

ST. PAUL'S GROTTO* — HISTORY

The Grotto of St. Paul in Rabat is "*the foundation stone of the Church in Malta*". This outright declaration was made on the 13 May 1617, by the Cathedral Chapter of Mdina. The same Chapter had appointed the Notary Andrea Allegritto as its delegate in Rome to defend St. Paul's Grotto: "it is the foundation stone of the very same Cathedral and on it rests the Maltese episcopate".

Throughout the Roman rule, the old City of Mdina was extended to a section of Rabat up to the site where now stands the Parish Church dedicated to St. Paul. The ditch that surrounded the city was riddled with caverns cut in rock which were utilised as burial places by the inhabitants of the city, as Roman Law prohibited burials inside the cities.

On his journey to Rome the Apostle St. Paul was shipwrecked on our Island in the year 60 A.D. and apparently dwelt in one of these caverns. This Grotto was thus turned into a meeting place of the first Christian community and our forefathers have since treated it with great respect, considering it as one of the sacred places on our Island.

The same Grotto is the foundation of our Parish Church built much later and being sited on the outer side of the ditch of the city — following the example of Rome — the Church came to be known as St. Paul — outside-the-city-walls. This is confirmed by

one of our oldest document — the Rollo of Bishop De Mello, dating back to 1436 — which refers to it as *capella di San Paolo di fora*.

The Cemetery

During the Middle — Ages, a large cemetery grew round this Grotto. Many nobles, Maltese and foreigners, with the desire to be buried in this cemetery allocated the necessary funds in their will for this purpose and for a chapel to be build on their tomb. In 1575 the Apostolic Delegate Mons. Pietro Dusina left in his records that he had visited 21 of these chapels. Earlier, in the year 1549, the Archpriest Matteo de Surdo recorded that the Grotto had been used as a Church since apostolic times. However he complained that the cemetery was not properly looked after.

Adjacent to this Grotto, a Church was built to cater for the spiritual needs of the everexpanding Christian community. Thus we find that in 1555 the building of the Church was carried out on instructions given by the Bishop Mons. Domenico Cubelles. Later on, in 1575, the Archpriest De Agathis enlarged this Church which became the Parish Church, thus transferring to it the parish-seat from the Grotto.

The Noblewoman Gusmana Navarra who had her house just opposite the Church, built a new church (the present one). The design for the new and larger Church was made by G.F. Bonamico and work started in 1653 ending 30 years later when the chapel of St. Stephen, and the facade, were completed under the direct supervision of Lorenzo Gafà.

The Grotto

St. Paul's Grotto was always kept as a Pauline shrine and a centre of pilgrimages and worship. Following the domination of the Arabs and as a result of the hardships suffered

through many sieges and plagues, the cult and pilgrimages to this Grotto declined. But a Spanish Nobleman revived again the devotion towards this Grotto. This Spanish Noble was JUAN BENEGOS and our records of him go back to 1599. A portrait of this Nobleman is found hanging in the sacristy of the "Colleggio".

In 1670 Benegos also obtained from Pope Paul V the permission to look after the Grotto, which juridically became a separate entity from the Church. Benegos also obtained many indulgences and donations for the Grotto. The Pope himself donated to Benegos a chasuble and a crucifix for his desk. The Duke of Mantua donated an ostensory of gold containing a part of St. Paul's arm-bone.

Juan Benegos should be considered as one of the great benefactors of the Grotto. He also founded a college of officiating priests to look after the Grotto. Benegos also erected a Church above the Grotto itself dedicated to St. Publius the first bishop of Malta. This year we are celebrating the 250 anniversary of the consecration of this Church and the altar in the Grotto.

The Knights

Benegos entrusted his foundations to the Knights of St. John. On their part the Knights had no ecclesiastical foundations of their own in the city of Mdina or in its neighbourhood.

Grandmaster Alof Wignacourt instituted a Collegiate Church of the Order to carry out regular services in the Church. The successors of Wignacourt, especially Grandmasters Perellos and Pinto, endowed the Church with works of art and silver.

When the Knights left Malta, the Grotto and its property passed under the control of the civil governments.

But after prolonged discussions the Government agreed to return the Grotto to the Church authorities. Thus in 1962, the Parish Church of St. Paul and the Grotto became one complex amidst the rejoicing of the people of Rabat.

As we said earlier, the old Roman Capital encompassed Rabat, and outside the city there stretched the countryside. To shorten their defence-lines, the Arabs reduced it to its present size. Still the population of Mdina and Rabat was not sufficiently large to necessitate the existence of two different parishes. For this reason only one parish was maintained for Rabat and Mdina and its chaplain became known as *Cappellano Maggiore* later called Archpriest. The first to be so called was Don Matteo de Surdo in 1539. He held this title even though he may not have been a proper canon of the Cathedral Chapter. In 1586, Archpriest De Agattis insisted to create a new dignity in the Cathedral Chapter — that of an Archpriest — which comprised both Rabat and Mdina. The investiture took place formally at Mdina but juridically another investiture always took place at St. Paul's Church.

This system was adopted till 1902 when the population was large enough for the separation of the two Churches and the creation of two parishes.

The Separation of 1902

The separation was carried out territorially and not on demographic basis. The Archpriest of the Cathedral held Mdina with a small enclave in the countryside, while St. Paul's Parish includes Rabat with its outskirts. However with this new division the Parish Church of St. Paul-outside-the-walls did not lose its

historic foundation. This was confirmed by the Sacred Congregation in 1917 when it gave St. Paul's parish the title of *Protoparrocchia*.

Still at this time, St. Paul's Church and the Grotto were still distinct, the former run by the clergy while the latter by a Chapter of Canons.

The unification of these two institutions took place in 1962 when St. Paul's parish was raised in dignity to the rank of a Collegiate Church.

The titular feast — St. Paul's Martyrdom — is celebrated solemnly the first Sunday of July. And to show the historical link of the Cathedral

Church with St. Paul's Parish Church, the Cathedral Chapter arrives in a solemn procession on the feast-day of St. Peter and St. Paul celebrated in the Cathedral at the end of June.

Today, following new pastoral post-Councillar thinking, Rabat is subdivided into smaller zones thus serving as a prototype in pastoral ministry.

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