

The Celebration of Life in the Maltese Antiphons dedicated to Our Lady and other Saints

In the Maltese Islands, from the Prehistoric to the Christian era and to nowadays, the inhabitants of these islands have uninterruptedly promoted and celebrated life. Looking back at prehistoric times, we see the emphasis on the cult of fertility going till Bronze period, coming to the Phoenician era with the cult of Astarte – the female goddess of divinity dominating the islands till we come into the Christian era. Now the Christians look to Christ, Mary the mother of Christ and the Apostles as the true celebration of life unified in the belief of one God. How to promote this Christian celebration of life? The Maltese people from the medieval ages have always held in high esteem their village feast, especially the liturgical functions that happen in the Church. To celebrate and promote the concept of Christian life, what is better than an Antiphon dedicated to a title of Our Lady or to a particular saint? In this essay I will discuss different antiphons which are found in different parishes around Malta and bring out the same message common for all; all Antiphons are a perfect example of the Christian belief of celebration of life and God's love for the whole human being each expressed differently and therefore a celebration of creativity in the same process.

First of all, let us take a look at the antiphon “Virgo Prudentissima” which is found in Mosta where the Assumption of our Lady is celebrated. This particular Antiphon praises the beauty and glory of Our Lady in Her glorious Assumption into Heaven. Already here we find some similarity to the celebration of fertility for the first Maltese, now it is the title of Our Lady that is celebrated. These are the words in Latin of this Antiphon:

“Virgo Prudentissima quo progredieris quasi aurora valde rutilans? Filia Sion, tota Formosa et suavis es; Pulchra ut luna electa ut sol”.

In Maltese it is translated as:

“Xebba tal-akbar għaqal, minn fejn inti tiela’ bħaż-żerniq mimlija dija? Bint Sion, inti kollok gmiel u hlewwa; sabiħa bħall-qamar, tiddi bħax-xemx”.

Apart from the beautiful music which accompanies such words, it is the appearance of the image of a strong and beautiful Lady that ensues from the words of this Antiphon. Is this idea not similar to what drove the first Maltese to carve out their huge statues of the Fat Lady? At that time it was an unknown female deity, here it is the mother of Christ praised by such words. In this antiphon, the mother of Christ is called “Virgo Prudentissima” because Mary was indeed the wise young girl who believed immediately the good news which the Lord gave her. He raised her over everything in this world for the glory which the mother of God indeed has to have, the same glory which found its primacy in the Assumption into heaven with body and soul. She is also called the daughter of Zion. This is because Zion is the centre of Jerusalem

which embraced the temple of God. As Mary embraced in her womb Jesus, like Zion offered to the world the true God and thus became the Spouse of God the Father. Here we truly have a Christian celebration of life. A celebration which outlines the greatness, splendour and joy found in the mother of Christ. Still as in Prehistoric times, as the Maltese considered the moon and the sun as divinities, here we find a similar parallel. “Pulchra ut Luna electa ut sol”, the beauty found in the mother of Christ exceeds that of each sunrise and that of the moon.

Now let’s look at another antiphon which celebrates the Christian concept of life. This the famous “Gloriosae Virginis Mariae” played for the feast of the Nativity of our Lady in Naxxar. The words in Latin being:

“Gloriosae Virginis Mariae
ortum dignissimum recolamus,
quae et genetricis dignitatem obtinuit
et viginalem pudicitiam non amisit”

In Maltese it is translated as:

“Niċċelebraw it-Twelid imqaddes,
tal-Verġni glorjuża Marija,
li kisbet il-ġieħ ta’ Omm Alla,
bla ma tilfet is-safa ta’ xbubitha”.

