

The two protagonists: Archbishop Michael Gonzi (L) and a young Dom Mintoff (R) addressing a mass meeting outside a parish church. Inset (L) Church supporters and women from the MUSEUM hissing at a Labour gathering in 1961, and (R) the Hal-Ghaxaq MLP club during the 1962 election

The unholy war

The notorious 'interdett' is part of a tragic episode in Maltese history when the island was split between the competing aspirations of the Malta Labour Party and the Catholic Church for the future of the island beyond colonialism.

IN JANUARY 1961, the diocesan commission issued a circular which was read in all churches condemning the MLP's affiliation with the Socialist International and the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organisation. In a bid to wield its power over the god fearing masses, it declared a sin the reading of Labour newspapers and the attendance of MLP meetings.

The events of the sixties would re-carve Maltese society as Gonzi's 'holy soldiers' battled Mintoff's 'evil' 51,000 'soldiers of steel' (*soldati ta' l-azzar*), the total number of people who had voted in favour of Labour's proposal for integration of the Maltese islands with the United Kingdom.

Malta always lagged behind the times. The church still played an important social role in society. An unemployed son

would be recommended to the village contractor by the parish priest. The priest was the village 'psychologist'.

In a decade where progressive cultural revolutions were taking place across all western societies, the regressive actions taken by the Maltese church remain a historical irony. Whilst Pope John XXIII opened up the Vatican to a new spring with the Vatican Council II, moving away from biblical literalism and absorbing the liberal influences of the times, Gonzi wanted to sustain his archbishopric as a feudal prince who had free reign over Malta.

And as the pope declared it no longer a mortal sin to vote for the communists, it was Mgr Gonzi who was declaring it a mortal sin for socialist material to be read and propagated.

The church's decree fragmented society to such an extent, that a parallel society was created. Alternatives to mainstream activities were organised. Labourites had their own carnival of flowers, their own snooker tournaments, and their own Labourite brigade as opposed to the scouts.

Both Gonzi and Mintoff can be described as men of vision but whilst Archbishop Gonzi wanted to keep the status quo, Mintoff envisaged a country unshackled by archaic values.

Whilst Mintoff wanted to shake up a rigid society so as to catch up with the times, Gonzi was simply enraged by tourists sunbathing in bikinis – even the usually accommodating Nationalist government fended off his lordship's requests to get the police to clamp down

on bikini-clad tourists, for fear of compromising Malta's reputation as a tourist destination.

In the parallel, Labour society however, Labourite girls felt protected to freely put on their bikinis during beach parties, an acceptable practice in the world of the 'other' political party.

MaltaToday will be analysing the difficult relations between the Malta Labour Party and the Church during the tumultuous sixties in a five-part series that starts today. The series will feature interviews with leading politicians at the time and personal accounts of people who lived and suffered the brunt of the Church's controversial decision to impose the interdict, and those who witnessed the feud from the other side of the political divide. →

Backdoor marriage

Michaela Muscat speaks to Joe Micallef Stafrace about his marriage with Yvonne in the sacristy of the St Paul's church in Rabat at the height of the politico-religious battle in the sixties

TYING THE knot during the interdiction is not the only thing former Labour ministers Joseph Micallef Stafrace and Lino Spiteri have in common.

"Both Lino and I got married at the same sacristy – that of St Paul's because our prospective wives were both from Rabat," says the 72-year-old Micallef Stafrace, the obstreperous lawyer who can still be found counselling his clients in the legal office he shares with two of his three children.

Micallef Stafrace eagerly shuffles through the towers of legal documents on his imposing desk to find the book that holds his collection of articles he had written for *It-Torca*. The article titled 'Six years of marriage' tells the detailed story of his wedding ceremony.

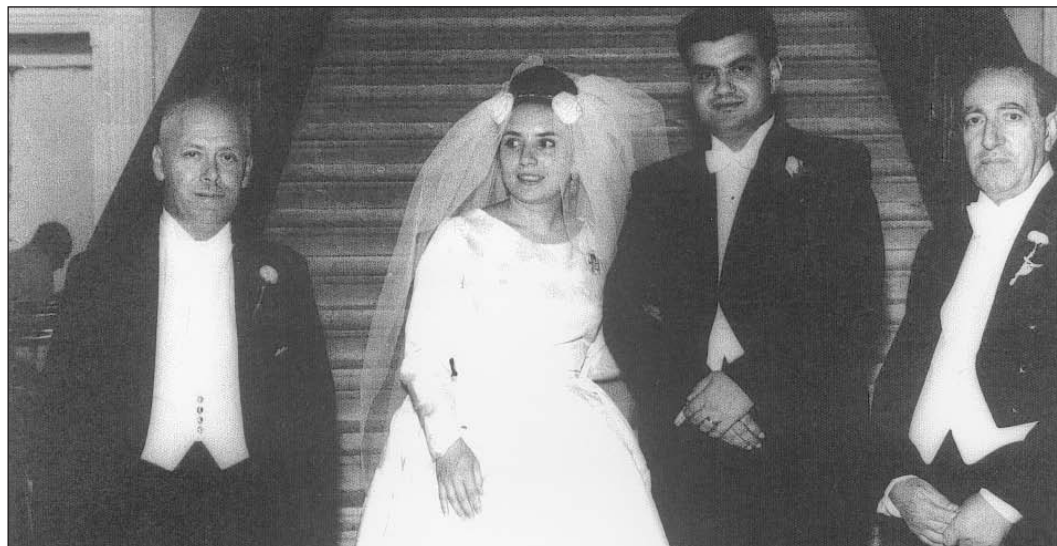
"Besides not being able to receive the holy sacraments, the interdiction had a direct impact on me because I wanted to get married." In an attempt "to humiliate" them, the Micallef Stafrace couple and their guests

had to enter the church from the side entrance and endure their wedding rites to be celebrated in a dimly lit sacristy.

