



ANNUAL REPORT

August 2020 - July 2021



The
St John's
Co-Cathedral
Foundation

OPPORTUNITIES FROM ADVERSITY

The President's Note



It is with great pleasure that I am introducing the annual report on the working of the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation for the outgoing year 2020-21. The year under survey has been an eventful one, not only because of the daunting challenges emanating from the global COVID-19 pandemic but more so because of the opportunities and activity generated by our restoration and conservation programme, the exciting museum extension project, and the celebratory events marking the twentieth anniversary of the Foundation.

The nationwide COVID-19 lockdowns, coupled with the contraction of the tourism industry, have made the Foundation acutely aware of the need of proactively resetting its priorities in order to refresh its goals and objectives, reassess its strategies, and re-evaluate its branding and organisational chart, its operational management, and cost-cutting measures. The Foundation firmly believes that a crisis should be viewed as an opportunity and not as an obstacle to eliminate in order to return to a *status quo*.

The events of the past year, with its unprecedented uncertainties and uncharted challenges, have offered a unique opportunity for Council members to reflect on the Foundation's narrative and, through vigilance and diligence, reset priorities to help the institution forge ahead with greater resilience. Despite the negative global situation which we all experienced, the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation continued to venture ahead as a hub of activity, with multiple tasks that included the pursuance of its museum extension project, the implementation of important conservation and restoration works, and the realisation of ambitious targets concerning its organisational structure and output. The latter have covered important issues related to conditions of employment and team building, best practices and good governance, performance and safety measures, and public outreach.

St John's Co-Cathedral is not only a historical, cultural, and artistic monument of international standing, but it is also a sacred space where the Catholic faith is celebrated, nurtured, and professed. The knights of the chivalric Order of St John dedicated considerable effort and expense to embellish their erstwhile Conventual Church with religious and artistic works of the finest quality. However, in spite of Malta's close proximity to Naples, the cradle of High Baroque world famous Nativity crèches, St John's Co-Cathedral has, throughout its long history, remained without an artistic Nativity scene for display during Christmastide.





This lacuna was remedied in December 2020 with the inauguration of an eighteenth-century Neapolitan crib. This magnificent crib features a fine set of eleven genuine figurines measuring eighty-three centimetres, manufactured by the renowned *bottega* of Giuseppe Luca (1785-1827), one of the leading sculptors of the Neapolitan Baroque tradition. St John's Co-Cathedral is now justifiably proud to have acquired one of the finest Baroque Neapolitan cribs as befits this great monument and its artistic heritage. It is also envisaged that in the near future, further authentic eighteenth-century crib figurines would be added to grace this artistic Nativity crib.

Since its inauguration in 1577 St John's Co-Cathedral has offered hope, courage, resilience, and empowerment to many believers who have felt vulnerable during their life trajectory. Last year, because of the pandemic, believers and visitors alike were precluded from treading these sacred precincts and experiencing the aura of intense spirituality, its feeling of the divine and its foretaste of heavenly glory. However, in spite of prevailing restrictions of COVID-19, the Foundation proactively explored new avenues for the promotion of the Co-Cathedral's religious and cultural heritage. The two concerts of sacred music which were filmed inside an otherwise empty Co-Cathedral and streamed live across the globe have uplifted the spirit of millions during the depressive days of the pandemic outbreak. The participation in these concerts of the world-famous Italian and Maltese tenors Andrea Bocelli and Joseph Calleja have evoked strong emotions of love, hope, and encouragement in millions of isolated lockdown viewers. These events also offered a unique opportunity to showcase the splendour of our Co-Cathedral, which is indeed the pride of all Maltese citizens and a brand image of our island's great cultural heritage.

During the pandemic, the world became ever more conscious of the great potential of the digital platform as a means of keeping individuals and communities virtually connected in spite of prevailing physical barriers. The Foundation left no stone unturned to foster and maintain such contact with the general public through its social media channels on a daily basis. High quality performances of organ, harp and vocal sacred music were posted regularly via the Foundation's social media and the national television channel. Through the dissemination of this cultural and historical content the Foundation maintained its link with the public and continued to raise awareness of the rich heritage encompassed within our island's great Co-Cathedral. To further attain this end, the layout and structure of the Foundation's website were revamped and redesigned to refresh content strategy, increase flexibility, optimise site experience, and promote a cohesive brand identity.

During the year under survey the most arduous target of the Foundation was the pursuance of the St John's Co-Cathedral Museum extension project. May 2021 finally saw the commencement of on-site works on this much awaited project, marking a veritable milestone in the Foundation's annals. One has to bear in mind that the project of constructing a new chamber to house the priceless collection of twenty-nine large Flemish tapestries entails delicate structural interventions on the site of one of Malta's foremost historical monuments. Over the past thirty months, lengthy discussions and regular weekly meetings of the museum project team have focused on an integral system of the construction project in order to resolve a complexity of issues that demand a multidisciplinary approach and the intervention of consultants and several public entities.

Although The St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation is an autonomous entity, Council continued to hold regular meetings with its various stakeholders. High level meetings of particular importance were held in this regard with the Minister for National Heritage, Arts and Local Government about the embellishment of the immediate areas surrounding the Co-Cathedral, with the aim of creating a buffer



zone to protect the monument and limit interventions and obstructions that are negatively impacting this area. St John's Co-Cathedral is the crown jewel of Valletta, "the city built by gentlemen for gentlemen". One of the priorities of the Foundation is therefore the upgrading of the built environment in the immediate vicinity of this great monument, to help minimise as much as possible any visual impairment of the beauty of its fabric and especially its façade.

