

Archbishop Michael Gonzi's Gozo Episcopate¹

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The life of Archbishop Michael Gonzi spanned nearly a century. He passed away in 1984 at the age of 99 after having retired from Malta's bishopric seat eight years earlier (Lehen is-Sewwa, 22 ta' Jannar 1984: 1). His episcopate in Malta had lasted thirty years. Furthermore, the archbishop also served as bishop of Gozo for a period of nineteen years between 1924 and 1943, succeeding Bishop Giovanni Maria Camilleri. In 1924, Mgr Michele Gonzi, aged 39, was chosen as Gozo's fifth bishop. Gozo had been an independent catholic diocese from Malta since 1864 with the Matrice of the Assumption, within the Citadel, as the Cathedral Church (Bezzina, 1988: 11). The earliest reference to a church in Gozo goes back to 1299 (Bezzina, 1989: 9). By the time of the Eucharistic Congress organised in Gozo in 1929, the population of the island was 23,000 inhabitants (Bezzina, 1979: 19).



Fourth Bishop of Gozo Giovanni Maria Camilleri (15 March 1843 – 7 November 1924) (Photo: Gozo Diocese).

The episcopate of Archbishop Gonzi in Gozo commenced in the era between the two world wars

and progressed on during the Second World War. At the time of Bishop Gonzi's appointment, Gozo was, under all aspects, a poor and neglected island (Grech, 2017: 58). For instance, the electricity service was introduced in Gozo thirty years after it was launched in Valletta, Malta's capital city (Bezzina, 2006: 51). Before the Second World War, besides the tilling of land, the opportunities for employment in Gozo were extremely limited. People could only aspire to become teachers, policemen or priests (Grech, 2017: 58). According to Archbishop Joseph Mercieca, himself a Gozitan, Gozo in the nineteen-thirties lacked the services and facilities available in Malta during the same period (Buttigieg, 2014: 5). In 1885, 'a reliable' steam ferry service came into operation between Malta and Gozo and this created a 'bridge' between the two islands even if the timetable of the ferry's operating service was restricted and the service was halted by inclement weather (Bezzina, 1991: 35). As Refalo put it, during the period in question, life in Gozo evolved around land and the Church. "The latter preached forbearance and provided such entertainment as the yearly village festa and the other religious festivities could provide" (Refalo, 2018: 19). Meanwhile, by the year 1924, the diocese of Gozo had 14 parishes, 50 churches, and five congregations of friars and two of nuns (Saliba, 2021: 40). In 1909, the Jesuit community left Gozo negatively impacting the quality of teaching at the Seminary.

Mgr Gonzi succeeded Bishop Giovanni Maria Camilleri following the resignation of the latter, due to illness and poor health at the end of a long episcopate of 35 years. At this juncture, bishops were not demanded by the Roman Catholic Church to resign at a specific age. That concept emerged later on from the Second Vatican Council. Bishop Camilleri's achievements in Gozo included the reorganisation of the diocese's seminary, the

¹ This contribution is based on the author's doctoral thesis presented to the University of Malta in 2022. The author delivered a public talk on this theme on 17th June 2023 at Il-Ħaġar Heart of Gozo Museum, Victoria, Gozo.



The Cittadella early 20th century. (Photo: Mikiel Farrugia).

building of new churches in Rabat, Munxar and Fontana (Borg, 1973: 7), the consecration of newly built churches like those of Ġhajnsielem, Kerċem, Qala, Fontana and Imġarr (Ibid: 7,8) and the establishment of new parishes like San Lawrenz, Ġhasri and Fontana (Ibid.). The parish priests of Xewkija, Xagħra, Ta' Sannat and Nadur were promoted to archpriests (Ibid.). Bishop Camilleri also launched the first Gozo Synod and introduced the Dominican nuns in the diocese of Gozo. Bishop Camilleri was one of Archbishop Gonzi's principal co-consecrators.² Mgr Camilleri wrote a total of twenty-four pastoral letters during his bishopric, and it was during his episcopate that the founding stone of the Ta' Pinu sanctuary, in the limits of Ġharb, was laid (Borg, 1973: 39).

