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## The life of a rural village – Mosta: pastoral visits, plague, and the erection of a new parish (1575-1619)

### *A visit by an apostolic delegate*

It was an unexceptional reality in Malta of the Hospitallers, for the bishops and the grandmasters to be on what may at best be termed as ‘less than amicable relations’. The relationship between Bishop Martin Royas de Portalrubio and Grandmaster Jean l’Evesque de la Cassiere was no exception. During the first decades of the Order’s rule, the bishop in Malta also acted as inquisitor on the island. Then, following the term of Domenico Cubelles (1562-65), after a lapse of eight years during which the islands first experienced a months-long ruthless Ottoman siege, dubbed as the Great Siege of 1565, and then entered the building spree which was to see the birth of a new fortified city named Valletta, a new inquisitor was appointed. Thus Royas, Bishop of Malta, took up the episcopal position which he would occupy between 1572 and 1577. Soon, the animosity between the bishop/inquisitor and grandmaster became quite evident. So much so that in 1574 Royas felt impelled to inform Rome that his officials were beaten and that la Cassiere had threatened Royas himself that if he dared come to the magisterial palace, he would be thrown out of the window.<sup>1</sup> Royas had considered it within his remit to investigate the members of the Order while the Grandmaster begged to differ and appealed to the Holy See for a solution on the matter. Pope Gregory XIII saw how to resolve the impasse by appointing an apostolic delegate *cum* inquisitor to deal on the spot with this bubbling situation. The appointee was Mgr Pietro Dusina who was given the title and position of Apostolic Visitor with instructions to examine the state of the Church in the Maltese islands. It was through this apostolic visit that the decrees of the Council of Trent would



**Mgr Pietro Dusina**

become effective in Malta and Gozo.<sup>2</sup>

Along the year 1575, the Apostolic Visitor executed his responsibility of going round all the parishes of the island, noting down what he saw and heard. He did not keep back from giving advice and issuing orders as befitted his position and according to the papal brief.

By 30 January 1575, with his visit to the matrix of Naxxar conclude, proceed to examine the filial churches and chapels in the villages of Casal Gregorio (in Maltese, Hal Gharghur) and Casal Musta (in Maltese, il-Mosta).

### *The village of Mosta and its principal church*

In the rural village of Mosta the Apostolic Visitor recorded that there were 116 places of residence which would work out at an approximate 580 inhabitants if an average of five persons is assigned to each household.<sup>3</sup>

The secretary accompanying Dusina noted that in the village there was a main church which he indicated as the “parish church” of the Assumption. This entry was not correct as, in actual fact, the church referred to was only the principal place of worship in the village – Mosta not being a parish at the time could not have its own parish church. We learn that the village had no income other than the main offerings which were given to the parish priest and rector of the parish of Naxxar, with which Mosta was affiliated. At the time the parish priest of the matrix was Don Juliano Borg, a controversial priest to say the least.<sup>4</sup> Rev. Borg, in his position as rector, indicated to the Apostolic Visitor that he had no other obligation in Mosta except that of celebrating mass on the feast day. The main church

itself, erroneously described as the parish, seems to have been quite spacious and decent, with a main altar, a paved floor and wooden doors.<sup>5</sup> The indications are that the said church was well looked after; the floor was in a good condition and the doors could be locked.<sup>6</sup> Later on, during the pastoral visit by Bishop Gargallo its significance was later signalled by the appellation: “*Ecclesia Maiorum appellata la Madonna*”<sup>7</sup> and it was also indicated that it was known as *Ta’ Żiri*.<sup>8</sup>

There were a number of other altars in this church; however, according to the rector, neither was any income derived from them nor was any responsibility owed to them. Mass was said only on the principal altar but no masses were celebrated on the other altars.<sup>9</sup>

Though the church of the Assumption looked important in the eyes of the Apostolic Visitor – so much so that he mistook it for a parish church – yet the same church did not even have its own rector. Though it also had no income and no obligations to fulfil, Dusina still decided to introduce the Confraternity of the Holy Sacrament in this church, this taking effect on 12 March 1575.<sup>10</sup> It may be that the main church in Mosta had been mistakenly indicated as a parish church due to the fact that the holy sacraments were kept in it,<sup>11</sup> the administration of which was the right of the parish priest of the matrix of Naxxar.

### ***Going round Mosta and its smaller chapels***

The village had at the time of the visit eleven chapels. These were respectively dedicated to St James (two chapels), St Michael, St Leonard, St Catherine, St Paul, St Nicholas (which was profaned), St Anthony the Abbot, St Margaret, and the Annunciation.<sup>12</sup>

The now lost chapel of St Nicholas may have been that known as ‘*tal-Lwatam*’, while there was also mention of another small chapel dedicated to the Assumption of Our Lady, which may have been located in the place where there is today the chapel known as ‘*ta’ Żejfi*’. There were also a number of chapels which in present times fall within the limits of the parish of Mosta, but these were mentioned by Mgr Dusina as being



**The title page of the Dusina Report**

these were devoid of the necessary trappings and each lacked a priest to look after it.

As was the praxis at this time, such chapels were usually left in the care of persons who held fields or buildings to which a testamentary obligation had been tied. This clause obliged the holder to take care of the chapel while it also provided a source of money by which vespers and masses could be financed. These would be held on the day commemorating the patron saint of the chapel or on the feast day of the same saint and which was celebrated in the chapel. On inspection, Dusina identified what was lacking in each chapel and ordered that the necessary upkeep be carried out failing which a penalty of a few *scudi* would have to be paid.