"The witnesses at our wedding had no qualms about being present as Guze Muscat Azzopardi was a left-wing writer and Magistrate John Formosa was a member of Strickland's constitutional party. That made him a veteran of religious persecution," he chuckled as he pointed to the black and white wedding photo. He is of course referring to Strickland's clash with the ecclesiastical authorities in 1930.

The fervent members of the Catholic Workers Youths waiting for the newly married couple made it a point to create a rebus. "I remember them shouting 'Hail Christ King' and other nonsensical phrases," Micallef Stafrace says.

"A good number of people didn't attend the wedding party because they were scared their attendance would be interpreted as political. But even Guido De



Newly-weds Joe and Yvonne Micallef Stafrace, accompanied by their two witnesses, writer Gino Muscat Azzopardi (on the left) and Magistrate John Formosa (on the right). This photo was taken outside the sacristy of St Paul's Church in Rabat on 16 September 1961

Marco attended my wedding. As far as he was concerned, his friend Joe was getting married and that was the end of it."

Micallef Stafrace's will remain strong as he resisted Archbishop Mikiel Gonzi's attempted bribery to convince him to convert. He was invited to the Curia where he was told that he could get married in the Mdina co-cathedral or in Gonzi's personal chapel in exchange for allowing Gonzi to save his soul.

Walking into Gonzi's office for a personal meeting with the

bishop, he saw him perched on an elevated throne like a regent. Only then did he realise that all the priests were finding excuses to run errands in the surrounding rooms in order to observe "the infamous enemy of Christ."

Gonzi retorted: "you have to endure the humiliation," when Micallef Stafrace asked if it was possible to get married in a deserted chapel.

The former Labour MP says he ignored the priests who frequently made allegations about his integrity during mass, except for one episode when the

Zurriq Parish priest mentioned his wife during the homily. Clearly protective of his family and the private dimension of his life, the man appears pained when recalling the congregations walking by his house, insulting him just as they returned from mass.

Micallef Stafrace says the Maltese people have matured as a result of these events, certain that the people have learnt their lesson and choose with their conscience: "They give unto God what is God's and unto Caesar what is his."

Taking politics to the grave – the undignified mizbla

DYING JUST before the AAPSO conference that would spur the indictment against the Malta Labour Party, Labour MP Guze Ellul Mercer would suffer the *interdett* anyway. The author of the classic social commentary *Leli ta' Hazz-Zghir* ended up buried in the unconsecrated part of the Addolorata cemetery, infamously known as the Mizbla.

One would never suspect this tucked away part of the Addolorata cemetery had once symbolised the extent to which the Maltese church would go in order to single out the people it feared were plotting its downfall. The 'mizbla' (rubbish-dump) was a small stretch of wasteland exactly adjacent to the cemetery.

The mizbla still elicits feeling of rancour from all sides. An old priest from Mellieha who spoke to MaltaToday on condition of anonymity says the mizbla was an invention: "There was no such thing as the mizbla. It was customary to bury those who had fallen out of God's grace in unconsecrated grounds."

But former Labour minister Joe Micallef Stafrace says the "so-called Christians" came up with the word mizbla to describe the area where the Labourites were buried."

Ellul Mercer's nephew Anthony Vella still remembers the path that leads to his uncle's grave. "The wall that separated the cemetery from the Mizbla had a narrow entrance," explains Vella.

"Children at school were always passing comments about the way uncle Joe had died. He died alone, so people started circulating rumours about the cause of death."

He speaks lovingly of his uncle who always took time out of his busy schedule to entertain his nephews and nieces with stories that always fascinated the children.

Vella remembers the trials and tribulations that the family had to endure even during Ellul Mercer's burial. Like all other families whose relatives were about to be buried in the mizbla, Ellul Mercer's family tried to persuade the curia to allow the Labour MP, a "God-fearing man till his death," a dignified burial – but to no avail.

Vella recalls that in the eighties the church authorities contacted the family and informed them that they were willing to transfer Ellul Mercer's remains to the consecrated part of the cemetery. The family refused on principle.

Back then the graves were not adorned with any fancy marble statues or granite slabs. It is almost certain that people walking by this place would not glance at these simple graves. The horizontal slabs of limestone used to be covered with twigs, bits and pieces of wood and assorted rubble.

As an unconsecrated burial ground, the mizbla was not considered part of the cemetery, attracting dumping of foliage and rubble on the ground. Vella remembers there was never any plaque commemorating the icons of the worker's movement buried in the mizbla, but the Msida MLP club paid for the marble tomb that today covers Ellul Mercer's grave.

Freddy Micallef, the present secretary of the MLP Msida club remembers his MP: "He was a gentleman and a great author, I still have his books."



