

## **The Church and Gozitan Culture**

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**C**ulture, broadly defined, refers to that which enables human beings to develop and refine their mental and physical abilities. The term is sometimes given a more narrow meaning, and associated with masterpieces of literature and art. Whatever the meaning attached to it, culture, always refers to man who learns, or to man at work, in a social context.

In this chapter, I shall attempt to show that the Church in Gozo, by its various activities, has offered in the past, and is still offering at present, a valuable contribution to the local culture.

I shall dwell mostly on the contribution that the Church has made through education, performed and visual arts, music, conservation of the cultural heritage, and publications. I shall not delve on the impact that religion and religious activity has had on the Gozitan population, due to space constraints. This aspect is dealt with in another chapter in this volume, authored by H. E. Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, President of Malta.

### **EDUCATION**

Of prime importance among the initiatives taken by the Church in Gozo in the field of culture is the educational effort, which is carried out by the schools. In our age, the major responsibility of the schools of different levels, belongs to the State, although the parents still exercise their right and duty to educate their children in schools of their preference. Together with the parents and the State, the Church considers it her mission to run schools and educate the young generation. In the island of Gozo, the Church has been discharging this task since the last century, when it opened its first schools.

The Papal Bull *Singulari Amore* by which the new diocese of Gozo was established, after its dismembration from that of Malta, enjoined also, that the newly erected diocese should have its Seminary – the house where priests obtain their training. The first bishop of Gozo, Mgr Michael Buttigieg made all preparation for the setting up of this institute. The Seminary was officially opened on 4 November 1866 and blessed by the Apostolic Administrator for Gozo, Mgr Paolo Micallef of the Augustinian Order. The Seminary (major and minor) together with a boarding school, was initially run by the Jesuit Fathers of the Sicilian Province, the first rector being Fr. Antonino Tommasi S.J.

When the Jesuits left the Seminary in 1909 and transferred themselves to Malta where they had opened their own college, H.L. Mgr Giovanni Maria Camilleri, fourth bishop of Gozo, entrusted the Seminary and Secondary school to the local diocesan priests.

Among the former students of the Gozo Seminary we find not only priests, but also members of different professions and other persons who have made a name for themselves in every sector of our country. The list includes the late Dr. Anton Buttigieg, former President of Malta, to cite but one example.

Even at present, the Gozo Major Seminary, which in April 1994, was affiliated to the Theological Faculty of the Università' San Tommaso of Rome, is the place where a number of young students who are preparing themselves for priesthood receive tertiary education. The Minor Seminary, with a qualified staff of priests, laymen and laywomen, caters for the secondary education of about 300 boys and prepares them for the Malta Matriculation and General Certificate of Education Examinations.

The Church in Gozo has been present in the field of primary education, much before these became compulsory in 1948. A marble slab fixed to the northern side of the Collegiate Church of Għarb, records the names of the priests who started the first school for boys in that village in 1809 and succeeded in keeping it going until 1859. Presently, there are three primary schools run by the nuns, namely the St Francis School in Victoria, under the direction of the Franciscan Sisters, the Laura Vicuna School at Għasri, entrusted to the Salesian Sisters and the St Thérèse

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The Gozo Seminary in the 1880s. Founded in November 1866, it was housed in the former St Julian Hospital. *Photo by courtesy of Gaulitana.*

School in Kerċem, run by the Carmelite sisters. Besides in several parishes of Gozo, there are kindergarten or day centres run by members of religious orders.

The Church in Gozo, through its parish centres, also provides leisure facilities for children and organises indoor and outdoor games, together with other recreational facilities. This fundamental need for children to develop their capabilities at the very early years through recreation activities has become more important nowadays, because most families have one or two children and hence there is little opportunity for the little ones to mix and play with other children within the household itself.

Playgrounds for boys and girls of varying age are now considered as

indispensable additional leisure space for the young, particularly in communities with a high traffic density. In Gozo, the Church, especially through the initiative of the religious organisation 'The Society of Christian Doctrine' popularly known as the M.U.S.E.U.M, has made several playgrounds of this kind available in different areas.

As far as adult education is concerned, it is worth mentioning the courses for parents and young couples in the form of discussions and lectures, designed, above all, to provide educational and pedagogical training for the upbringing of children. The organisations responsible for this initiative in the town and villages of Gozo, are their respective Parish Councils. On the whole, these courses, are very well attended. In addition, the Cana Movement gives marriage and family guidance and through its councilors, deals with marriage problems, including family planning, sex education, and the care of difficult children.