### ***The chapel of St Michael***

This chapel lacked all that was necessary. It did not have a door and water dripped through the roof causing it to flood during rainy days. It fell on Leone Xerri to ensure that an annual mass was celebrated in this chapel while Theramus Vassallo was to make sure that a mass was said on the feast day. Due to the bad state of the chapel Mgr Dusina felt constrained to suspend these functions temporarily.<sup>13</sup> There was no specific obligation to say mass in this chapel. The Apostolic Visitor gave instructions that a wooden door should be installed within a month. If such orders were not obeyed, those responsible would have to pay 10 *scudi* in penalties. Only after the door was fixed could the celebration of mass be resumed in that chapel, and in the meantime the mass on the feast of St Michael was to be celebrated in the parish church of Naxxar.<sup>16</sup>

within the, by then, extinct parish of Mellieħa.<sup>13</sup> The Apostolic Visitor in this instance indicates the chapels of St Andrew ‘*tal-Blat*’ in Ħal Dimekk, St Paul the Hermit in the valley known as *Wied il-Għasel*, and that of the Visitation.<sup>14</sup>

As with many other small chapels that dotted the Maltese islands at that time, it could not be claimed that these chapels were being kept up to scratch. Though each had an altar, yet they lacked adequate floor paving, and some of them did not even have a front door. It was only the chapel dedicated to St Paul which had adequate interior necessities, a source of income and a rector; for the rest,

### ***The chapel of St Anthony the Abbot***

The state of this chapel seems not to have much different from that of St Michael's, because it lacked every basic necessity. The chapel was under the guardianship of the already mentioned Xerri and Vassallo who had to make sure that two masses were celebrated on the feast day. As the floor needed maintenance, Mgr. Dusina gave instructions that this should be done.<sup>17</sup>

In the chapel of St Anthony the Abbot<sup>18</sup> there was one altar and the door could be locked well. Yet it lacked a rector. While masses were said on the feast day, these were not tied to any particular obligation. It seems that a certain Pietro Portelli took it upon himself to see that other masses were celebrated on the feast day of the saint. Against a penalty of 5 *scudi* Dusina ordered the damaged pavestone to be fixed within a month.<sup>19</sup>

### ***The chapel of St Leonard***

While this chapel needed some upkeep, at the same time, a certain Paolo Borg was bound to see that vespers and a mass were done on the feast day and it fell on him because he held some houses which were adjoined to this chapel. The same Borg was bound to see that from the accrued income the chapel would be maintained and any damages were to be fixed.<sup>20</sup> The house had belonged to Francesca Borg, wife of Andrea Felice. When Francesca gave up the ownership of this property, she obliged Paolo to use part of the income derived for vespers and for the celebration of a mass on the feast day of the saint. Furthermore, he was to see that the said chapel was taken care of and ensure that any damages were fixed as these occurred. According to Dusina's report, this chapel had one altar and could be securely locked; however it did not have its own rector and also lacked floor paving.<sup>21</sup>

### ***The chapel of St Catherine***

Arriving at this chapel, the Apostolic Visitor noted that it did not have a paved floor. The mass and the vespers tied to the feast were the responsibility of Francesco Batholo;<sup>22</sup> a duty which came with the piece of land adjacent to the chapel. Batholo was also taxed with the upkeep of the chapel as necessary and all these details were registered in the Acts of the Curia of the Bishop of Malta.<sup>23</sup>

### ***The two chapels dedicated to St. James***

Though today both chapels have disappeared, during the visit by Dusina these structures were still standing.

Both lacked sound flooring and a rector.

The first of these chapels had one altar but lacked all necessary amenities. The obligation for the celebration of a mass on the feast day was seen to by a certain Giacomo Borg who, on his own initiative saw to it that vespers was also said. Giacomo's father had bound his son to take care of the feast to the saint when he left him a piece of land near the chapel.<sup>24</sup>

The other chapel dedicated to St James also had a single altar and its door was in good order. This chapel had neither income nor obligations. There was a single condition which fell on Giacomo Cumbo who had to see to it that a mass was celebrated on the feast day of the saint as he held some land in the neighbourhood of this chapel.<sup>25</sup>

### ***The chapel of the Annunciation***

This small chapel had one altar and a sound, well-locking door; however there was no rector responsible for it and it had no income whatsoever. It only had the usual obligation – the celebration of mass and the reciting of vespers on the feast day. This duty fell on Giovanni Boagar who possessed a house in Mosta that carried with it this condition.<sup>26</sup>

### ***The chapel of St Paul***

This had no rector. It had one altar and a wooden door. It did not have any rents or obligations and lacked the basic necessities. Paolo Cumbo, though not strictly burdened to do so, saw to it that vespers and a mass were said on the feast day, and this was done out of a sense of personal devotion.<sup>27</sup>

### ***The chapel to St Nicholas***

St Nicholas was the one in the worst condition out of all the chapels visited by Dusina. It lacked practically everything – it had no rector, no door, no income, and moreover access to it was barred by stones. Naturally no masses were celebrated in it. Considering all these aspects, Mgr Dusina profaned it as there was nothing that connected it to its original purpose.<sup>28</sup>

### ***The chapel of St Margaret***

This chapel had no door and no rector. It had neither rents nor obligations. However, a certain silversmith named Pietro Sillatu had the responsibility to see that a mass and vespers were said on the day of the feast of St Margaret as the chapel stood on the land which he held and to which was tied this condition. Based on this fact, Mgr Dusina bound Sillato to fix a wooden door

to the entrance of the chapel within one month against a penalty of 10 *scudi* should this order not be obeyed. Till these instructions were fulfilled the obligations of mass and vespers on the feast day were to be honoured in the parish church of Naxxar.<sup>29</sup>

### ***The chapel of the Assumption***

In the Mosta area there were two churches dedicated to the Assumption of Our Lady. One was quite spacious and had been erroneously indicated as the parish church.<sup>30</sup> The other was a small, simple wayside chapel having an only altar and a locking door. However this was an abandoned chapel and deprived of any income or burdens. This deficiency led to it lacking all the necessary amenities and trappings. No masses were celebrated in this chapel at any time during the year.<sup>31</sup>

