

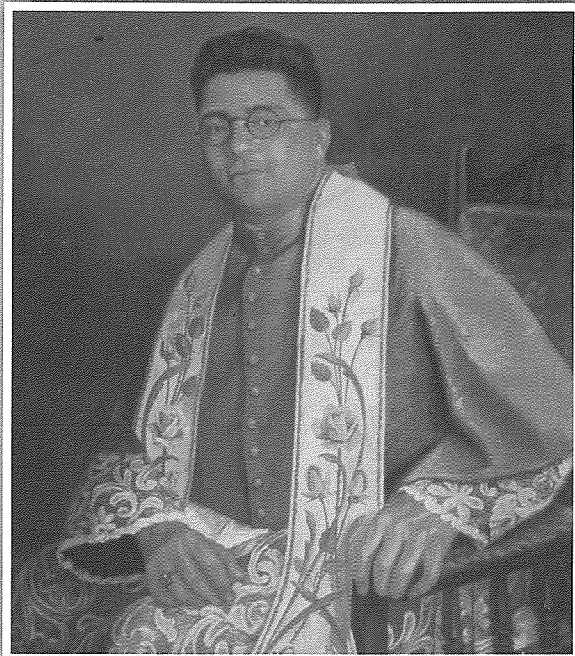
Monsignor Joseph Zarb (1912-1985)

Father Joseph Zarb was born at Hamrun on 9th December 1912. He was ordained priest on 25th July 1937 and served at the Parish of Hamrun until he was appointed Parish Priest of Kirkop in 1942. Shortly afterwards, on 14th March 1943, he was appointed Parish Priest of Zabbar, a parish dedicated to Our Lady of Graces. At those times World War II was at its height. The early forties were difficult times for the Maltese not just because of the relentless heavy bombing of the island by Italian and German aircraft, but also because of the widespread shortages of all commodities especially food. Most of the residents of Zabbar took refuge in safer places in the north of Malta, away from the sea ports and the airports.

That was the state of Zabbar which greeted the new Parish Priest Joseph Zarb who followed three short lived Parish Priests, Father Francis Abela* (1940-1941), Father Joseph Lanzon (1941-1942) and Father Lawrence Spiteri** (1942?). But as the war moved away from Malta, the air attacks stopped and the people of Zabbar returned from their safe refuge. As the civil situation went back to normal, Father Zarb turned his attention to the state of the Sanctuary and the artefacts which had accumulated in the Sanctuary and its precincts since the establishment of the Parish in 1615.

The crowning of the titular painting of Our Lady of Graces by Alessio Erardi (1715) was a long standing dream of the people of Zabbar. Two months after being appointed Parish Priest, Father Zarb received a letter from former Parish Priest Leopoldo Farrugia (1886-1918) bringing to his attention the long standing dream of the Zabbar parishioners:

".....above all I would like you to initiate the process for the coronation of the Madonna so that maybe before I close my eyes forever, I will have the fortune of seeing the Madonna crowned which has always been my wish. I assure you that for this event you will find support not only from the parishioners whose love for the Madonna is very well known to me but also from the numerous other devotees....."(15 May 1943)



When the war ended he turned his attention to the parish's and other archives in search of the history of the Sanctuary and its treasures. He started publishing his intense research in 1947 and kept issuing publications connected with the Parish up to 1972. Soon he concluded that he had gathered enough documentation to satisfy the conditions required to obtain the approval from the Vatican for the crowning of the image of Our Lady of Graces. On 13th March 1949 the Presidents of the two Zabbar band clubs asked the visiting Archbishop Gonzi to take the necessary action for the coronation of Our Lady of Graces. Archbishop Gonzi on that same day publicly pledged his support for the coronation to the delight of the crowd gathered in Sanctuary Square.

On 22nd July 1949 the Vatican issued the decree approving the coronation of Erardi's Our Lady of Graces venerated at the Zabbar Sanctuary. The decree was mysteriously kept secret until 26th February 1950, People's Sunday (Hadd in-Nies) when Zarb announced it to the congregation. The preparations started immediately and the

embellishment of the Sanctuary for the occasion was taken in hand. Parishioners answered generously to the Parish Priest's appeal by donating their personal jewellery which was melted down to be turned into jewelled golden crowns. The much awaited ceremony took place on the 2nd September 1951.

Apart from the pastoral work which he never neglected, Zarb must be credited with the total transformation of the Sanctuary and its environment. He also spread the devotion towards Our Lady of Graces on a national scale. A comprehensive list of projects undertaken during the 32 years as Parish Priest was published in a leaflet which marked his forced retirement and promotion as Archpriest of the Cathedral of Mdina in 1975. Going through this list one may ask, "Where the people of Zabbar so rich?" Most of the people are middle class workers but their devotion towards Our Lady of Graces made them contribute money as well as free labour to the Parish. Father Zarb had the ability to make money go further by making full use of volunteers. His charisma and undisputed devotion towards Our Lady of Graces was the driving force behind all the projects undertaken.

I must also mention my personal impressions of the unique Parish Priest Joseph Zarb. I remember him delivering the Sunday homily in every

mass said at the Sanctuary and then personally collecting the donations using the 'kopp'. He also used to do the annual blessing of homes and families of the whole of Zabbar single handed, a task which took him months to complete. He rarely travelled abroad or took a holiday. He was frequently found in his confessional and his office was always open to provide certificates and all other paperwork required by the parishioners. People also turned to his good counsel in family disputes and problems. He was always available, he had no office hours and I am amazed how he managed to find the time to do research and write so many publications. His day must have been longer than the normal 24 hours.

One of the most prestigious honours he received was the honorary insignia of Chaplain of the Magistral Obedience of the Sovereign and Military Order of Malta. The ceremony took place on 30th May 1954 at the Zabbar Parish Church.

When he turned 63 and after 32 years serving the Parish of Zabbar, Archbishop Mercieca appointed him Monsignor and Archpriest of the Cathedral of Mdina. The ceremony took place on 23rd February 1975. He died ten years later on the 27th February 1985. His funeral was held at the Zabbar Sanctuary and he was buried at the Addolorata Cemetery.

Paul Pace

* Father Francis Abela was never appointed Parish Priest of Zabbar but served as acting Parish Priest for 10 months between 6th April 1940 and 31st January 1941. (Source: Joseph F. Caruana in *Lehen is-Santwarju* No. 64, page 10)

** Father Lawrence Spiteri, although he was appointed Parish Priest of Zabbar, did not take formal possession of the Parish. (Source: A.H. in *Lehen l-Ghaqda Muzikali San Mikiel - Żabbar*, 1995, page 82)

This information was retrieved on June 25, 2010, from <http://zsmm.bravehost.com/profiles.html>

Thanks to Paul Pace who gave me the permission to use this information well researched.

TAL-MANNI

High-Up Service
Water & Rubble Supplies

"St. Joseph", Marsascala Road, Zabbar.
Tel. 2166 4990 Mob. 9949 0893