## **CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE THEATRE**

Stage productions were the main forms of popular entertainment before the advent of television. In Gozo this cultural activity was especially promoted by the Church. Although the history of the theatre on our island is yet to be written, we may mention here the well known fact that it was due to the Italian Jesuits, who were in charge of the Gozo Seminary, that as early as the second half of the last century, young students were coached to produce some plays in Italian. Several of these plays were later translated into Maltese and produced by groups of amateur actors. One of the pioneers of this cultural activity, was Fr. Joseph Diacono, parish priest of Xaghra, who set up a stage in a hall near the church and organised performances by a group of youngsters from the village.

In Victoria and in some of the villages, halls with a limited seating capacity were used instead of theatres. Local companies with a male cast presented melodramas and farces, in the vernacular, most of which were translated or adapted from Italian.

Important contributions in this regard were those by the Catholic Action Centre and to Don Bosco Oratory, which have kept alive to our own day,

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this tradition of theatrical entertainment. For several years, under the direction of the Salesian fathers, the Don Bosco Oratory presented religious drama such as the Passion Play, Saint Thomas More, The Prodigal Son and literary plays like the Song of Spring and the Apotheosis of Ġorġ Pisani.

Even in present times, several villages in Gozo, from time to time, hold stage productions in their parochial halls. Drama festivals with the participation of the various companies, although few in number, have been organised with a certain degree of success. All these initiatives, help to foster a love and appreciation for dramatic art among Gozitan youth.

### THE ARTISTIC LEGACY

The art galleries in our island are few and far between, but works of art produced by renowned masters are treasured in our churches and chapels, where every visitor can enjoy their artistic beauty. Since time immemorial, religious art has served not only to adorn the churches, but also to instruct the faithful. "Many churches in the Maltese islands - writes the late Mgr Arthur Bonnici (*History of the Church in Malta*, Vol III, p. 167) - contain work of diverse artistic value in marble, wood or silver, on canvas or on parchment, admired by the people who visit these houses of God. In this respect such churches may be considered as small museums that adorn the town or village were they stand".

The architects employed by the Order of Saint John, notably Girolamo Cassar and Lorenzo Gafà, were mainly military engineers whose chief concern was the building of the defences of the island, but some of them built very fine churches. Two works in Gozo which belong to this period are the Cathedral and the old church of St George in Victoria. The former was built by Lorenzo Gafà; the latter was designed by Vittorio Cassar, son of Girolamo, who according to the memorial tablet placed over his tomb in Santa Barbara Chapel in the Citadel, died in 1607.

In more recent years, Canon Salvatore Bondì, who had studied architecture under Giorgio Pullicino and painting under Michele Busuttill, planned the Church of Xaghra, and Kerċem and directed their construction. Although different in style from the other churches of the island, the

baroque church of Gharb and the romanesque Basilica of Ta' Pinu are works of architecture of immense artistic value.

Many of our churches are renowned for their excellent paintings, as shown in the chapter in this volume, authored by Dr. Mario Buhagiar in this volume. Some of the most important artists, whose works of art adorn the vaults of our places of worship or are hung as altarpieces include Mattia Preti, Giuseppe D'Arena, Lazzaro Pisani, Giuseppe Cali, Rocco Buhagiar and Francesco Zahra.

Worthy of note, among the works of sculpture are Antonio Sciortino's statue representing the three theological virtues in the facade of Nadur's basilica and the numerous works in local stone or in papier mâché, by the well-known sculptor Chevalier Agostino Camilleri.

## CHURCH MUSIC

Every parish in Gozo holds its annual *fešta* in honour of the Patron Saint. The *fešta* does not consist only of marches by brass bands, pealing of bells and firing of petards. Within the Church itself, the liturgical service is celebrated with the singing of the choir accompanied by the orchestra. A large amount of religious music was composed for these and similar festive occasions. The parishioners, as a rule, are very proud of the *antifona* played in their church, on the eve of their feast, and of the hymn sung to the accompaniment of a brass band, at the start of the procession with the statue of the patron saint.

The long list of composers, who wrote music for Church festivities, includes Mgr Giorgio Mercieca and Mgr Giuseppe Farrugia, both canons of the Cathedral Chapter of Gozo. The more important musical compositions of the former include a *Te Deum* for choir and orchestra which was sung on the occasion of the Enthronement of the first bishop of Gozo, Mgr Michael Buttigieg. Mgr Farrugia is more famous because he was a man of many talents. His profound musical expertise, was achieved at the Seminary, through his own personal efforts and studies. His musical teacher at the Seminary was Enrico Sciò, a member of the Society of Jesus, himself a good musician. Mgr Farrugia composed his earliest known works *Beatus Vir* and *Confitebor* in 1876.