### ***The cave-chapel dedicated to the Visitation***

As in the case of a number of chapels mentioned above, this too is a lost chapel. However, it is perhaps the one chapel that has created most perplexities. In the visit Mgr Dusina made in the limits of Mellieħa in February 1575, he wrote in his report that he stopped at a church dedicated to the Visitation of the Blessed Mary which stood in the village of Mosta. This chapel was described as hewn out of the live rock, small in size, and of a roundish shape. According to Dusina's account, this troglodyte church had been consecrated by seven bishops who had happened to be in Malta after being shipwrecked on the island. Yet, all these details do not contribute to establish the location or age of this church. We do find a reference to it in Gio Francesco Abela's work *Della Descrizione di Malta*; however what the



An old map of Malta showing the village of Mosta (circled) and the neighbouring villages of Naxxar and Hal Gharghur

author does is that he simply repeats the details which come down through tradition connected to the seven bishops, but goes no further.<sup>32</sup>

Another author, Onorato Bres, writing in the early nineteenth century, also indicates the cave-chapel of St Paul the Hermit to explain that there were places of worship in Mosta that went back to remote times and that their fame was still strong during the time Bres was writing.<sup>33</sup>

The mid-nineteenth century book by Achille Ferris also includes a mention of this mysterious cave-chapel but says little more than the previous authors. While reiterating the well-known tradition, he also underlines that in Mosta there was also a chapel bearing a dedication to the Visitation and this was known locally as '*Ta' Wejda*'.<sup>34</sup>

Being a staunch Mosti and with a passionate interest in all that Mosta had to offer, and having also a very inquisitive mind, the historian and educator Emmanuel Benjamin Vella did his best to delve as deeply as he could on the whereabouts of the mysterious crypt. He opined that it may have been located in the north western area of Mosta, in the zone between the valley and the entrenchment that passes from there. Vella made this assumption on the basis of research that he had carried out and which unearthed a chapel in the fields dedicated to the Visitation of Our Lady in the defunct hamlet of Hal Dmiegh (Hal Dimekk) and which had been profaned by the Church authorities.<sup>35</sup> E.B. Vella continued to explore the writings of various authors. While G.F. Abela's text told him nothing, he turned to that by Count G. Ciantar. According to the latter historian, a church had been built on this cave in 1761 and was dedicated to Our Lady of Good Hope.<sup>36</sup> Vella considered this indication to be quite important towards the resolution of the mystery of the underground crypt. He reasoned that, as Ciantar had written closer to the past (the book was published in 1780), therefore there must have been a higher possibility of him being more knowledgeable on this matter. For E.B. Vella therefore, the ancient cave-church of the Visitation was none other than the cave beneath the present church dedicated to Our Lady of Good Hope.<sup>37</sup>

For Stanley Fiorini, however, this reasoning did make sense. Fiorini suggests that this cave must have been where the chapel of the Visitation, known as '*Ta' Wejda*', stands today. He argues that Damiano and Agata Bonnici, known as '*Ta' Wejda*', built the chapel in the early years of the 17<sup>th</sup> century on the said ancient crypt. Fiorini adds that it may also be that the old chapel dedicated to St Zechariah, which had already

disappeared when Dusina did his visit, was in fact the underground chapel. Looking at the present altarpiece of *Ta' Wejda* one notices the presence of St Zechariah accompanying his wife St Elizabeth in the depiction of the episode of the Visitation.<sup>38</sup>

### ***Daily life in the village***

The visit by Mgr Dusina must have stirred some interest among the villagers in Mosta as this was a rather unusual event. Rural life was mostly monotonous and repetitive. Nature dictated the routine which country folk followed in their daily lives. This went from working the fields and the reaping the agricultural produce to animal husbandry. Such a life would of course be punctuated by the highlights of living such as births, marriages and deaths. Annual festivities would relieve the daily drudgery and introduce a touch of colour and variation into the life of the villagers. Exceptional episodes would then disrupt the norm, and such events included the 1565 Ottoman siege which constrained the locals to abandon their fields and the habitations, a situation which dragged on for months on end.<sup>39</sup> No less disruptive and destructive were the periodic dreaded pestilences such as the plague.<sup>40</sup> There were also other negative visitors such as drought and famine which, for rural communities especially, meant even more misery.

The demographics of the village could be sourced from the birth registers which indicated the increase or decrease in the local population and the names given to the new-born. Between 1546 and 1600 the more common boys' names in the village of Mosta were Salvaturi or Salvu and Mariano. Among the girls, the more popular names were Caterina, Domenica and Mariana, while Paola and Margerita figured with some prominence. During this period there were 337 baptisms of which 204 were boys and 120 were girls, while a further thirteen did not have their sex entered in the register. This list of births included six illegitimate babies – with the case of Isabella, the daughter of Merkisi, standing out, for she had two children outside wedlock within two years, these being Girolamo (1548) and Mariola (1550).<sup>41</sup>

As to marriages along this period, it seems that there were 532 ceremonies, the majority of which being between Mostin. A breakdown of the number gives 397 marriages with the couple being fellow villagers, while 135 others took spouses from outside their village. The Mosta females seem to have preferred men mostly from Naxxar, while others married men from Hal Gharghur. Similar were the preferences among the men of Mosta who were betrothed to women from neighbouring



**The plague spared no one and no country and some artists represented the hardships of the people and depicted St Roque, the patron saint and protector of plague victims – as seen here in the work of Jacopo Bassano entitled ‘St Roque among the plague victims and the Madonna in glory’ (1575), found in the Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan**

Naxxar. Others took a wife from Ħal Gharghur, Lija, Ħ'Attard, Ħaż-Żebbuġ, Birkirkara, Ħal Mann, Ħal Balzan, Vittoriosa, Mdina and Rabat. Interestingly, some women from Mosta chose a foreigner for a husband, and these included two French, two Italians and a Spaniard.<sup>42</sup>

