

Mosta Rotunda elevated to the dignity of minor basilica

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News that the Mosta Rotunda was elevated to the coveted privilege of minor basilica by Pope Francis last May has kindled a sense of satisfaction, joy and gratitude among the parishioners of this populous locality.

In a canonical sense, the sanctuary basilica of the Assumption joins a restricted group of around 1,800 pre-eminent churches worldwide, including another four in Malta and five in Gozo, and is the latest minor basilica to be established in the Maltese archdiocese since the elevation of the collegiate church of St Helen in Birkirkara to the same canonical dignity in 1950.

Etymologically meaning a 'royal house', the term 'basilica' has been reserved for distinguished churches that stand out in size, magnificence and/or historical significance, or upon which the Roman Pontiff has bestowed this title along with its obligations and privileges.

Throughout the centuries, the Catholic Church has designated the title of major basilica to the former seats of the four Patriarchs in Rome. These comprise the Lateran Archbasilica of the Most Holy Saviour and St John the Baptist (St John Lateran; the cathedral of the Bishop of Rome, also known as Patriarch of the West), the Vatican Basilica of St Peter (formerly assigned to the Patriarch of Constantinople), the Liberian Basilica of the Divine Maternity (St Mary Major; formerly assigned to the Patriarch of Antioch) and the Ostian Basilica of St Paul (St Paul-outside-the-Walls; formerly assigned to the Patriarch of Alexandria).

All four major basilicas are characterised by a permanent papal throne and a papal altar located within a 'papal chapel' used only by the Holy Father or his delegated prelate. Moreover, one of the basilicas' doors is designated as a Holy Door, opened only during the Holy Jubilee Years. Major basilicas have a college of penitentiaries (confessors with special faculties to forgive

reserved sins) subject to the Cardinal Penitentiary. All other basilicas, including the Patriarchal basilica of St Laurence Outside the Walls and the two Franciscan Patriarchal Basilicas of Assisi (St Francis and St Mary of the Angels) are deemed minor basilicas.

Some churches were considered minor basilicas by virtue of the consistent use of this title since antiquity or medieval age – such edifices are now referred to as immemorial basilicas. They include four famous shrines in the Holy Land (the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, the Basilica of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, the Basilica of the Agony and the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem). The distinguished (insignis) collegiate churches of Rome assumed this title in the second half of the 18th century and served as a prototype of today's minor basilicas.

The first canonically created minor basilica dates back to 1783 (San Nicola di Tolentino in Macerata, Italy), while the first church to be bestowed with this dignity outside Italy was the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in 1805.

While the first few minor basilicas were created by the Supreme Pontiff, the canonical processing of petitions asking for the concession of this privilege has been entrusted to a Roman dicastery, and subsequently approved by the Holy Father. The first norms governing this ecclesiastical title were set out in the decree *Lucretina* issued in 1836 during the pontificate of Pope Gregory XVI. These norms were updated in line with the spirit of Vatican Council II by the Sacred Congregation of Rites through the publication of the decree *Domus Dei* in 1968. Specifically, the latter document emphasises that such churches should be "linked even more closely with the Chair of Peter and become centres of special liturgical and spiritual endeavour".

In 1988, the canonical process was entrusted to the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, acting upon the norms of the decree *Domus Ecclesiae* – *de titulo Basilicae Minoris* issued on November 9,

1989. The latter document governed the granting of the title of minor basilica to the archpresbyterial church and sanctuary of the Assumption in Mosta on May 31, 2018, through a decree signed by Cardinal Robert Sarah, prefect of the aforementioned dicastery, acting upon powers conferred by Pope Francis.

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The detailed canonical process was instituted at the request of formal Mosta archpriest Fr Albert Buhagiar and petitioned to Rome by Archbishop Charles Scicluna, after obtaining the 'nihil obstat' (favourable judgment) by the Maltese Episcopal Conference. Additionally, it required the presentation of a detailed dossier on the historical, artistic and liturgical aspects of Mosta church, in accordance with the requirements of the aforementioned *Domus Ecclesiae* decree. This process was completed during the tenure of the current archpriest Fr Sebastian Caruana.

The criteria of pre-eminence justifying the granting of this title can be summarised in terms of history, architecture, artistic merit, devotional fame and liturgical celebration.

Built to gigantic yet elegant proportions between 1833 and 1860 by largely poor parishioners bereft of major commodities, the parish

church of Mosta was essentially the first local major ecclesiastical project built in neoclassical lines. Its architectural motifs and dimensions are truly monumental and a living testimony of unwavering faith in the Creator and devotion to the Blessed Virgin.

The Rotunda's unsupported masonry dome built in Maltese globigerina limestone remains a feat of architectural engineering to this day.

Throughout the years, this edifice, raised to archpresbyterial status in 1888, was decorated with works of art by eminent local and foreign artists – suffice to mention the famous murals by Giuseppe Cali, paintings by Stefano Erardi, Good Friday statues made by Carlo Darmanin, the monumental urn holding the statue of the dead body of Christ and the Inzoli mechanical pipe organ, in addition to silverware and embroidery adorning the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy.