## Libraries, Museums and Archives

Another very important service by the Church is offered by the Diocesan Seminary Library, and by some parish libraries. The idea of setting up a library in the Seminary originated with the Jesuit Fathers, who ran the Seminary. Many persons enriched the library by bequeathing collections of important books. Four major benefactors of the library were Mgr Antonio Grech Delicata, Mgr Sidor Formosa, Mgr Giuseppe Farrugia and Mgr Emanuele Micallef.

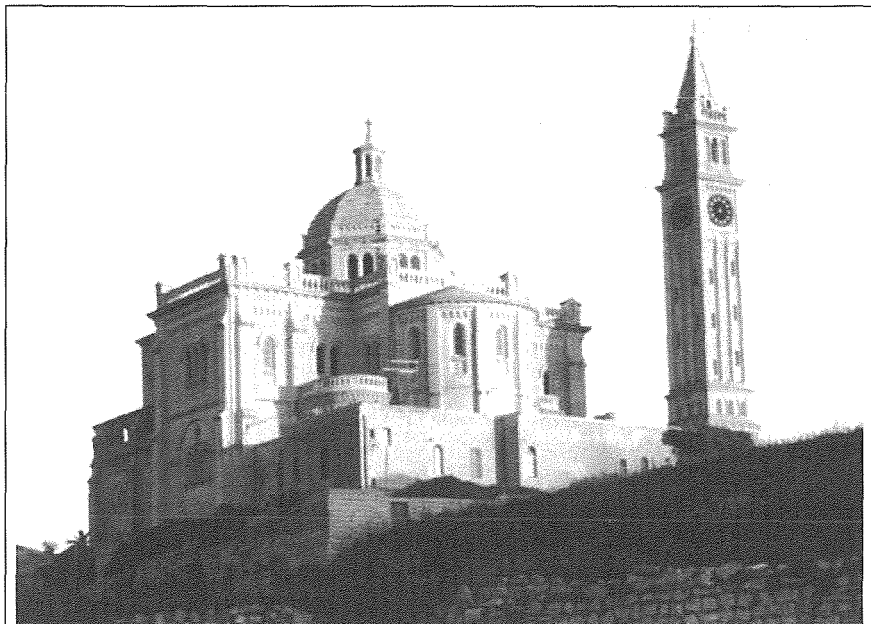
Since 1969, the library has been housed in a spacious hall in the second floor of the new wing of the Seminary.

The study of antiquities, together with the love and interest in all that has historical or artistic value, is fostered by the Church museums. The International Symposium on "Cathedral and Diocesan Museums" held in Malta in January 1994 recommended that wherever possible, a diocese should promote diocesan and ecclesiastical museums as centres of cultural and pastoral meditations.

A major contribution by the Church in Gozo, in this regard, is the Cathedral museum. This Museum is divided into three sections. The first section, in the basement, consists of the Cathedral Treasury, including a set of twelve silver candlesticks, which are placed on the main altar during the main feasts. In the second section, housed on the first floor, there are on display a large number of general exhibits, related to the history of the Cathedral and the diocese of Gozo. The third section, occupying the second floor, is a miniature picture gallery containing the work of various local and foreign painters.

The Ta' Pinu Museum, situated on the street leading from Rabat to Gharb, is housed in the building where Carmela Grima lived and died. Carmela Grima was the peasant who in 1883 received a message from the Blessed Virgin at Ta' Pinu chapel. Besides her personal belongings and some objects of devotion, there are many items which remind the visitor of rural life in a Gozo during the second half of the nineteenth century.

In Gozo one also finds diocesan and parochial archives, as well as archives belonging to other ecclesiastical entities in Gozo. The wealth of



The Ta' Pinu Church. The Ta' Pinu Museum is housed in the building where Carmela Grima lived and died. *Photo Gino Galea*

documents kept in these archives may throw new light on the centuries old history of the Church in our small island. Norms were issued in 1981 and lately by the Synod of Gozo (1992) with the aim of regulating the running of these archives, and facilitating work for researchers.

## **PUBLICATIONS**

The Church in Gozo also gives a large contribution to the culture of the islands through the publication of books and periodicals, such as *Il-Hajja f'Ghawdex*, a monthly diocesan magazine. The Church is also responsible for the *Lumen Christi* Media Centre, which houses the local branch of the radio-studio RTK. The Centre is also responsible for the production of tapes and videos-tapes. It is not possible to go into detail in this regard, because this form of contribution is very vast and does not only deal with strictly religious matters.



## CONCLUSION

It should be pointed out, in conclusion, that this was only a brief summary of the contribution that the Church in Gozo has made and is still making to Gozitan culture. Moreover, we have not touched upon the impact that the Church had through its religious activities.

However, even this short survey shows that Church in Gozo has had a major effect on the development of education and the arts in Gozo, and has been instrumental in the preservation of the Gozitan cultural heritage in the form of Museums and Archives.

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