A glance at the surnames found in Mosta in this period, some stand out due to these being more diffused. Thus one found: Agius, Aquilina, Bartholo, Bezzina, Borg, Bonnici, Brincat, Buhagiar, Busutil, Calfat, Callus, Callejja, Camilleri, Caruana, Cauchi, Chetcuti, Ciappara, Combo, Cusburella, Debono, Delia, Deguara, Dijf, Di Proxia, Ebejer, Falzon, Farrugia, Felici, Fenech, Fiteni, Frendo, Galea, Gauci, Grixti, Lagu, Lichis, Louaci, Magro, Mangion, Mamo, Micallef, Muscat, Pace, Portelli. Sammut, Scerri, Sciberras, Scicluna, Schriha, Seichel, Spiteri, Stivala, Vassallo, Vella, Zahra, Zammit, Zarb and Zizo. A closer study of these surnames reveals that some were particular to the village of Mosta and did not appear in the neighbouring localities of Naxxar and Ħal Gharghur. Furthermore, from another list which documented surnames in fifteenth century Mosta, it transpires that some surnames had vanished over the years. These included: Felu, Dinkille, Bindin (or Bondin), Hakim, Camenzuli, Muzangar, Cagege, Guaractu, Burasi, Haleu, Cuzin, Zarun, Daiona, Chumi, Chakini, Mahanuc, Maltisi, Bertelli (or Portelli), Curmi, Piasanu, and Lukkisi.<sup>43</sup>

### ***A harsh stab for the people – plague and famine***

In the latter decades of the sixteenth century Mosta was visited by a bout of famine which crippled its population and their daily life. This famine was triggered by a reduction in the import of food items from Sicily. With the available food supply not being sufficient to feed the inhabitants of the Maltese islands, around 3,000 persons succumbed to the ensuing famine. Though it cannot be ascertained, it may well be that some inhabitants from Mosta were among the victims. The pressures became so great that the Order's Council, for example, in the years 1589 and 1591, issued specific instructions to its ships to embark on piratical missions so as to capture vessels laden with food and bring them to Malta so that the suffering could be relieved. In times of crisis consideration as to whether these were vessels that belonged to friend or foe were sidelined; all was admissible and any naval prize was valid to feed the people of Malta.<sup>44</sup>

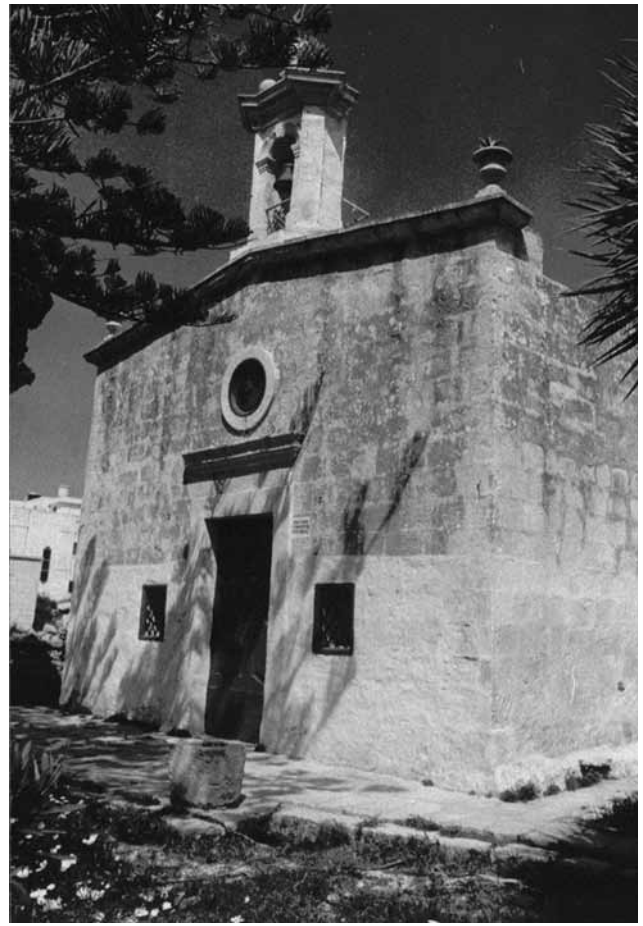
To the dreaded bouts of famine was then added the equally frightening expectation of a visit from one or other of the pestilences that regularly made an

appearance on the islands. The conflagration that visited Malta in 1592 came in the form of the plague. During the early months of 1592, some galleys of the Duchy of Tuscany entered the Grand Harbour. They had just captured a number of vessels laden with cargo that had come out of the port of Alexandria in Egypt, which was at this time passing through one of its common and frequent plague epidemics. Shortly afterwards signs of the plague began to emerge among the Tuscan crew but at first there was disagreement among the doctor whether their malady was the plague or some other illness and thus no immediate precautions were taken to restrain the pestilence from spreading around the island. Such an indecision caused the plague to run like wildfire in the villages and towns of Malta, and by early June it had taken over with no one doubting what it really was any more. The measures which were now taken by the local authorities seemed to have been efficient enough to slow down the epidemic by the end of September, after about 300 persons had already paid the final price with their life. Seeing this, it was decided that precautionary measures could now be lifted and patients were sent home. This, however, proved to be a blatant mistake as by mid-November the epidemic had revamped reaping another 500 victims. With the epidemic raging, Malta was quarantined by all the Mediterranean countries meaning that food could not be imported. This naturally led to famine, compounding the suffering caused by the plague. Those who had managed to survive the pestilence were now in danger of dying from hunger. The second phase of the plague stretched till the end of January 1593.<sup>45</sup>