One of the first actions taken by Archbishop Gonzi during the first phase of his Gozitan bishopric was to prohibit the priests in his diocese from contesting political elections. Another crucial decision was that lawyer Nerik Mizzi was stopped from chairing the parish priests' meetings. Those were courageous decisions which were meant to draw boundaries between religion and politics. But here one must draw a clear distinction. It was not the same philosophy of achieving separation between

Church and State, as for instance it was envisaged later on by Mr Dominic Mintoff, the leader of the Malta Labour Party. It was instead the vision as enshrined in *Rerum Novarum* and *Immortale Dei*, both documents being the brainchild of Pope Leo XIII.

In *Rerum Novarum*, the Pope focused his attention on the right of freedom of religion as a fundamental right. In the second document, *Immortale Dei*, which was issued "at the end of the Papal States, during the suppression of religious orders in Spain and Portugal, and during a period when several other conflicts between civil and ecclesiastical authorities raged," Pope Leo XIII referred to both the temporal and ecclesiastical domains as "supreme powers, each one in its own field, with specific limits following from the finality and nature of each" (Gomes, 2009: 205). Therefore, the Church was regarded as a *societas iuridice perfecta*. "Under this conception, the Church is a society ordered to the good, sufficient, and autonomous. The basic idea is that the Church is not a society created inside a specific state or by this same state's juridical system, and is therefore not like other societies created under civil law ..." (Ibid.)

² In the case of Archbishop Gonzi, his Principal Consecrator was Archbishop Mauro Caruana and the second consecrator was Bishop Angelo Portelli.



Visit to Mgr Gonzi Bishop of Gozo by Mgr V. Azzopardi, Canon of the Metropolitan Cathedral, and his brother Rev. Raphael Azzopardi O.S.B. (Photo taken by Jos Portelli who was accompanying Mgr Azzopardi).

The reader must bear in mind that for a period of three years, Archbishop Gonzi was Archbishop Caruana's *kappillan tal-isqof* (private secretary to the bishop) and this position had left a bearing on Archbishop Gonzi's episcopate. It also emerged that both Archbishop Caruana and Bishop Gonzi were taken by surprise when they were appointed to administer the Malta and Gozo dioceses. Mgr Gonzi had received the news of his appointment as bishop of Gozo from Archbishop Caruana (Storja, 1978:128). In the last seven years of Archbishop Caruana's episcopate, Bishop Gonzi was the effective administrator of the Malta diocese as Archbishop Caruana was very ill.

Even though Gozo was a tiny diocese, it is still relevant for one to understand the context in which Archbishop Gonzi's episcopate in Gozo was operating. During the first phase of his episcopate, Europe went from a period of apparent peace, resulting from the First World War, which was supposed to be a short interval of six months, to the Second World War that devastated Europe. The consequences of the Versailles Treaty which had humiliated Germany, the seeming success of the League of Nations, the 1929 world economic crisis, the failure of the World Disarmament Conference, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, and the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany ultimately led to a failure in keeping the international relations at peace, and war was the result.

During Archbishop Gonzi's period as bishop of Gozo the Catholic Church had two Popes, Pius XI and Pius XII. As stated in the fourth chapter, Pope Pius XI in his encyclicals articulated a strong message against capitalistic greed, highlighted the dangers of communism and socialism, and instead suggested social justice as the way forward for a peaceful co-existence. It was a time when the Catholic Church had concluded several concordats. During Pius XI's pontificate, the Lateran Treaty of 1929 was signed creating the independent state of the Vatican. It was also a period of time when the Church was persecuted and Catholic clergy were killed in countries like Mexico, Spain and the Soviet Union. Through the Catholic Action movement, the Pope encouraged active participation of the laity in the Church's life. Pius XI openly criticised dictators, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini.

