with escutcheons and appropriate decorative motifs. Both inscription and decorations were engraved to a depth of about half an inch and filled with tar. This type of tombstone must have been common in the 17th century, but as globigerina limestone is soft and wears away quickly, very few have been preserved. Apart from the ones at Lija, the only other examples I know are at the old parish church of Santa Marija ta' Bir Miftuh and in the rural church of the Visitation at Wied Qirda, Zebbug. Many were doubtlessly destroyed when the original flagstone pavements of most churches were removed and substituted by marble pavements or cheap cement tiles. Of the tombstones in the church of Our Saviour, only two have been well preserved. The inscriptions and decorations on the others have been to a large extent erased, apparently by the moving of heavy objects on them when the church was used as a storeroom. One of the two preserved stones marks the tomb of members of the Confraternity of the Rosary instituted by Mgr. Duzzina in 1575 and bears the date 1629. The other tombstone has an escutcheon with a plough and the following inscription:

"SEPULTURA DI NINO

HAIUS 1610 "

The most ornate tombstone appears to have been that immediately to the north of the chancel. It has a fine escutcheon consisting of a tower and two lions rampant. The inscription, unfortunately, is mostly erased,

however.

Among those buried in the church, is the architect and engineer Giovanni Attard who between 1610 and 1614 was employed by Grandmaster Aloff de Wignacourt to complete the aqueduct to carry water to the new city of Valletta. Attard is believed to have been the tutor of the architect Tumas Dingli.⁽⁹⁾

While on the subject of tombstones mention should also be made of a few fine marble ones in front of the chancel. The most interesting two commemorate the great Maltese architect Giovanni Barbara, responsible among other things, for Lija's present parish church, and the author and linguist Annibale Preca. These tombstones were removed from the parish church in 1928⁽¹⁰⁾ when the original flagstone pavement of the church was replaced by the present marble one.

When the new parish church of Lija was built towards the end of the 17th century, the old church of Our Saviour, naturally lost much of its importance, but for a time, it continued to be well looked after. Writing in 1866, Achille Ferres, praises the clergy of Lija, for having preserved it and looked after it.⁽¹¹⁾ By the beginning of this century, however, the church had already degenerated into a storeroom for the festa decorations.

(9) J. Quentin Hughes "The Building of Malta" London 1956, p. 201.

(10) M. Agius "Is-SS. Salvatur F'Malta" (Qima u Storia) p. 28.

(11) A. Ferres, op. cit., p. 448.

For a brief period, in 1928, while the marble pavement of the parish church was being placed, the church was cleaned and whitewashed and reutilized as a parish church. But this did not last long and no sooner had the pavement been completed than the church reverted to its former ignoble role. The new parish priest of Lija, the Rev. Alfred Xuereb, therefore deserves our praise and gratitude for having, with the help of some enthusiastic volunteers, once more cleaned the church and taken in hand its proper restoration.

The church is a gem of early Maltese Ecclesiastical architecture and probably Lija's most important monument. Its restoration will therefore be greeted by all those who have the preservation of our heritage at heart.