Though many Maltese would have wished to leave their homeland for a safer place, no country was disposed to accept them as all the Mediterranean countries had imposed precautionary isolation measures. Pressures mounted on the Commissioners for Health to close the Lazaretto and declare the plague epidemic finished. As there was an imminent danger that famine would spread and complicate even more the lives of the people and seeing from the previous year how hunger could cripple a population, at the beginning of February the authorities succumbed to the general pressure and declared Malta free from plague. Thus, the previous mistake was being repeated with the consequence that by the beginning of March the pestilence raged for a third time and in an even more aggressive intensity than before. This created havoc among the people of the towns who tried to escape contagion by moving to the countryside.<sup>46</sup>

It was in June of 1593 that the plague finally began to waver till it gradually subsided. Until that moment, however, about 3000 had already died and among





**The entrance to St Roque cemetery for plague victims (left) and the adjoining chapel of St Margaret (right), which was situated in the outskirts of Mosta**

**The last remaining tomb slab in Mosta reminds us of the plague of 1592 which is today in the chapel of St Margaret**



these there were 40 knights.<sup>47</sup> The total number of dead persons reached 11 percent of the whole population which was about 27,000 at the time.<sup>48</sup> It is known that 27 of these victims hailed from Mosta.<sup>49</sup> A detail which is pertinent here refers to the feast of St Roque and the races that are held in Malta on the Saint's feast day (16 August). These races trace their origin to the end of the plague of 1592, as they were organised to commemorate the end of the pestilence on the island.

The village of Mosta was directly linked to this plague epidemic through the chapel dedicated to St Margaret. In the precincts of this small chapel, besides the 27 victims from the village, another 283 from Naxxar and Gharghur who died at the time were buried in the adjoining cemetery. In past years these tombs used to be blessed in the month of November of every year.<sup>50</sup> This cemetery bears the name of St Roque who is the patron saint connected to the plague.<sup>51</sup> Similar cemeteries started to be opened in other parts of Malta after the 1592-3 plague epidemic. Up till then burials used to take place inside the churches but with the plague it was decided that other cemeteries outside churches should be prepared for victims of this pestilence.<sup>52</sup> A singular memento has come down to us, which bears testimony to this plague, and it is stored in the chapel of St Margaret. This consists of a grave slab from one of the tombs. On it a fleur-de-lys is engraved in each of the four corners, while a sculpted fringe creates a frame along the four sides of this capping slab. In the centre, sculpted into the stone, there is an unrecognisable coat-of-arms and the date '1594' is etched under it. The slab is in a pitiful state as it is broken in several pieces and recently a cover has been provided so that further damage is avoided.

### ***A new parish is born***

Up till the turn of the seventeenth century Mosta was an integral part of Naxxar. This status went back to at least 1436 and is confirmed through the visit of Bishop Senatore de Mello in that year. Naxxar had within its jurisdiction the villages of Mosta, Hal Gharghur and a number of hamlets such as Hal Pisa, Hal Dimekk, Hal Sammut, Hal Miselmiet and Hal Dghif.<sup>53</sup>

An important pastoral visit took place in 1608. It was Bishop Tommaso Gargallo who, this time, went to Mosta, and during that stop he decided to create Mosta as a new parish. In translation Mgr Gargallo's reasons for his decision were stated in the report of the visit, and he wrote as follows.<sup>54</sup>

The separation of Musta from the Parish of Naxxaro – 16<sup>th</sup> September 1608

As the long experience up to this day shows us that the parish priest of Naxxaro is unable to keep up with the distribution of the Sacraments due to the distance, and as the parish church of Naxxaro includes 1100 parishioners, 800 of whom confess and receive Holy Communion, therefore during the visit and after one considers the distance from Musta, which includes 180 houses with 900 persons, and which lies about 3 miles away, and the streets are bad and strewn with stones, it is time that we act according to Chapter 4 of Section 21 of the Council of Trent *De Reform* and the Chapter *Audientia*, on the building of churches (as indicated by HH Pope Paul V and the Apostolic See), and we separate and define the village of Musta from the parish church of Naxxaro so that this will not anymore form part of the said parish of Naxxaro.

We create and put the principal church of the assumption of St. Mary, of the said village of Musta, as the parish, with all the rights, honours, responsibilities, and income which are usually associated with the parish church, whenever it does not have a superior, but without any loss for the present parish priest who now resides in Naxxaro, only on the principal rights, till the Parish of Naxxaro enjoys them, and not later; in the same way as we have divided the parishes of St. Lawrence of Birgu, of Birkirkara, and of Birmiftuh, and as we have done in the creation of other churches as parishes, which are those of H'Attard, Hal Lija, Hal Kirkop, Imqabba, Hal Safi, Hal Tarxien, Bormla and of the Isola of Senglea.

Tommaso, Bishop of Malta.

This decree made it emphatically clear that until the Naxxar parish priest remained alive, his rights would not be touched. Thus, only after the death of Rev. Juliano Borg, which happened on 14 July 1610, did Mosta get its own first parish priest.

As the effective change could only take place after the death of the incumbent at Naxxar, the residents of Mosta thought it wise to politely remind the Bishop about the decree through which he had proclaimed the separation of the two villages into separate parishes. For this reason the representatives of the villagers at once took up pen and ink to write a reminder letter while the office of parish priest in Naxxar was still vacant.<sup>55</sup> An English translation of this letter follows.

To the Most Illustrious and Most Reverend Monsignor,

Giorgio Galea, Giacomo Xiberras, Girolamo Ebejjer, Agostino Busuttill and the people of Musta, most humble subjects and servants of Your Most Illustrious and Most Reverend Lordship, wish to put to your attention that as in the past their village had been placed under the care of the parish priest of Naxxaro they faced much hardship and many obstacles to go to the parish church of Naxxaro (which is two miles distant from their village) so that they could partake of the Sacrament and hear the holy offices.

Moreover, the street between the two villages is in itself bad, and when it rains it is so full of holes that you cannot go to the said parish church. It also happened that when many people were in the said church to attend to the holy offices on the feast day, they had to remain for a long time in Naxxaro, practically the whole day, because of the rain that fell and made a river out of the street. At times too, due to the distance the parish priest was not in time to reach sick people still alive so that he could give them the Holy Sacrament of Communion and administer the Last Unction.