Guze Ellul Mercer: former Labour Minister and one of Malta's literary giants was buried in unconsecrated grounds outside the cemetery. The MLP Msida club commissioned the marble tomb to honour their beloved MP

Most of the graves situated in this peaceful nook have no connection whatsoever with the past religious-political feud. The Labour government tore down the wall over two decades ago and most of the families transferred the remains of their loved ones to their family graves.

"Guze Ellul Mercer loved Msida and her people and they loved him," Micallef says as he recalls that the executive committee decid-

ed to dig in its pockets to pay tribute to a man who usually shied away from public adulation. They also commissioned a bust of Ellul Mercer and a lesser-known Msida woman who had also been interdicted and buried in the mizbla.

Liza Zammit was only 49 years old when she was run over by a car in Rue d'Argens. Her being a devout Catholic didn't stop Gonzi from issuing the interdiction edict

the morning of her funeral. She had just walked out of church and was on her way home when she died. A priest ran out of a passing bus to administer her the last rites.

Gonzi's former PRO, Mgr Charles Vella says he had convinced the archbishop to be more moderate during the Curia's dispute with Mintoff, by issuing interdiction to the MLP executive instead to all of the party members.

Although slightly sceptical about the veracity of Liza Zammit's case, he expresses his regret for the incident and says: "tell them to remove her remains if they haven't already done so."

Indeed, when granted permission by the Curia her family removed her remains from there. One of her six children, Rose Falzon, says: "we had to cope with the shock of losing our mother and then being told that she would not be blessed by the priest."

The family was on the verge of starting the mourning rituals with the routine procession from the hospital when the priest was ordered to leave and they were told to remove the cross from the casket carrying Zammit. The presiding undertaker had insisted the cross remained on the casket, and so it did. The funeral was also postponed till the evening.

"Pandemonium broke out when we heard about the edict," says Falzon. "We were tremendously upset because it was a disgrace to be buried in unconsecrated grounds in those times... our faith and that of others remained strong irrespective of the show that they wanted to make out of my mother's death."



Top: Catholic women jeering at the labourites gathered for a mass meeting in Gozo



The unholy war

Part 2



Defiant Mintoff supporters making their way to the meeting at It-Tokk

For whom the bell tolls

Michaela Muscat

COMPARISONS ARE odious. But one is hard pressed to find a more hateful comparison to the devil. "The people miming Beelzebub" baffled Lino Spiteri the former labour Minister as he was on his way to the Tokk meeting in Gozo.

Spiteri was present along with other Labourites when they spotted fervent Catholics sauntering around on the Rabat hills whilst grabbing their behinds. "It was a bizarre moment which would be perfectly captured on film," he says.

Spiteri says that it took him a while to realise that the catholic crowd were trying to show the Labourites that they believed them to be the devil incarnate.

Reminiscent of the fear of God inspired by the Inquisition; the Maltese Church attempted to manoeuvre the political scene in its favour. So the Labour executive and supporters became accustomed, but never immune to being accused of doing the devil's work by members of their own community.

The curia was convinced that Mintoff's socialism was a Trojan horse for communism. At the apex of the cold war the extreme sense of paranoia had found its breeding ground amongst Malta's most conservative echelons.

Clergymen, *Azzjoni Kattolika* and MUSE-UM had mobilised women and children, some

of whom were carrying banners and sticks. After every meeting women known as *tal-Parfum* took to the streets to disinfect the area where the labourites had convened.

Back at *it-Tokk*, the Church had issued an unofficial order to all the shopkeepers to shut-down their business for the day and all public facilities including the latrines were also locked up.

Paul Caruana, the father of Gozitan Labour MP Justyne Caruana says that it was hard to accept that their fellow Gozitans were suddenly taunting them and hurling stones. "I was hit by a lady with a wooden stick and we had stones thrown at us as well," says Caruana who was 14 years old at the time. The church-bells tolled throughout the meeting and '*Ghawdex ma' l-Isqof*' was inscribed on a banner hung on the façade of the church of San Gakbu.

Realising that it was useless to continue the meeting, Anton Buttigieg halted his speech about the party's intentions for the Civic Councils. He addressed the hollering mob around the square "*saffru saffru issa l-guvin-tur jitolqu lejn l-Awstarlja u intom tibqghu ssaffru.*"

The meeting was stopped halfway through because it was too chaotic and dangerous for the people attending the meeting. The police eventually closed off the square, preventing people from leaving or entering.

Anton F Attard who was 18 at the time told MaltaToday that he couldn't bear the noise and walked out, so he was not allowed back in. Caruana remembers being terrified by the banshee screeching and the verbal and physical abuse that he encountered with his father at Ghajnsielem. They had taken a detour to get back home and so they climbed their way through Mgarr ix-Xini to get back to Xewkija.

On the otherhand, Labour MP Evarist Bartolo candidly articulates the part he played in this saga as a ten-year-old boy on the other side of the battlefield as a child coming from a Nationalist background. He says that the fear, self-righteousness and visceral hatred instigated by the local priest spurred children on to commit those heinous acts. Whenever the camarilla of children spotted Labourites commuting to and fro from Gozo meetings they paraded around with flags displaying the Pope's emblem. And singing "*Ghalxejn l-ghedewwa iridu jkissru il-hitan tal-belt imqaddsa tieghek il-belt tal-Vatikan*" at the which the labourites retorted: "*Ghalxejn l-ghedewwa iridu jfarku il-partit tal Malta Labour Party, immexxi mill-perit.*"

Anton F Attard from Rabat, Gozo remembers priests making insinuations and sometimes-blatant declarations against the MLP and Mintoff during mass. "It was a constant crusade against the MLP," he says. "I clearly remember that priests would refuse to give

absolution to Labourites during confession and the often mentioned the mortal sin." Attard was 18 years old in May 1961 when the infamous "Tokk meeting" took place in the Gozitan capital of Rabat. At the time the MLP was fighting for the *Sitt Punti*. Labourites who were present at the meeting and revealed their memories to this newspaper draw parallels to the persecution suffered by early Christians in the Roman Empire. But not all priests supported the interdiction at the time.