This meant that during Archbishop Gonzi's first phase of the episcopate, same as in his second phase (1943-1955), "the (Malta) Church was increasingly finding itself in the midst of a society not immune to the winds of change, remnants of a militant liberalism and laicism, an emerging communism, and rampant nationalism that was sweeping the continent" (Doublet, 2020:163). In the case of Malta and Gozo, self-government had been introduced in 1921, but the final text of the constitution concerned raised eyebrows since a religious clause had not been included, and the then Secretary of State for the

Colonies was arguing that “the Constitution was not the proper document to declare what is the religion of the country” (Grima, 1985: 27). This had its effect on the way the episcopate functioned, especially in difficult instances like the dispute between Lord Strickland and the Malta Church. Under that circumstance, the position of the episcopate was unequivocal: “the obligation of conscience... to give their vote only to those candidates who give sufficient guarantees that, as far as they depend on them, the religious interests of the Catholic Maltese people will be respected and protected.”³

For his Gozo episcopate, and later on for his Malta’s episcopate, Archbishop Gonzi chose the motto *Dominus Illuminatio Mea* (Psalm 26). On a particular occasion, Archbishop Gonzi, during his bishopric office in Gozo, described the bishop’s mission as follows: “*You will find in him a heart that beats, more than by blood drive, out of solicitude, who will implore for you before God.*”⁴ On the same day, he was consecrated as a bishop, that is on 24 July 1924, Archbishop Gonzi in his role as bishop of Gozo issued his first pastoral letter which was addressed to his Gozo diocese and which clearly expressed the course that his episcopate would take. In fact, the novel bishop appealed to archpriests and parish priests to prepare themselves to resist the enemy who, according to his assessment, had vowed to crush the harmony that had existed in the past between the clergy and the people.⁵ Archbishop Gonzi argued also that the life of a bishop was uneasy.

The reader must bear in mind that these documents were emanating from “a strongly ultra-montane Church, proud of its apostolic tradition as much as it was conscious of its authoritative role, indeed responsibility, in safeguarding the Catholic identity of this people. In an island colony, it was the truly nationalistic institution, conscious of its patriotic calling, especially so in an island governed by a non-Catholic power” (Doublet, 2020: 162).

Besides this, as explained earlier, in 1917 the Catholic Church had introduced the *Codex Juris Canonici* which had defined the role of the members

making up the Catholic Church from the Pope downwards and this document articulated the behaviour and norms expected in all circumstances that had to do with religion. The man behind the project was the famous Benedetto Ojetti who taught Canon law at the Gregorian University when Archbishop Gonzi was a student there.

Discipline was therefore a strong feature of the episcopate. The Regional Council organised in 1935 between the two dioceses of Malta and Gozo was a vivid example of the disciplinary attitude of the episcopate. The Regional Council was an opportunity for the episcopate to put its house in order spelling out the Church’s position on various themes like the preservation and propagation of faith, the religious life of priests, nuns and laity, the administration of sacraments, the observation of feast days, the respect to holy places and shrines, and so on. To a certain extent, there was some urgency to call the council as the last diocesan synod had been held in Malta during the Knights’ stay (1530-1798) whilst in Gozo’s case, the most recent synod had been organised after Gozo became a separate diocese in 1864.

In a pastoral letter published soon after the publication of the new decrees enacted during the mentioned Regional Council, the Malta and Gozo bishops explained that the Council was not only a solemn exhibition of the bishops’ power but also a difficult compilation of laws that Catholics were expected to follow scrupulously with all their conscience.⁶ Already at this stage, the bishops were noticing a dwindling trend in vocations although for the time being they preferred not to comment about the shortcomings that were leading to that state (Ibid: 8) In fact, the bishops proceeded to ask parents to be generous with God if their children felt the priestly vocation. Both bishops appealed to the parish priests to see that the movement of Catholic Action was well established and rooted in their parish. Parish priests were reminded to give their share in teaching catechism to adults on Sundays (Ibid: 10).⁷ In fact, Archbishop Gonzi instituted the Catholic Action in Gozo. That was also the Pope’s will.

3 Pastoral Letter No 92, Archbishop Caruana and Bishop Gonzi, dated 3rd June 1932. The original pastoral letter was written in Italian.

4 Pastoral Letter No 12, Bishop Michael Gonzi, dated 1st January 1925. The original pastoral letter was written in Italian.

5 Entire pastoral letter published in Galea and Tonna (1981): 77.

6 *Ittra Pastorali ta’ l-Iskijiet ta’ Malta u Ghawdex fuk l-Ewwel Concilju Regjonali* (Malta, Ghakda ta’ Qari Tajjeb, 1936), 4.