Already there is a word that strikes the mind both in the Latin and the Maltese translation. These are the words “Gloriosae” and its translation in Maltese “Niċċelebraw”. We can already note the opening of the Maltese people for their Christian celebration for life with just one word. This is due that for the Maltese people this is something which is inside them; to celebrate life. As the first Maltese celebrated life by praising their rudimentary divinities and continued with this notion for thousands of years, the Maltese as a Christian sees no problem to celebrate life because this is what Christ wants from us. Celebrate life for what it is, and this is what the Maltese have done before the advent of Christianity. Here again we find again the attachment of the Maltese people to a female protagonist. As in the Temple Period, and afterwards the Maltese preferred a female divinity, this attachment continued even till nowadays, with the majority of Maltese feasts being dedicated to a title of Our Lady. Here what is being celebrated? Here we find a celebration to the nativity of our Lady. Surely, one celebrates life mostly at the beginning of it. Life here is being celebrated for the birth of the mother of Christ. Also throughout this antiphon we find references to the Marian doctrines of the Catholic Church. “Tal-Verġni glorjuża Marija”, a clear reference to the doctrine that holds that Mary remained a virgin all her life, even after the act of giving birth to Christ. Also, “Li kisbet il-ġieħ ta’ Omm Alla”, a reference to the Theotokos. Mary as mother of Jesus is therefore God-bearer (Theotokos). Last of all, “Bla ma tilfet is-safa’ ta’ xbubitha; a confirmation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception where Mary herself was conceived without original sin.

Although the majority of the Maltese village feasts are dedicated to a title of Our Lady; which shows the Maltese attachment to the concept of celebration of life which was started in Prehistoric times by preferring a female divinity attributed to the fertility cult, still there

was a cult for the male divinity but which also celebrated life. Now as the Maltese converted into Christianity, what was better than to relate the ancient male divinity which celebrated life, with the person in the Bible who was considered “a just man”, and had the privilege of having been chosen by God to be the foster-father of Jesus and the spouse of the Virgin Mother? That is why the devotion of Saint Joseph is very strong in our islands. Now let’s look at the antiphon which celebrates the Christian concept now from a male point of view. This is the famous Antiphon of Saint Joseph played for the feast of Saint Joseph in Kalkara. The words in Latin being:

“Joseph Filii David
Noli Timere
Accipere Mariam
Conjugem Tuam
Quod Enim In Ea
Natum Est
De Spiritu Sancto Est.”

In Maltese it is translated as:

“Guzzeppi Bin David
La Tibżax
Tieħu Għandek Lil Marija b’Martek
Għax DaK li Tnissel Fiha
Hu mill-Ispirtu s-Santu.”

Here we clearly notice that the paternal figure and role of Saint Joseph. Joseph as the earthly father had the unique privilege of taking care of the Jesus, the son of God. Joseph is rightly to be seen as celebrating life but by protecting it. “Noli Timere” – do not to be afraid. Joseph had this privilege of adopting the son of God and raising him as his own son amidst what other people would say and the risk of retribution on his own family. Saint Joseph was not afraid of escaping with his wife and son to Egypt so as to escape the persecution of King Herod the Great. His decision inspired by his dream from an angel was vital for the future wellbeing of Jesus. That is why Saint Joseph is a celebrator himself of life. As in Prehistoric times the emphasis was on the concept of a close united family which is the result of the fertility cult dominating the Maltese islands, now within Christianity Saint Joseph is seen as the person who takes wise decisions for the good of his family. He accepts as a wife Mary and circumstances which even for him were difficult to understand; how can his wife be pregnant without knowing a man? He accepts this and knows that what has happened is authored to the Holy Spirit and he must give Jesus the son of God everything so as to prepare him for his Divine Mission. Also in the antiphon we also find a clear reminder of the Annunciation. The Christian celebration of the announcement of the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive and become the mother of Jesus, the son of God, marking his Incarnation.

To conclude, the Maltese population always celebrated the concept of life. Starting from the Prehistoric Age and through the centuries this celebration of life always concentrated on

the female fertility cult. Fertility was celebrated in every aspect, from the beginning of life till death. So when Christianity entered the Maltese islands, it already found a population who had similar principles which celebrated life now finding their apex in Christ the son of God, his mother Mary the mother of Christ with all the saints. In the antiphons which are played in our churches during the local feasts, we find now the Christian concept of the celebration of life. As the Maltese preferred the female divinity attributed to the fertility cult, the feasts attributed to Our Lady which are a majority in our Maltese islands are truly a proof of this continual cycle of the celebration of life now seen under the beautiful words coming from these antiphons.

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