Dun Ang Seychell was against the "calumnious interdiction" but when "he had to choose loyalties" he ultimately chose the church. Seychell attended rallies organised by the *Gunta* but never took part in any of the "disgusting episodes." The father of Labour MP Justyne Caruana says that his family suffered repercussions in their personal life due to political bigotry.

Even nowadays Gozitan society is more insular. The church has a tighter grip on people than in Malta and is less secular. Back then it was extremely degrading for the parish priest to skip someone's house during the ritual Easter blessings. "I was denied Holy Communion and confession. I was sent away from the altar myself being told that I could not receive Holy Communion because I was a Mintoffian," Caruana says.



The river flows, and times change

Former Labour minister **Lino Spiteri**, interdicted during the sixties, tells MICHAELA MUSCAT how his marriage at the time was considered by the church to be a mixed marriage between a believer and a non-believer



"WE WERE lucky that no incidents took place at our wedding even though there was a huge crowd outside the church," former Labour minister Lino Spiteri recalls of his wedding ceremony held during the interdicted. The bride and groom had been anxious that their 'special day' would be marred by angry extremists who had made a habit out of showering the participants at Labour weddings with insults.

The 25-year-old Spiteri and his spouse-to-be had been warned the marriage rites would be performed in the church sacristy but to their surprise it was carried out in English – reinforcing the message that Spiteri was not considered a member of the Catholic Church, and that this was a 'mixed marriage'.

The parish priest had informed the couple all would not be plain sailing when they had approached him to get married. However they were still astonished the priest used rites

appropriate for mixed religion marriages.

Occupying a post in the MLP executive after having been politically active for around seven years, had singled Spiteri out for differential treatment. The extent of the church's power was so strong that it was not possible to have a civil wedding at the time. They had no choice but to accept the conditions imposed by the curia. "We were a Maltese couple in a church in Rabat yet the mixed marriage ceremony took place in English," says Spiteri.

Today however, the soft-spoken writer and former politician does not hold any grudges as he speaks about Malta's unsavoury past.

Surprisingly dispassionate about the entire affair, Spiteri does not harbour hostility towards the church and the individuals involved, but he admits he was perplexed at the time.

"I didn't feel anger or hostility in the past, so it would be futile

to feel that way nowadays. I never say 'look what they've done to me or my family'. As far as I was concerned I was not doing anything wrong or anything which would have angered God."

A devout believer, his faith never faltered but he does make a distinction between the church and God and always felt he had God and not his mortal representatives to answer to. As he grows older, Spiteri feels that he can analyse the situation better: "I can understand what was going on in the archbishop's mind more than I could at the time."

In his eyes, it still does not absolve the Curia of her sins. As far as he was concerned, this saga was political and not religious, yet the repercussions were political and social, attempting to exclude people from a religious and social context.

Spiteri uses an analogy to describe the implications of the interdicted. "Most people were

catholic, and Labourites were no less catholic – they participated in religious activities, feasts and organisations. Then all of a sudden a scythe tore our society apart."

Disorientated intellectually and spiritually, he attempted to rationalise what was going on but socially, he did not suffer – his family soldiered on despite the moral pressure, and having been involved in politics from an early age, he nurtured friendships that didn't balk under the strain of the times.

He happily reminisces that the wedding party was "normal" and all of the invitees attended, irrespective of their political beliefs. The interdicted did not cast its shadow on the festivities and important political heavy-

weights: Anton Buttigieg, Mabel Strickland and Nationalist party leader Gorg Borg Olivier were all present.

"I am sorry it happened," he remarks in an afterthought. "It was obviously not a nice thing having to baptise your child and seeing the priest write down that the baby's father was interdicted. I ask myself, did we have to go through all this? And the answer is no, I don't think that we should have experienced what we experienced."

But time cures all things – Spiteri says he understands why people, especially the younger generation, don't feel strongly about the issue anymore: "The river flows, times change – so it is not relevant for people anymore."

Across the divide

Guido de Marco during the interdicted

THE FLAMBOYANT, former President of the Republic is not one to hide his light under a bushel. And his friendship with political opponent and Labour MP Joe Micallef Stafrace is no exception.

"We will always remain close friends," Guido de Marco says about his friendship with the Labour politician, who in 1961 was a member of the MLP executive that received the interdicted from the Maltese curia.

"It was too much," de Marco says about the church's decree. "Although the church was rightly reacting, it was too heavy."

With a sense of escalation characterising the heady days of the early sixties, de Marco says the language used by both sides had been far from diplomatic. The strong convictions held by both Archbishop Michael Gonzi and Labour leader Dom Mintoff did not help to ease tensions.