It is the Foundation's vision to liberate the space fronting the Co-Cathedral and its adjacent areas in St John Street from the present commercial activity, so that the public would enjoy an unobstructed view of the uniformity and aesthetic unity of the impressive main façade in its entirety. The present condition of the site imparts a sense of fragmentation of spaces, with the result that the lighting installation that is projected to highlight the homogeneity of the beautiful features of the façade would be a vain exercise unless the immediate environs of the Co-Cathedral are seriously upgraded.

During the year under survey, in line with the Church-Government foundation deed of 2001, The St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation continued to discuss with the Minister for National Heritage, Arts and Local Government the issue of ownership of leased properties forming part of the Co-Cathedral complex. These spaces are direly needed by the Foundation to help create additional administrative space, a security and surveillance hub, a children's educational centre, bookshop, and an extension of the restoration workshop. The above meetings had led to the presentation of a memorandum to the Cabinet of Ministers in mid-April 2020, when a Council delegation and its consultant had presented an overview of the museum extension project and the Foundation's position in claiming back the said properties. The unfailing support of the Government in these matters is greatly appreciated by the Foundation.

Although projects are important for the Foundation, it has always directed particular attention towards its staff welfare and work conditions. All members of the administrative, executive, and operational grades, together with custodians give their very best for the greater benefit of the Co-Cathedral, working together as a dynamic and cohesive team. Together we have survived the negative impact of the global pandemic and have emerged stronger than before because the Foundation has always invested in employee training and education, team building and community work activity. We have learned to resolve disputes through constructive dialogue and hammer out solutions for the benefit of all parties concerned. In line with its commitment of a role model employer, the Foundation has this year signed a new collective agreement with UHM-Voice of the Workers, following its approval by employees.

The highlight of my term in office as president was undoubtedly the programme of celebrations marking the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation in 2001. Despite the uncertainties harassing our planning, caused by pandemic regulations and social restrictions, the Foundation's perseverance was eventually rewarded with the relaxation of social gathering regulations as of 1 July 2021, coinciding exactly with the first day of the Malta-Pisa Conference on *The Physiognomy of Cathedrals: Conservation Strategies* which was held in conjunction with the Opera della Primaziale Pisana, an entity which is responsible for the conservation of Pisa's monuments in Piazza del Duomo. With this conference on European cathedrals, St John's Co-Cathedral has secured its niche within a network of the most prominent cathedral churches of Europe.



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One other successful event of the year under survey was the inauguration of the extensive restoration project of the Co-Cathedral's oratory of the Beheading of the Baptist which had remained for more than five years on the Foundation's business plan without being implemented. The ambitious restoration of this oratory and its late Baroque embellishments, which the late Co-Cathedral historian Sir Hannibal Scicluna described as a "miniature museum", was launched in August 2020, shortly after my appointment as president of the Foundation.

During the first six months of the following year the oratory was a veritable hub of interdisciplinary restoration work on the ornate gilt soffit, the gilded stone carvings of the apsidal arch and vault, and the thirteen canvases and two mural paintings by the celebrated artist Mattia Preti, four of which decorate the apse, three others are affixed within the soffit, while the remaining eight are placed along the side walls. The realisation of the oratory project was another significant landmark in the Foundation's programme of restoration of the patrimonial heritage of the Order of St John as epitomised in this great Co-Cathedral.

The inauguration ceremony of the restored oratory also covered the opening of the Caravaggio Wing. This wing now hosts Caravaggio's painting of St Jerome within a special hall where this great work of art can now be appreciated in all its splendour. Inside the Caravaggio Wing visitors can also watch a short but excellently produced docudrama on the artist's sojourn in Malta between July 1607 and October 1608, a period that saw his admittance in the Order as a novice and Knight of Obedience and his dramatic escape from imprisonment inside Fort St Angelo.

A final event of my tenure as president took place on Saturday 31st July 2021, when the Foundation marked its twentieth anniversary with the launching of a publication on the salient restoration projects which have been implemented since its establishment in 2001. The scope of this publication, entitled *St John's Co-Cathedral: Looking after a Cultural Gem – Twenty Years of Restoration and Conservation*, was to showcase and record for posterity the extensive and holistic programme of conservation embarked upon by the Foundation over the past two decades. This beautifully produced publication renders unequivocal credibility to the vision and foresight of the founding fathers of the Foundation and the outstanding achievements of this institution.

I feel greatly honoured to have served as president of the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation from 1st of August 2020 to the 31st of July 2021. This has been a year that has seen the objectives and priorities of the Foundation firmly back on track, and much good work has been accomplished that augurs well for the future. I would finally like to express my sincere appreciation to all council members, the Foundation's CEO/Curator, managerial staff, and all employees for their hard work, commitment, and dedication for the benefit of our nation's prime cultural and religious monument.

Posterity will one day be justifiably grateful to this generation for its unstinting efforts in safeguarding this great monument of Baroque splendour for the enjoyment of mankind.

E. Agius

Mgr Professor Emmanuel Agius
President 2020-2021



Bronze Lectern,
a gift of Francis,
Duke of Lorraine,
donated in 1557.

The St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation

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