The solemn crowning of the titular painting of the Assumption, authorised by papal decree on August 10, 1975, cemented the centuries-old irrevocable bond between the locals and the Blessed Virgin, a bond which predates Mosta's institution as a parish in 1608.

Throughout the years, the Rotunda hosted important events. Clergy and laity, including 15 archbishops, 45 bishops, four cardinals and other dignitaries, presided over by Papa delegate Cardinal Domenico Ferrata, packed this archpresbyterial church between April 24 and 26, 1913, as they deliberated and gave praise to the Holy Eucharist during the 24th International Eucharistic Congress.

In a similar vein, Maltese faithful (joining others around the globe) gathered in the Rotunda on September 22, 1946, to present a petition signed by 46,200 families to diocesan bishop Mgr Michael Gonzi asking that the immemorial belief in the bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven be solemnly defined as a dogma of divine and Catholic faith. This process reached its culmination in Pope Pius XII's solemn proclamation

of the Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* on November 1, 1950.

In 2005, the Mosta Rotunda was one of the distinguished venues hosting over a thousand priests from 80 countries, including several cardinals, participating in the International Congress for Priests organised by the Congregation for the Clergy.

Reflecting their spiritual closeness to the Holy Father, minor basilicas are duty bound to encourage the study and divulgation of documents issued by the Supreme Pontiff and the Holy See, particularly those pertaining to the Sacred Liturgy. Such holy edifices are particularly called to promote active liturgical participation by the faithful, especially in the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation and the celebration of the Divine Office.

Emphasis is made on thorough preparation of the Liturgy, particularly that pertaining to the most solemn seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter, and to the promotion of sacred music and singing. To this end, throughout the centuries and to date, Mosta parish, currently the largest in the archdiocese, has been abundantly blessed with priests and religious, and dignified execution of the Liturgy.

Moreover, basilicas are called to celebrate "with particular care" the feasts of the Chair of St Peter (February 22), the solemnity of the apostles Peter and Paul (June 29) and the anniversary of the election or inauguration of the Supreme Pontiff's Petrine ministry.

Basilicas are entitled to the use of the basilica canopy (*umbraculum*) and bell (*tintinnabulum*). The canopy, shaped like a half-open umbrella, is made in plain or damasked silk in stripes of alternate red and yellow colours, topped by a globe with a cross, both made of gilt metal. From each stripe hangs a pendant of the opposite colour. Red and yellow are reminiscent of the hereditary colours of the Roman senate, later adopted by the Papal government. It was originally intended to be used to cover the Supreme Pontiff on his descent from his horse or carriage as he arrived to visit a Roman basilica.

The *tintinnabulum* comprises a small metal bell hanging from a typically elaborate portable belfry held atop a supporting pole, and is usually carved in wood or precious metal. It was probably used in Rome to signal the arrival of the basilica clergy to the next station church. The coat of arms of a minor basilica consists of a shield of arms 'timbered' with the canopy whose pole stands upright behind the shield. The crossed papal keys, coloured in silver and gold and with grips turned down to the hands of



Sanctuary Basilica of the Assumption, Mosta. PHOTOS: MARK MICALLEP PERCONTE

the Supreme Pontiff signify Petrine authority to bind and loose on earth (silver key) and in heaven (gold key), as entrusted by Christ himself (Matt 16:19).

The heraldic insignia of the newly instituted Mosta basilica comprises the traditional coat of arms of Mosta, namely an escutcheon with a red cross on a white field, (representing the Catholic faith), a yellow circle (representing the Rotunda) and a white star on a blue background (a symbol of the Madonna). A monogram of Mary (interlaced 'A' and 'M' for 'Auspice Maria', meaning 'Under the protection of Mary') is included in the upper division of the shield.

The basilica motto 'Spes Alit Ruricolam' ('Hope sustains the farmer'), reflecting Mosta's agricultural past, is written on a scroll below the shield and is reminiscent of the faithful's earthly pilgrimage, borne with faith and Chris-

tian hope. The red lining of the scroll symbolises the sacrifices made by the local parishioners over the centuries.

Minor basilicas have the right to display the insignia of the Supreme Pontiff on their facade (alongside that of the bishop in the case of parish churches), together with the triple barred papal cross. Basilicas erected after 1968 are additionally entitled to the use of the papal symbol (the crossed keys) on banners, furnishings and the basilica seal.

Moreover, the rector of a minor basilica may wear as choir dress a black mozetta with red piping, buttons and button-holes over his cassock or religious habit and the surplice.