"They were alike – headstrong personalities who believed that they had to use extreme measures to get their point across."

de Marco and Micallef Stafrace were atypical bosom buddies in turbulent political times. Their friendship stood strong in the face of adversity. As a real friend



De Marco: Mintoff and Gonzi were alike, headstrong personalities

would do, de Marco walked in when the rest of the world walked out. When Micallef Stafrace and his spouse were shunned by some on their wedding day, de Marco attended the reception formally with his part-

ner Violet.

The strong sense of solidarity might seem peculiar in the circumstances. But as older politicians are keen to point out, politics was conducted in a more gentlemanly manner. "A person

qualifies as a gentleman when he stands by you even when the going is not so good," de Marco says.

Affectionately dubbed "staffy", de Marco says Micallef Stafrace was moderate by convictions. They similarly acknowledge life is not a matter of "black or white – there is often a lot of grey in-between." Micallef Stafrace concurs that the ideological cleavage never prevented them from "substantially agreeing on various levels."

Micallef Stafrace is evidently fond of de Marco, the man who was not "simply a fair-weather friend." Although numerous politicians were against the interdicted because they knew that it was not a theological matter, nobody opposed the decree publicly.

The two got to know each other at university and their friendship was tested as far back as 1959 when Micallef Stafrace was jailed after losing a libel case. Governor Robert Laycock had taken offence for a tongue-in-cheek cartoon published as a reaction to the temporary suspension of a ban on village feasts. The cartoon published by 'Is-Sebh' when Micallef Stafrace

was editor, portrayed the perspiring governor holding a bottle of gin whilst ridding piggyback on revellers at a festa.

De Marco had accompanied Micallef Stafrace to the law courts and had waited with him until he was carted off to jail for four days. The guilty verdict was delivered by Magistrate Giovanni Refalo and confirmed on appeal by Judge William Harding, for "vilifying the governor" on 7 January, 1959.

Micallef Stafrace's mother and fiancée Yvonne were anxiously waiting at home, when they received a phone call from de Marco who wanted to inform them of the verdict first hand. He wanted to reassure them that "Staffy" was cheerful and courageous. It was a political issue for which the negative verdict would not demean him in any way.

Soon after Micallef Stafrace would ask de Marco to allow him to spend his year of practice at his law firm. de Marco consented, and so Micallef Stafrace obtained his warrant. "Both Refalo and Harding attended my graduation reception, as obviously did Guido," Micallef Stafrace recalls.

Next week: Victor Ragonesi on the PN during the interdicted



feature



Archbishop Gonzi's condemnation of the Reds

MONS ARCHBISHOP believes that in today's circumstances, one had to condemn with all force, the following actions:

(a) the grave offence by word of mouth or in writing or in actions against the Archbishop or the clergy.

(b) Supporting the leaders of MLP, until they insist of battling out with the church and they keep contact with socialists, communists and AAPSO

Apart from that, today, it appears that the MLP executive, through the 'Helsien' has publicly INVITED THE ARCHBISHOPS. This invite is the greatest insult that one

can make to the ecclesiastical ranks and after the warning issued by the curia to the editors of this newspaper and 'The Voice of Malta' this is obviously an incitement on their part.

No one can print, write, sell, buy, deliver or read these newspapers without falling in mortal sin.

Excerpts translated from Latin from the letter issued by Gonzi on 26 May 1961, published in Il-Qawmien tal-Haddiem Malti by Anthony Azzopardi as part of the Labour Party's Sensiela Kotba Soċjalisti.



Ticket to hell

Michaela Muscat

THE FACTS speak for themselves. After the strong warnings issued by Archbishop Michael Gonzi's curia about the dangers of supporting "the socialist enemies of the church," the die was cast. The Malta Labour Party did not win an election during the interdiction.

During the 1962 elections the MLP gained 50,974 votes. These votes increased to 61,774 votes in 1966. Eventually the MLP managed 85,448 votes in 1971 to claim its first victory since the interdiction.

Former Nationalist Party secretary general Victor Ragonese, told this newspaper that it would be unfair to assume that the Nationalist Party's victories were the result of the interdiction. "After the fight against the integration which we as a party were resolutely against, the people had the opportunity to vote in the Independence referendum and they did with 65,714 voting in favour," he says.

The MLP had won a relative victory in the integration referendum of 1956 as 44.25 per cent of all voters voted in favour. The British and the PN did not accept the integration because 40.87 percent had abstained from voting meaning that out of 152,783 registered voters only 67,607 voted in favour.

Ragonese elaborates: "one must analyse the moral concept and traditions of past times. Back then it was different, catholic principles used to be more rigid, there wasn't a liberal or laissez faire attitude that there is today.

The Maltese did fear the wrath of Archbishop Michael Gonzi and his God. In the letters circulated by hand amongst the priests there were blunt instructions on how to ostracise or change the opinions of Labour members and sympathisers. "If the person who is confessing did

not vote because he did not have faith in the politicians (except those who were members of the party contrary to the church) the confessor has the obligation to change the person's view with arguments that explain how grave it was not to vote for these parties," said the letter worded in Latin and issued on the 7 of March 1962. Priests were only allowed to forgive people's sins "if they were deemed to be truly and sincerely sorry for having voted for the party which was hostile to the church." Had anyone had the misfortune to canvass for the MLP politicians or publicly state that they were MLP voters they could only be forgiven for their sins "if they publicly stated that they were sorry for having done so."