7 Ibid.

Nevertheless, it was an episcopate close to the people thanks to different religious initiatives. During his bishopric, Bishop Gonzi conducted four cycles of pastoral visitations in every parish in Gozo every five years. These pastoral visitations were an opportunity for the bishop to enforce the laws of the Church as regards church rites and parish life, and to correct any shortcomings. But, pastoral visitations were also an opportunity for the people to meet their bishop and cohere their relationship with him. For the 1930 cycle, the bishop informed his subjects that “Like Jesus, We will visit cities and castles, shouting out without ceasing, and exalt our voice like a trumpet, proclaiming law and counsel, punishment and reward, justice and misery.”⁸ Moreover, the pastoral letters were another key source for a bishop to propagate the Church’s teaching within his diocese. As bishop of Gozo, Archbishop Gonzi issued 196 letters of such nature.

Irrespective of the size of the diocese, the Church in Gozo under Bishop Gonzi managed to organise a number of large-scale manifestations that continued to enhance the people’s faith and showed the people’s allegiance to their bishop and their Church. The Eucharistic Congress held in Gozo was one of such manifestations. Furthermore, it was also an unmistakable sign that there existed an affinity between the episcopate and its people. Religion and faith created a bond between the two sides. In fact, fifty years later, during an interview with *Storja* ’78, Archbishop Gonzi recalled that event as one of his major achievements of his episcopate (Storja, 1978: 127)

In the pastoral letter that announced the Eucharistic Congress event, the bishop argued that the event should be an opportunity for spiritual reawakening. The bishop drew the attention of his flock to the fact that the dispute with Lord Strickland, and other shortcomings like fashion trends and the printed press, were contributing to an unhealthy environment that was ultimately affecting the faith of the people (Bezzina, 1979:24). According to Bezzina, the success of the Eucharistic Congress, which lasted four months, included 528,331 masses, 22,436 hours of adoration of the blessed sacrament and 3,065,899 visits to the blessed sacraments

(Ibid.). During his ninth year as bishop of Gozo, Archbishop Gonzi celebrated the 25th anniversary of his ordination to priesthood which once again confirmed the affinity between the episcopate and its flock.

The Seminary, being the training school for future priesthood, was an important pillar for the episcopate. In fact, the Seminary underwent a thorough reform during Archbishop Gonzi’s stay in Gozo. He insisted in being present during the annual examinations at the Seminary and he himself used to verify whether the seminarians kept themselves clean by inspecting their hands and their shoes (Galea and Tonna, 1981: 116). Bezzina noted that “during the bishopric of Gonzi, the number of Maltese Seminarians studying in Gozo rose rapidly. It reached its peak during the Second World War.” (Bezzina, 1991: 43). Moreover, Archbishop Gonzi, in his role as bishop of Gozo, prohibited altarboys to serve mass without wearing shoes. Children were also not allowed to receive Holy Communion barefooted. This sense of reform was a strong element within the episcopate. It also transpired that as a bishop of Gozo, Archbishop Gonzi led his diocese with no Vicar General only leaving an Apostolic Delegate when “*assente della diocese ... lascia ... un delegato apostolico.*”⁹

Another project which Archbishop Gonzi as Bishop of Gozo spearheaded was the finalisation of the building of the Ta’ Pinu Sanctuary, in the limits of Għarb. Archbishop Gonzi increased the wages of the builder Vitor Vella (Galea and Tonna 1981:46). The climax of the project was the coronation of Our Lady of Ta’ Pinu’s titular painting in June 1935. Archbishop Gonzi also restored the Palazzo Bondi which served as the bishop’s Curia. It was he who introduced electricity in that *palazzo* which also served as his private residence and a home for his parents.

This phase of Archbishop Gonzi’s episcopate was also a time when Bishop Gonzi visited regularly the Maltese/Gozitan emigrant communities abroad although this trend continued in other phases of the episcopate. That was an important statement from the episcopate’s side. At that stage,

8 Pastoral Letter, Bishop Michael Gonzi, dated 1st October 1930. The original pastoral letter was written in Italian.

9 Letter by Archbishop Mauro Caruana dated 24th April 1930 in *Pareri e Giudizii di SE Mons M. Caruana circa la nomina di Un Vescovo Ausiliare di Malta*, Archives of the Secretary of the State of the Vatican.



