

THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF MALTA

The Maltese Church is one of the very few remaining Apostolic Churches. It was founded in A.D. 60 by St. Paul of Tarsus after being shipwrecked on his way to Rome. The rest of the story is well known: the "Princeps Insulae", Publius, entertained them all at his summer residence at a place which is still known as "San Pawl Milqi" (St. Paul Welcomed).

St. Paul also healed Refanus, alias Alvinus, Publius' father, who was suffering from dysentery. The Apostle is also recorded to have appointed him as Bishop of the place and turned his City palace at Rabat as the first Maltese Church or "domus-ecclesia".

That first church quite near St. Paul's Grotto, where he is believed to have lived during his three months' stay in Malta, in the locality still known as "Ta' Duni" (a small Greek temple dedicated to Adonis existed in the area) was in the fourth century dedicated to the Mother of God, the "Theotocos", and when later on the Arabs (870–1900) built the

city of Mdina as a safer place for the population, Bishop Manas (868–890), during whose time as Deacon the Maltese Church was made dependent on Constantinople as suffragan to the See of Syracuse, built a small church under the same title of "Sayyidna Maryam – Sidtna Marija", Our Lady Mary. It was also known as the Church of "Umm Isa – Omm Ġesù", Mother of Jesus, whom both the Maltese Christians and the Muslim Arabs invoked. The annual feast was held on Mary's Assumption into Heaven, better known as "Santa Marija".

The Islands were liberated from the Arabs in July of 1090 by Roger of Hauteville, Count of Normandy, who restored the Cathedral Church which had remained desolate and deteriorating for almost two centuries. He also endowed the Bishop's "mensa" with property in Lentini, Cuppodia and Cileppi in Sicily and provided prebends for the three dignitaries of the Cathedral Chapter: the Archdeacon, the Dean and the Treasurer.

Bishop Stephen (1140–1167) constructed the pen-



Titular at the Mdina Cathedral Church, a polyptych of 11 parts (Siculo-Catalan School), showing St. Paul on a throne in the large central section with pictures of aspects of his life around it

ultimate Cathedral Church and dedicated it also to the Mother of God with a devout painting by an 11th century Sicilian artist, Santo Luca. The painting still exists. It was given a superimposed silver dress by Bishop Fra Thomas Gargallo (1578–1614) and placed on the altar of the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament when the Church was re-dedicated to the Apostle St. Paul. The ancient icon was solemnly crowned by Archbishop Sir Peter Pace on June 26th, 1898.

The dedication of the Mdina Cathedral Church was changed to St. Paul's after the deliverance of Malta from a Saracen invasion in 1429. The population of Malta then was 1,667 persons, of whom 424 lived within the bastions of Mdina. Males numbered 190 between the ages of 19 and 65. According to legend, St. Paul was seen with sword in hand on a white horse flying over Mdina to drive the enemy away: hence the fine commemorating painting by Mattia Preti (1613–1699) found inside the Church. The titular is composed of a polyptych of eleven parts of the Siculo-Catalan school. It shows St. Paul on a throne in the large central section with pictures of his life around. The work can still be seen at the Cathedral Museum.

On July 10th, 1154, the Cathedral Church of Malta was made suffragan to the Archdiocese of Palermo and dependent on the Latin Roman Church by the only English Pope, Hadrian IV, Nicholas Breakspere (1154–1159).

The old Church was destroyed by a great earthquake on January 11th, 1693. What remains from that terrible day, the feast of St. Iginus, is the front internal facade-cum-apse. The rest of the cathedral was built between 1697 and 1702 under the famous Maltese architect Lorenzo Gafa'. This explains the new titular showing the "Conversion of St. Paul" by Mattia Preti and which had been salvaged from the destroyed temple. It has remained as the titular ever since. The new Church was consecrated by Bishop Fra David Cocco Palmieri (1684–1711) on October 8th, 1702.

The church possesses many historic and artistic treasures, one of which is certainly the solid silver processional cross, said to have belonged to Godfrey de Bouillon who led the first Crusade in 1099. The cross had first been given to the Order of St. John whose Grandmaster, Fra Philip Villiers de l'Isle Adam donated it to the Malta church on taking possession of Mdina on November 13th, 1530.

The vault paintings are the work of Sicilian artist Vincent Manno in 1794, while the cupola was entrusted to G. Gallucci in 1860. It was redone in 1970 by Mario Gaffaro Rore of Turin.