Ragonese never expressed his feelings about the interdiction openly at the time and his party cannot be blamed for making hay while the sun shines by neither condoning nor condemning the interdiction. Even in his advanced age Ragonese still has the tact of a lawyer as he diplomatically says that "people are not forced to be Catholics."

"After all the church is like a club and you have to obey the rules," he says. Ragonese does give the labourite voters during the interdiction the benefit of the doubt, but from the historical documents and accounts being uncovered, he is definitely in denial about Archbishop Gonzi when he says "that Gonzi's curia never interfered in politics and only spoke about

religious matters."

The Maltese church had probably not administered such an extensive manipulation of society since the times of the Inquisition. The Archbishop wrote at the time that "the church's divine will to endeavour for a perfect society basking on God's grace meant that it could never err."

From the pulpit of the local church, preachers stressed the consequences of not obeying the church's will. These ranged from the mortal sin to burning in hell for all eternity, the penultimate sanction for devout Catholics. But as the old adage goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions and even Labour politicians like Lino Spiteri grant that Gonzi truly believed that "the enemies of the Church who engaged themselves in socialist teachings did their utmost to trick believers and send them to hell."

Il-Poplu Malti Hum tghallim jiddistingwi bejn Religjon u Pulitika. F'dik li hi Religjon għandhom imexxu l-Kapijiet Spiritwali. F'dik li hi Pulitika l-Poplu Malti jrid li f'issu jtkollom biss il-PERIT MINTOFF.



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Divide et Impera: Ragonesi recalls PN during the interdiction

Victor Ragonesi reminisces about the Nationalist Party's role during the interdict and talks to **MICHAELA MUSCAT** about the relationship between church and politics.

THE ETERNAL bond between the Christian Democrat Partit Nazzjonalista and the church is implied. But the Vatican was not convinced of the PN's intentions when it wanted to further the Maltese Catholic church's power in the 1962 independence constitution.

"The English minister in charge of commonwealth affairs asked us: 'Why do you want to include this bloody clause about the church?' Even the Vatican thinks that you want to be more catholic than the pope," recalls Victor Ragonesi, at the time secretary general of the PN.

The Nationalist Party was in government and it was obsessed with entrenching the religion of Malta as the "Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion."

The PN wanted to give free reign to the Church over "the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong."

So it does come as a surprise that Ragonesi says "as a principle the PN never wanted for religion and politics to mix." He does however concede the PN used to have members who mentioned religion during their meetings.

Ragonesi continues that Borg Olivier and himself, who always took part in "principal meetings during the elections and even during the integration transition, never wanted to take advantage of the interdict."

But seeing that the MLP leader Dom Mintoff was Archbishop Gonzi's bete noire, wasn't it inevitable the PN would gain a considerable advantage?

"That Gonzi considered Borg Olivier the designate leader of the Gunta – this I do not accept," Ragonesi insists. His justification being that Gonzi was always against Malta's independence.

According to his faithful secretary, Borg Olivier never uttered a word in favour or against the interdict: "We always said that it was the church's business and we would not interfere."

One would be excused for suspecting that the deafening silence from the PN executive and leader only helped pave the way to subsequent electoral victories. It would have logically been against the PN's interests for the interdict to come to an end.



Victor Ragonesi: That Gonzi considered Borg Olivier the designate leader of the Gunta – this I do not accept

Ragonesi is frank about politics yet seemingly reluctant to delve into the merits of the interdict. When pressed on the subject his pronouncements betray where his sympathies lay.

"The MLP did not want the church to have the last say over the basic fundamental moral issues which have to do with the church or any religion," Ragonesi says.

The former PN secretary general does believe that "the church should not interfere in strictly political affairs" but when there are moral issues at stake "the church has every right to intervene."

Ragonesi justifies the inclusion of Roman Catholicism as Malta's official religion in the Constitution since 97 per cent of the people at the time went to church.

As Borg Olivier's right-hand man, Ragonesi was present at every single discussion involving the drafting of the Maltese independence constitution. "I was always there, never missed a single one of them," he says.

When the Maltese government was discussing the clause of the

constitution which deals with the Catholic Church and her functions, Ragonesi remembers that "the English Minister let slip that not even the Vatican approved of their insistence to include the clause about the Catholic Church."

The draft of the independence constitution involved long meetings in London, especially since the Maltese delegation had proposed a lot of changes based on the peace pact made between the Vatican and Italy in 1929.

The fact that the British government and the Opposition in Malta objected to the inclusion of the clause related to the Catholic church did not deter Borg Olivier who always insisted that when Malta became independent it would be able to include whatever it wanted in the constitution.

The British insisted that this clause was highly unusual. "In none of the independent commonwealth would you find a clause related to religion," Ragonesi says.

And so the Vatican's stance on this matter was truly bewildering news to Borg Olivier and his dele-

gation.

"The Italo-American Vatican envoy had always told us that he approved of this clause," says Ragonesi.

The Vatican's rebuke bothered the Maltese Prime Minister to the extent that he sent Ragonesi out on the first morning flight to Rome to deliver a message to the Holy See. The message was clear: "Do not interfere in our constitution, not even in the clause regarding religion unless you can prove that I am harming religion or the church."