Therefore, as the parish is now without a parish priest following the demise of Don Juliano, the last parish priest, it is their wish, because of all

that we have mentioned, that a new parish be erected in Mosta according to what is set by the Sacred Council of Trent Session 21, Chapter 4 *De Reform.* Therefore they pray Your Lordship Most Illustrious and Most Reverend, because of the recognised distance and because all that we have mentioned is correct, that you may be pleased to erect and establish for them a new parish in their village. So that in what concerns their needs they will be served better than in the past; so that the said obstacles and problems caused by distance may end.

They also pray that, you grant this new parish an appropriate part of the fixed income of the matrix, and also the small silver cross towards which the persons making this request had contributed, and who are poor people.

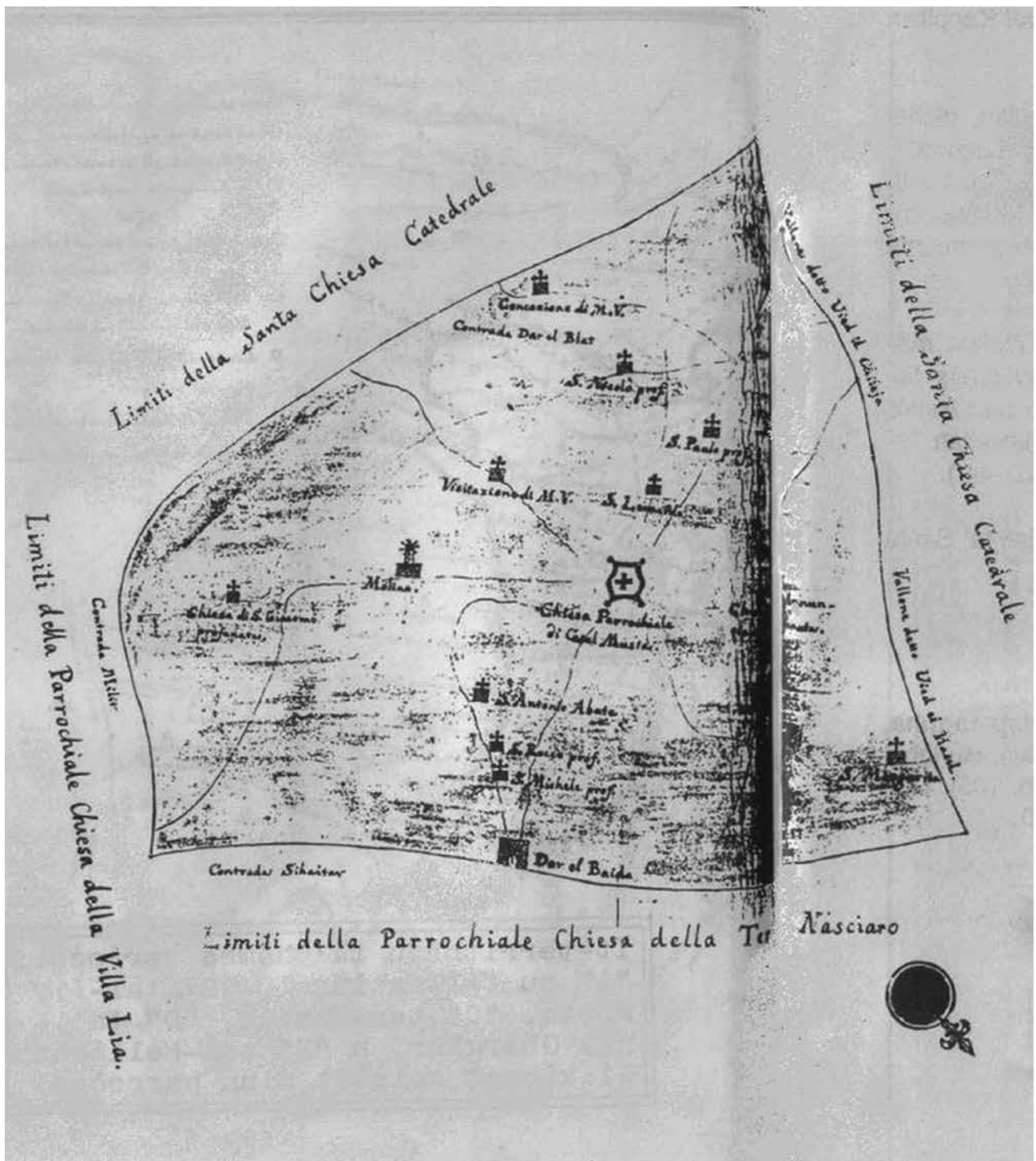
This beloved Mosta is made up of 200 houses, and so as the erection of the parish may be completed, the residents have voluntarily decided to organise a collection among them so as to accrue a sum of money which amounts to that which is required to create a source of revenue to light the lamp of the Holy Sacrament and other needs for the church of the Assumption of Our Lady, which they hope and wish will be their parish; and in this way they would deem themselves more obliged to pray Our Lord to grant a long and blest life to your Most Illustrious and Most Rev. Lordship.<sup>56</sup>



**Bishop Tommaso Gargallo**

On its delivery to Mgr Gargallo it was noted and the Bishop ordered this correspondence to be put with the acts of his last visit to Mosta. The note bore the date 27 July 1610.<sup>57</sup>