The Cathedral Chapter enjoys several privileges: Pope Urban VIII (1623–1644) gave it the rochet, purple cape and "cappa magna" with fur and lined



Outline sketch of the Cathedral Church in 1099

underneath with red silk on March 13th, 1635 at the request of the only Malta-born bishop during the whole rule of the Order Fra Balthasar Cagliares (1615–1633). Papal approval was brought from Rome by his immediate successor Bishop Fra Michael John Balaguer de Camarasa (1635–1663); the golden chapter mace (clava) by Pope Innocent VIII (1721–1724) in 1722 at the request of Bishop Fra Gaspard Gori Mancini (1722–1727); the mitre and golden pectoral cross suspended from a golden and red thread cord by Pope Benedict XIV (1740–1758) in 1747 through Archbishop Bishop Fra Paul Alpheran de Bussan (1728–1757); Pope Pius IX (1846–1878) gave the Chapter the prerogatives of domestic prelates, but not the name; in 1850 at the request of Archbishop Bishop Publius-Mary Sant (1847–1857); and Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) gave the Chapter the prerogatives of Protonotaries Apostolic but not the name "ad instar durante munere" in 1896 at the request of Archbishop Bishop Peter Pace, hence the painting of Bishops Cagliares, Sant, Pace and Archbishop Sir Michael Gonzi (1944–1976). Archbishop Gonzi founded the Cathedral Museum. As the first Metropolitan Archbishop of the Maltese archdiocese, Mgr. Gonzi helped

raise the Cathedral Chapter to the Metropolitan status.

Other paintings include Pope Benedict XIV and Pius VI, who on March 3rd, 1797 gave the title of Archbishop of Rhodes to the Bishop of Malta (the honour was removed in March 28th, 1928 when the Maltese Bishop was given the personal title of Archbishop) and Pope Pius XII (1939–1958) who promoted the Maltese diocese to an archdiocese.

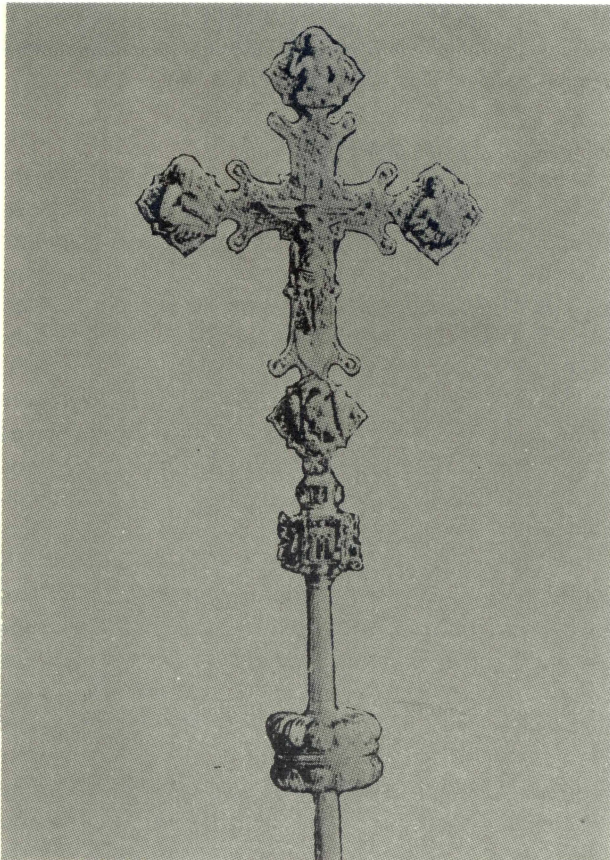
Two other paintings in the Chapter Hall are those of the only Maltese Cardinal Fabrice dei Baroni Sceberras Testaferrata (1758–1843) who was canon of the Cathedral between 1768 and 1818, and of Cardinal Frederick Colonna who in 1686 strongly upheld the privileges of the Cathedral Chapter in relation to those of the then only other Chapter in Malta, that of Birkirkara.

The Cathedral Chapter, originally made up of 14 canons, is now composed of 26 canons, who divide among themselves the religious duties at Mdina Cathedral and St. John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta.

Its five senior members are dignitaries: the Archdeacon, the Dean, the Precentor, the Treasurer and the Archpriest. The Precentor's post was created in 1372 when the Reverend Bartholomew Hasciah was appointed on the recommendation of King Frederick



The Church as restored in 1702 after the earthquake of 1693



The processional Cross donated by the Order to the Church. The Cross, which can still be seen at the Mdina Cathedral, is said to have been carried into Jerusalem by Godfrey de Bouillon in 1099

III of Sicily, "The Simple" (1355–1377), grandfather of Margerita d'Aragona, great benefactress of the Carmelite Fathers outside Rabat in Malta and her sister Sibilla, benefactress of the Annunciation semitroglodytic chapel outside Rabat in Gozo. Hasciah was chaplain and personal friend of the king.

This first Precentor died in 1391 (his coat-of-arms can be seen inside the sacristy of the old St. Gregory's Church in Zejtun). Contrary to the procedure in other Colleges of canons where the Archpriest is usually the highest member, in the Mdina Cathedral Chapter he occupies the lowest dignity. The reason for this is that originally the "cura delle anime" (care of souls) in Mdina was the sole responsibility of the Proto-parish church of Malta, that of St. Paul at Rabat, where parishioners were considered as "unum corpus" (one body) – hence the "duplice possesso", the double possession of the incumbent at both parishes. The parish of St. Paul in Rabat, Malta was given its own parishpriest on June 6th, 1902.

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