The Gozo Seminary.

the episcopate was not interested only in those living in its restricted territory but also fetched the spiritual and the material welfare of the Maltese and Gozitans living abroad in faraway countries. The episcopate felt the need to keep following the fate of those Maltese emigrants who had left their country to make a living abroad. In fact, priests were sent to live in those communities and to offer their services which ranged from spiritual needs to catering and, where necessary, attending also material requirements. The peaceful period after the First World War was characterised by hefty unemployment, and around 20,000 workers were unemployed. This situation led to Maltese migratory movements in Europe and North America. From 1922 to 1967, 157,468 Maltese had emigrated to fetch a decent future (Buttigieg, 2014: 21).

These ventures had their difficulties as some countries were employing a quota system which established the maximum number of emigrants that they were ready to take each year (Attard 1999: 58). In fact, during his stay at Gozo, Bishop Gonzi visited the Maltese residing in Detroit, Québec, Montréal, Toronto and New York. He also led different pilgrimages abroad. For instance in 1925,

he led a group of 200 Gozitans to Rome for the *Anno Santo*.¹⁰ Archbishop Gonzi attended international conferences and Eucharistic Congresses in Poznań (1927), Dublin (1932), Manila (1937) and Budapest (1938). The Eucharistic Congress in Manila, during which he took an active part, impressed him a lot (Galea and Tonna, 1981: 87). Therefore the episcopate had also an international dimension in an era when travelling abroad was necessarily limited.

It was also an episcopate that encouraged the people to give money to support the missionary movement. In 1926, Pope Pius XI launched the encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae* described by Bishop Gonzi as the “*the magna charta, which must inspire the Catholic Missions*”¹¹ One should also add that during 1926 Archbishop Gonzi was asked to fill the role of an Apostolic Delegate in Albania, but he declined the invitation.

One may conclude that it was also a patriotic episcopate considering the collection of wheat that Gozo managed to organise during the Second World War. As shown, the prime mover for the collection was Archbishop Gonzi, and that initiative saved Malta from succumbing to the enemy. Either

10 Pastoral Letter, Bishop Michael Gonzi, dated 21st February 1925.

11 Pastoral Letter No 45, Bishop Michael Gonzi, dated 14th February 1927. The original pastoral letter was written in Italian.

together with Archbishop Caruana or on his own, Archbishop Gonzi issued a number of pastoral letters during the Second World War appealing to the flock to pray for peace, to support the local authorities when difficult directives like bread rationing were announced, to practise charity, and to aid financially those who had lost their personal belongings owing to heavy bombardment (Bezzina & Bezzina, 2020: 367).

Archbishop Gonzi's first stage of the episcopate was characterised by the need to safeguard the Catholic identity of the inhabitants of his diocese. The people were after their bishop and proud of their Pauline heritage, and believed that their Catholic patrimony needed to be protected. The episcopate was appealing to the people "wake up so that the wolf does not come to devour the flock; It is necessary to be vigilant and to be attentive to follow its moves and prevent it from advancing to assault its prey. It is necessary to oppose evil when it buds, to fight error while it is still hidden, to follow it without respite and to unmask it, so that the faithful are not condemned by it."¹² Being a *societas iuridice perfecta*, the episcopate believed that the Church had "the right to exist, the right to announce and proclaim the gospel, the right to teach the Christian faith, the right of worship, the right to have and build communities, and others." (Gomes, 2009: 205). Therefore the bishop, "He must therefore be the defender of truth, of justice, of the rights of souls in the face of falsehood, injustice, and oppression on the part of perverse and sometimes even powerful men. It is the responsibility of the bishop to raise his voice to contradict and save, even at the cost of meeting the anger of those present."¹³

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¹² Pastoral Letter No 69, Bishop Michael Gonzi, dated 1st January 1930. The original pastoral letter was written in Italian.

¹³ Pastoral Letter No 126, Bishop Michael Gonzi, dated 30th April 1930. The original pastoral letter was written in Italian.