On a pastoral level, pilgrims piously visiting a minor basilica on certain days are endowed with a plenary indulgence under the usual conditions. As Archbishop Scicluna aptly said during the

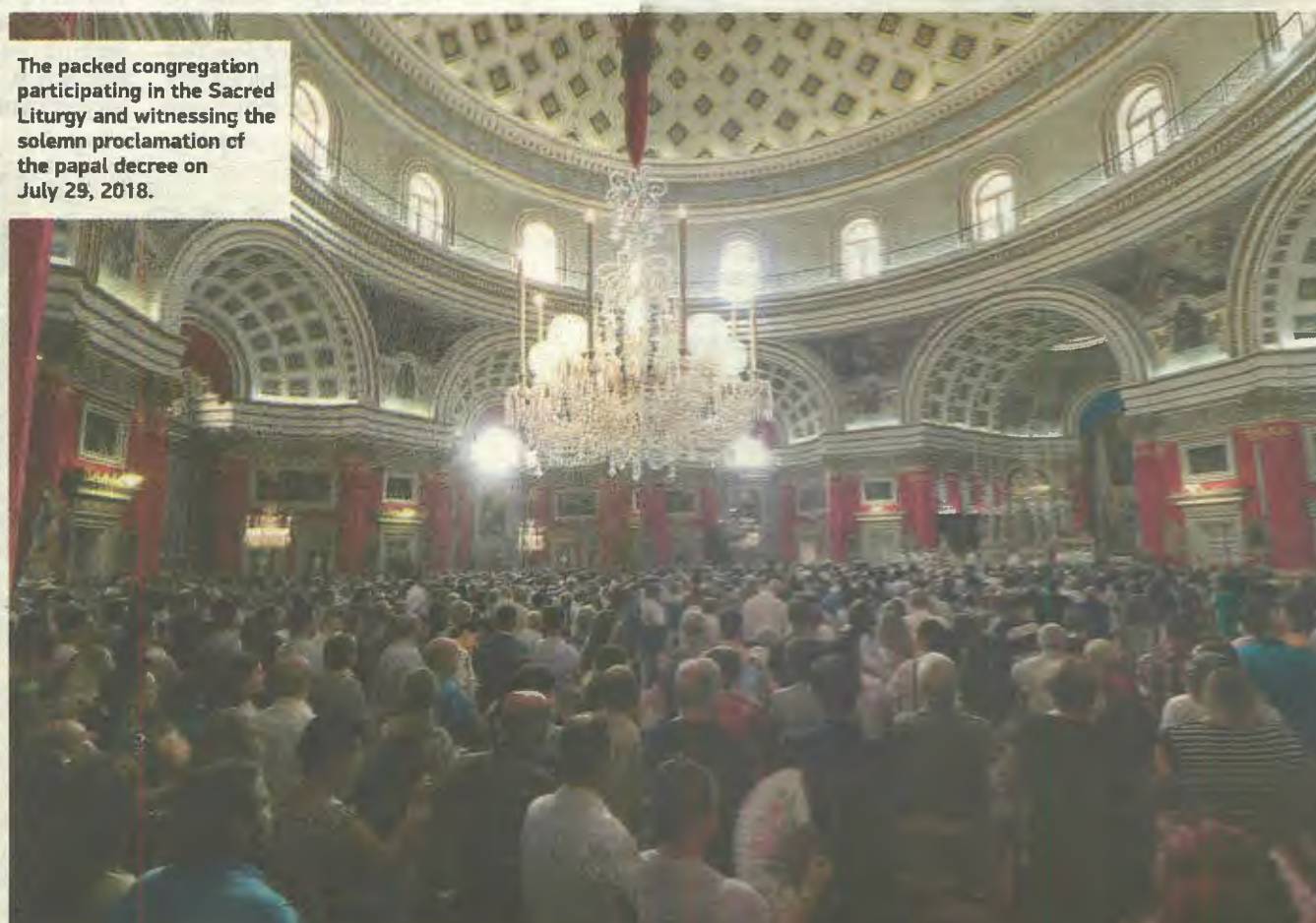
solemn inauguration Mass of this newly instituted minor basilica on July 29, 2018, the granting of this coveted title to one of Malta's most iconic churches carries an added responsibility to convey the Kingdom of God (*Basilea*), through active ministry with all strata of society, particularly the poor and the marginalised.

May the Blessed Virgin, the first fruit of the *Basilea* and mother of the Eternal King (*Basileus*), accompany the local parish community as it struggles in its walk of faith, striving – despite setbacks, trials and difficulties – to be a sign of hope and comfort, spreading the Good News of love and compassion, joyful in the hope of Eternal Life.

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Inscribed marble plaque commemorating this momentous event.



The packed congregation participating in the Sacred Liturgy and witnessing the solemn proclamation of the papal decree on July 29, 2018.



Main altar of the sanctuary basilica of the Assumption, displaying the *umbraculum* and *tintinnabulum*. While the *umbraculum* was inaugurated by the parish in time for this year's feast of the Assumption, the *tintinnabulum* was kindly lent for the occasion by the sanctuary basilica of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Valletta.