Following the developments at Naxxar and the prompting letter from the people of Mosta, Mgr Gargallo reiterated his decision to detached the village from its matrix parish church, and granted the customary dues and tithes from the village, and three pieces of agricultural land – one in the vicinity of Naxxar, another adjacent to the church, while the third was known as ‘*tal-Carbuni*’.<sup>58</sup> From these pieces of land it was calculated that an income in the region of 5 *scudi* or a little more could be generated for the new parish priest, in addition to the first agricultural products from the cotton, wheat and barley harvests, which were also to be given to him.<sup>59</sup> On 10 November 1610 the first parish priest was then appointed by Mgr Gargallo. He was Rev. Giovanni Bezzina who was not at all new to Mosta as he had served for the past 20 years as vice-parish priest of Naxxar.<sup>60</sup>



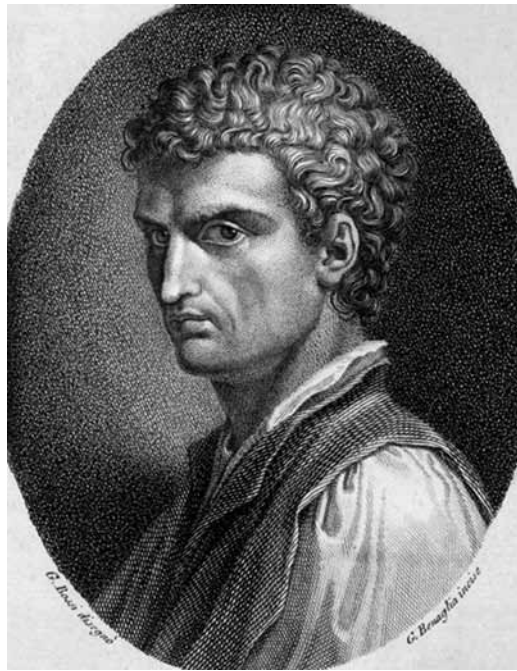
The parochial territory of Mosta in the seventeenth century, showing also the neighbouring parishes of Lija, Naxxar and Mdina (the Cathedral)

The life of the new parish had at long last commenced. All spiritual services were administered by Rev. Bezzina who married the first couple, Antonio Fenech and Domenica Aquilina on 29 July 1611. The first baby baptised in the new parish of Mosta on 3 November 1611 was Domenico Cardona, while the first funeral was that of Pasquale Galea, which took place on 3 May 1612 and who was interred in the parish church.<sup>61</sup>

### *A new parish church*

The young parish of Mosta embarked on its first ambitious project immediately after it had started its autonomous existence. This project was nothing less than a new, bigger parish church. There is no evidence as to how much of the original first parish church was incorporated into the new design. It may be that parts were indeed left if one takes into consideration

that Mgr Dusina had noted that the principal church “was spacious and sufficiently appropriate.” The chosen architect commissioned with the design was Tommaso Dingli (1591-1666) who would along his career prove to be one of the best architects of his time. At the time of his Mosta project he was barely 20 years old; yet the people of Mosta seem to have sensed that he was an architect on the rise – capable yet affordable. The works which he did and those attributed to him attest to his skills and architectural knowledge.<sup>62</sup> Works which bear his name and demonstrate his abilities include the completion of the aqueduct from Fawwara to Valletta which he did with the



**The renowned architect Leon Battista Alberti who influenced Tommaso Dingli in his design of the Mosta parish church**

*capomastro* Giovanni Attard between 1610 and 1615. Dingli also designed the Bishop’s Palace in Valletta for Mgr Cagliares between 1622 and 1631; the city gate of Valletta in 1630; the parish church of Attard (1613);<sup>63</sup> the facade of the church of the Annunciation in Birkirkara (1617);<sup>64</sup> together with the parish churches of Naxxar (1630), Hal Gharghur (1638), Haż-Żebbuġ (1641) and Haż-Żabbar (1641) and Gudja (1556-66), some of which were later altered.<sup>65</sup>

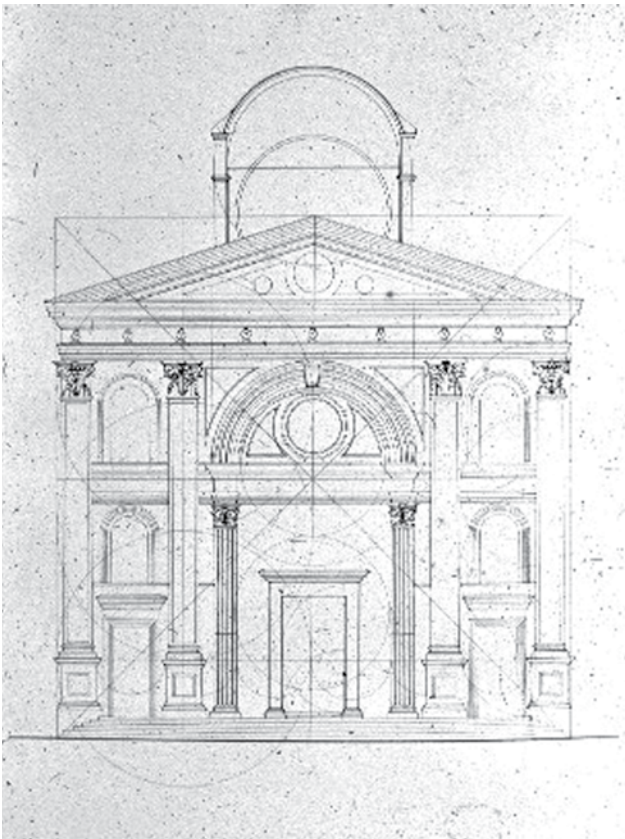
An inkling of how the church, which was commenced in 1610, turned out to look may be elicited from a number of sources and a plan of the church, the measurements of the back walls which are still visible in the crypt of the present Rotunda Church, and from the testimony left by those who remembered it. Putting all the evidence together it emerges that the church was built in the shape of a Latin cross. The outside perimeter measured 30 metres in length with a width of 31 metres in the transepts and 18 metres along the facade. The height from the pinnacle of the belfries to ground level was 19.8 metres. It had three doors, one in the front leading into the aisle, and two side doors one each in the transepts. It had a small dome and in the open space in front of the church stood a column topped by a cross. It is also ascertained that its floor was lower than that of today’s Rotunda as, when the latter was still being built (with the Dingli structure inside), people entered by means of three ramps which descended into the church. It is not clear when the construction work was actually concluded. Some indicate the year 1614,<sup>66</sup> while E.B. Vella gives the year of completion as 1619,

