

Alfons Maria Hili - A Gozitan Patriot

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Introduction

Gozo, though a tiny island and sometimes featureless on maps of the Mediterranean, still has its own heroes and patriots. One such man was Mgr. Alfons Maria Hili of Victoria. What follows is a biographical note that may help readers become more familiar with a man who loved Gozo and the town of Victoria, and who spent his life being of service to his community.

Background

Alfons Maria Hili was born in Rabat, Gozo on the 19th of January 1865, the son of Ġorġ and Agata neé Grech. He was baptised at St George's Parish Church by the then Curate Canon Francesco Mercieca. Three of his brothers became priests: Dun Ġużepp who was to become the first parish priest of the newly-erected parish of Fontana, Mgr.



Alfons Maria Hili

Carmelo who died in December 1955 and Fra Ġorġ, who was a member of the Capuchin Order. Alfons did his primary and secondary school studies in Victoria and then proceeded to the Gozo Seminary in Victoria. Gozo had become a separate diocese just a year before he was born. He was ordained a priest on the 3rd April 1888 in the Seminary Chapel. The Bishop of Gozo Mgr. Ġwann M. Camilleri OSA chose him as his private chaplain. He became Rector of the Ta' Pinu Sanctuary in 1894. He also served as the fourteenth rector of the Diocesan Seminary from 1910 to 1914 and he had the formation of the future priests very much to his heart. Dun Alfons, as he was popularly known, became renowned throughout the Maltese Islands when the Gozitan seer Karmni Grima confided to him that the Blessed Virgin Mary had spoken to her from the chapel of Ta' Pinu; it was he who determined the actual date on which Our Lady had spoken to Karmni Grima.

An Illustrious Prelate

On the 21st of February 1899 he was chosen to become Canon Lector of the Gozo Cathedral Chapter. He was installed on the 11th of March of that same year. Bishop Camilleri called him to become Professor of Sacred Scripture and Canon Law at the Seminary. On the death of Mgr. Salv Grech, Dun Alfons became effective Canon of the Cathedral Church. Pope Benedict XV honoured him with the title of Domestic Prelate of His Holiness.

Parish Priest

The Bishop of Gozo appointed Dun Alfons parish priest of the Cathedral Chapter and St George's Parish in Victoria in 1917. It was a custom that since the Matrice and St George's formed one single parish, the new parish priest would be solemnly installed in both churches. So Dun Alfons was solemnly installed at the Cathedral Church on the 25th of January 1918 and at St George's on the 27th

of January. During his tenure as parish priest of Victoria, Dun Alfons became known for his kind-heartedness and generosity with the people of Rabat. He favoured the poor and the lowly. Those who knew him would say that both Dun Alfons and other members of his family died in poverty because of the financial help that they constantly gave to the poor of Victoria. This was testified by a friend of the family, Mgr. Ġuzeppi Debrincat known locally as *L-Angolin* who was actually part of the Hili household.

The Political Scene

Dun Alfons even entered politics – something that clerics were allowed to do in those times. In the 1921 election, Dun Alfons was elected member of the Legislative Assembly; he won a seat in the interests of the Partito Democratico Nazionalista led by Dr. Enrico Mizzi, also of Gozitan provenance. It was due to his hard work that a ferry service was established between Marfa in Malta and Mgarr, Gozo.

Hili the Benefactor

Dun Alfons' main dream in life was to embellish the parish church of St George in Rabat and put it in a class of its own. Aided by Mgr. Francesco Portelli and his brother Ġuzepp, Mgr. Hili entered into an ambitious project; the buildings of the naves for St George's parish church. He actually paid 200 pounds from his own money to see the naves built. He also left the sum of 400 pounds for the building of the dome of the same church. From the money he earned through his participation in the political arena, he paid for the embroidered velvet vestments of the church which were manufactured in Lyons, France.

Dun Alfons forked out his own money for the manufacturing of twenty-four Roman style chasubles, seven capes and three tunics (worn by deacons). From Malta he bought a *baldacchino* which is used for the procession of the *Quaranta Ore* annually. It was also during his time as parish priest that the church was embellished with a canopy which used to be hung on the main altar of the church (*Tużzell*) and which was later on sold to the Parish of St. Peter in Chains in Birżebbuġa;

this ornamental object was manufactured in Rabat, Malta in 1922. It was also on Dun Alfons' personal initiative that St George's Church was enriched with a set of bells, one of which is actually called "Alfonsa" after him. These bells were manufactured by the Baricozzi Company of Milan. In 1930 he asked Mgr. Giuseppe Giardini-Vella, a composer of Sicilian descent who had settled in Gozo, to write a hymn in honour of St George, patron saint of the island. The hymn was actually composed and sung for the first time in 1931.

Mgr. Alfons M. Hili died on the 31st December 1943 while still in office.

A Fitting Tribute

Dun Alfons' work and activities were to be given due recognition. Mgr. Joseph Farrugia, parish priest of St George's and successor of Dun Alfons himself, undertook the project of erecting a bust in honour of the illustrious prelate. On the 13th of January 1996, the President of the Republic of Malta Dr. Ugo Mifsud Bonnici unveiled the monument at St George's Basilica in the presence of the collegiate chapter of the very same parish of which he was pastor, spiritual father and benefactor. A memorial stone also hangs on the wall of the house in which he lived in Library Street, Victoria. Dun Alfons will always be remembered as a genuine Gozitan patriot who put the needs of his own people before his very own thus earning the love and respect of his fellow Gozitans.

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