Ragonesi, Malta's Hermes with the Vatican proudly says that the Vatican was his niche since he could always speak Italian fluently. Indeed, the lawyer, whom I meet a couple of days after his 81 birthday peppers his conversation with Italian phrases. He refers to Seneca and also quotes well-known Latin sayings. It is hard to believe that he is not a product of the Liceo Classico, until he tells me that he was Nerik Mizzi's apprentice. Mizzi, a 'Belti' like Ragonesi was Prime Minister for three months and was renowned for his Italian sympathies – even

during World War II. Mizzi was also interred and deported to Uganda with another 47 others for their close connection to the Italian authorities at the time. Consequently it makes sense that a party with such close historical ties to Italy would see red whenever they heard the word integration.

Ragonesi was always of the opinion that Mintoff was never sincere about integration.

"He made so many reservations and exceptions as regards to integration that I believe he used to say he wanted integration with Britain so that they would give him more money that would enable him to remain in government."

If that was the case then Mintoff's plan backfired. The result of the referendum was not accepted as being favourable of Malta's integration with the United Kingdom.

Ragonesi thinks that "England wanted the integration more genuinely in the beginning because they needed Malta for military reasons."

After the Suez Canal Crisis, the British had come to the realisation that their Empire was no more. Malta would no longer be of any military strategic importance making it highly unlikely that they would be willing to keep up the expensive hobby of collecting colonies.

Yet Ragonesi says that Sir Anthony Eden's memoirs, who was Prime Minister during the integration, include a chapter on Malta which starts: "it is refreshing to know that one colony – Malta wanted to integrate with Britain."

To Eden's knowledge we were the exception because the entire commonwealth wanted independence, Ragonesi muses. The only country that was integrated, Northern Ireland wanted out as well. "That is why I thought Mintoff, whom I always considered a friend even though we did not see eye to eye, could not have been sincere about integration," Ragonesi says.

The seasoned politician chuckles: "Well, Seneca once wrote about politics: your mother must have been a prostitute, so it was always like that."

Unholy war: timeline of the interdiction

11 and 12 February 1956 - The Integration Referendum of 1956.

Although it was won by a relative majority since 67,607 voted in favour and 20,177 against. The British government did not accept the result because 62,440 voters abstained.

28 April 1958 - Riots after Mintoff's government resigned

January 1959 - Three months after he is elected Pope John XXIII gives notice of intention to convene Vatican Council II.

January 1961 - AAPSO

Conference – Attended by Dom Mintoff and Anton Buttigieg. The conference was later described by the church as a communist front.

17 March 1961 – MLP accuses Church of interfering in political affairs

8 April 1961 – Bishops issue Interdiction Decree

21 May 1961 - Tokk Meeting at Rabat Gozo. The meeting was interrupted by the crowds instigated by the church.

16 September 1961 - MLP execu-

tive member Joe Micallef Stafrace's wedding which had to take place in the sacristy since he was interdicted.

18 September 1961 - Guze Ellul Mercer dies and is the first to be buried in the Mizbla (unconsecrated grounds in the cemetery).

11 October 1962 - Vatican Council II is convened for the first time.

Election of 1962 - PN wins by 63,262 votes in the first general election to take place during the interdiction. George Borg Olivier becomes Independent Malta's

first Prime Minister in 1964.

2, 3 and 4 May 1964 - The Independence referendum is won by 65,714 votes in favour and 54,919 against.

20 August 1964 - MLP executive member Lino Spiteri's Wedding which had to take place in the sacristy since he was interdicted.

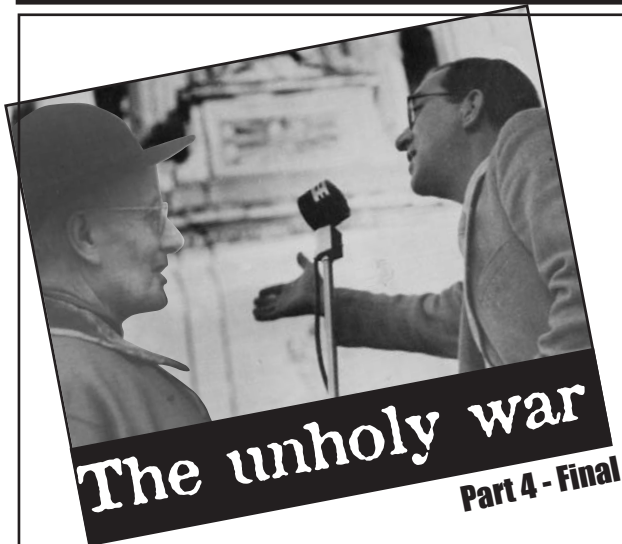
21 September 1964 - Malta becomes an independent state under the premiership of George Borg Olivier

1966 – PN wins the second general election to take place during

the interdiction with 68,656 votes.

4 April 1969 - Interdiction decree lifted after the Bishops and MLP officials signed a joint statement saying that relations had improved and the Church was going to refrain from imposing mortal sin as a means of censorship

1971 – MLP wins its first general election since independence by 85,448 votes after the interdiction is lifted. MLP goes on to obtain Republic status for Malta. Sir Anthony Mamo becomes Malta's first President.



The unholy war
Part 4 - Final

Scar tissue: The aftermath of the interdett

Michaela Muscat

"THE IMPOSITION of the interdett and the mortal sin in the sixties left a traumatic effect on the life of all of those who experienced it. A great pain that is still felt today," says Wenzu Mintoff, the Labour politician and Dom Mintoff's nephew. He believes that at least another two generations have to pass before the great hurts are not felt anymore.