a date which is based on some old manuscripts.<sup>67</sup>

The architectural style adopted by Dingli seems to combine two different forms. The architect knew well the treatise by Leon Battista Alberti entitled *De Re Aedificatoria* published in Florence in 1485 and which first appeared in its Italian language version in 1546.<sup>68</sup> This publication was found in Malta as the Order had a copy and Dingli appears to have read it. At the same time Dingli was also inspired by the style of facades which adorned the small churches built in the form of halls which were numerous in Malta at the time.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the facade was reminiscent of a Roman temple. The pediment at

the central upper part of the facade of this church was given prominence. Columns were also inserted in the design but took the shape of pilasters. The similarity of the design to that of the church of St Andrew in Mantua, Italy, designed by Alberti, is striking. The churches at Attard and Birkirkara were examples on the same design with the resemblance seen also through the inclusion of three niches, one on top of the other, on each side of the façade. Yet, it is important to note that the church of Mosta was one of Dingli’s first commissions and this meant that he came face to face with architectural headaches which he had still not had the experience to tackle briskly; challenges out of which he would learn.<sup>70</sup>

The church had two belfries with a clock inserted in that of the left. It struck the hours and the quarters on two bells. The inside of the second parish church of Mosta is documented in reports of pastoral visits to the village. The floor, as was the custom at the time, held the graves of those who were interred in the church, and these were well-kept. At some later time the church was extended when the chancel area was widened; this incorporated the choir within the presbytery. The choir held seats for the priests and the clerics. The baptistery was situated on the right as you entered the church. It dated back to 1557 and this fact indicated that people were already being baptised in Mosta before it became a parish. The baptismal font bore the coat-of-arms of Bishop Cubelles (1541-66).<sup>71</sup> On one side, which in olden times was known as ‘the side of the Gospel’, stood the pulpit which included a cross, from where the



**The facade of the basilica of St Andrew in Mantua that evidently inspired the design of the facade of the new church of Mosta which Dingli presented to the villagers in 1610**

**Two examples of church facades by Dingli that can still be seen today and which also have a similarity to the basilica of St Andrew in Mantua – St Mary’s church in Attard (left) and St Mary’s church in Birkirkara (right)**



*Source:*  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Parish-church-attard.jpg>



*Source:*  
<http://www.thefranksfamily.com/5157/22433.jpg>

sermons were delivered. This pulpit could be described as having some artistic value and was situated adjacent to the principal pilaster at the end of the central nave, closest to the chancel.<sup>72</sup>

The interior of the church held ten altars spread along the sides. These were dedicated as follows:

The altar of the Rosary which was taken care by the Confraternity of the Rosary.

The altar of St Paul, erected by Rev. Salvatore Muscat.

The altar of St Cosma and St Damian, which belonged to Rev. Salvatore Fenech J.U.D.

The altar of St Joseph that had been erected by Giorgio Galea.

The altar of Our Lady of Graces, erected and embellished by Giorgio Muscat.

The altar of St Roque taken care of by Damiano Busuttil.

The altar of St Dominic and St Anthony of Padua, placed near the baptismal font.

The altar of the Annunciation, with the painting and burdens which were transferred to the parish church when the chapel of the Annunciation was profaned.

The altar of the choir.

The main altar, which was completed in 1682 and which can still be seen today in the choir of the Rotunda. Above the main altar hung a red damask canopy (*baldachinum*).

The titular painting of the Assumption of Our Lady is attributed to Stefano Erardi and was completed through a legacy left in the will of Rev. Giacomo Chetcuti, and which was documented in the acts of Notary GianPaolo Fenech in 1678.

In the parish church of Mosta, up to 1619 two confraternities had been erected – that of the Rosary and the other of the Holy Sacrament, and by the end of the seventeenth century, ten masses were said daily.<sup>73</sup>

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- 46 P. Cassar, 169.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Savona-Ventura, 223.
- 49 M[osta] P[arish] A[rchives], *Libro antico delle Festività*.
- 50 The practice of blessing these graves has now been discontinued. The area which used to hold the graveyard has now become a small garden with trees and shrubs and the place had been restored in the 1990s.
- 51 G. Cassar, *Kappelli fil Mosta: Kalendarju 2004 Skola Primarja Carmela Sammut – Mosta* (Malta, 2004), April.
- 52 Savona-Ventura, 60.
- 53 P. Catania, ‘The Parish of Naxxar’, in P. Catania & L.J. Scerri, 140, 141; Friggieri, 200.
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- 55 Ibid.
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- 57 Ibid., 80.
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- 59 Bonnici (2005), 107.



- 60 N[ational] L[ibrary] M[alta], MS 360, p. 542
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- 62 For an academic critique of Tommaso Dingli, cf. L. Mahoney, *5000 Years of Architecture in Malta* (Malta, 1996), 314
- 63 Although traditionally the design of this church has been attributed to Dingli, architect and researcher Leonard Mahoney did not agree and had argued that it was the work of Vittorio Cassar. It is not clear who did indeed design the church as there does not seem to be definite documentation on the matter. Cf. Q. Hughes & C. Thake, *Malta The Baroque Island* (Malta, 2003), 74.
- 64 Hughes & Thake, 71.
- 65 More information about Tommaso Dingli can be found in R. Mifsud Bonnici, *Dizzjunarju Bijo-Biblijografiku Nazzjonali* (Malta, 1960), 183. It needs to be pointed out that some of the information which is given by Mifsud Bonnici has today been updated through more recent research.
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