"To show how a hurt like this lasts for long one only has to read the biography of Mabel Strickland who until her death could not find reassurance on whether her father Lord Gerald Strickland, who had also been affected by the imposition of the mortal sin in the 30s with Boffa's labourites, had been ex-communicated from the church and had managed to save his soul."

English anthropologist Annabel Hendry was researching her doctorate thesis in the 70s and she remembers that even after the

interdett was declared over, "politics seemed to infiltrate everything, even where you chose to buy your loaf of bread. The dark side of this was that the increasing social stratification intensified both political divisions and inter and sometimes intra-family rivalries. The role of the interdett was complex, but very present."

Wenzu Mintoff is dismayed that the aftermath of the interdett led to a lacunae of values. "The traditional values imposed by the church were not replaced by ethical and civic lay values because in other countries the transition took hundreds of years. This is one of the reasons why in this country there is a vacuum of values, libertinism and a lot of hypocrisy and double standards."

Hendry says that back in the 70s, she felt that the frequent collective reminiscing over past struggles for those defending the government acted as a kind of group myth to amplify and justify

the power of the weak (the Labour Party) and the forces of progress over the powers of reaction which had been ranged against them. Attempts to defend the pastoral role of the Church in the past would be dismissed, with the lack of effective schooling in the village until after World War II cited as an example of the Church's role in "keeping us ignorant, so we would not know how to fight back." There was great and genuine bitterness still there.

She remembers that life was fun in the 70s as Malta was undergoing change by the minute – tourism was taking off and the community beginning to open up and see new possibilities, although there was still a whiff of Salem floating on the air in Mellicha 1975.

"Rumours were circulating that I was a prostitute, and most probably a socialist prostitute to boot," says anthropologist Annabel Hendry, remembering when as a doctorate student conducting her fieldwork in Malta she aroused the police's suspicions to the extent that they inspected her premises after two male friends known to be far left of centre frequently called round to check how she was settling in.

In fact many young children and people ignored the instructions of a very fervent and active priest to stay away from the "dangerous English woman." It is probable that her presumed political leanings and the fraternising of a single woman with men led the priest to decry her imputed lack of morals.

Labour was in power as MLP politicians were immediately elected as soon as the interdett was declared over. It was around the time that a Labour government had already started implementing every single one of the "six points" which triggered off the interdett – except for divorce which even in present times is not recognised by civil law as a right for Maltese people. Wenzu Mintoff says "the intervention of Archbishop Gerada who had a direct line with the Vatican led to a truce between Dom Mintoff and Archbishop Michael Gonzi." Mintoff believes that once the interdett was lifted



Wenzu Mintoff, Dom's nephew, believes at least another two generations have to pass before the great hurts are not felt anymore

and there was a dramatic decrease of the Church's influence, Malta started becoming more secularised.

But anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain believes that the reverberation of the interdett can still be observed today as "the anti-MLP press of the 1960s is still anti-MLP."

When asked whether the Labourites in the 70s had let bygones be bygones, Hendry believes not. "I was impressed by how vivid the period remained in people's memory, certainly amongst Labour supporters. Many recalled the atmosphere of fear and panic over the fate of the dockyard at the time of the interdett and it was common to remember the local and national heroes of the time, such as those who had been placed in prison for supporting the dockyard strikes. The two themes, which always recurred, were how barbaric the Church was to withhold the Easter blessing from certain households and the fate of those who ended up being buried at the *mizbla*."

She says that many such conversations, often in the Labour Club, ended up in hilarity as those present joined in with ever more gruesome memories of their own experiences and with examples of the avarice and wickedness of the chaplain at that time. "But these tales communicated a fundamental and serious message, that of the unity and definition of the participants as past victims, essentially opposed to the corrupt and vicious tactics which could be used by the Church and of their collectively standing against the power it represented."

She explains that unlike in the villages where her tutor,

Boissevain, worked, Labour supporters were very much a minority group in Mellicha at the time of the interdett: "so people had to be extremely brave to defend their allegiance and were literally forced underground and subject to severe stigma." Boissevain says that "workers in the harbour had more contact with the outside world and new ideas. Unionisation was strong there and the people supported the party. Dom Mintoff's own background was there. But support was also very strong in the so called 'rural' southern villages, where many residents also worked in the harbour area and in the quarries."

"Perhaps the church should have been advised to accept the MLP's slogan 'with Mintoff always, against the Church never' on its face value," Hendry says. To force a whole community of believers into such terrible choices of conscience was no way to gain fans so the questioning, mistrust and bitterness did generate secularisation.

But she also says that secularisation is a relative term. "Two weeks ago people were queuing up at 5.45am outside the church in Mellicha, anxious for their early festa mass... now that wouldn't happen in England."

Asked to comment on how Malta nowadays compares to back then, she says: "Oddly, increasing wealth and apparent prosperity apart, Malta is not so very different from the 1970s. Politics apart, there is still no place better in the world to take that first slice into a loaf of bread. And those subversive friends of mine? They are pillars of the community now! So things do change."



The interdett through a foreigner's eyes

MICHAELA MUSCAT speaks to Dutch anthropologist **Jeremy Boissevain** on his personal observations on the events of the 1960s Church interdiction.

"THE INTERDETT left a lasting scar. The young and older adults who lived through the period have never forgotten it," Dutch anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain says.

Indeed Labour leader Alfred Sant recounts an anecdote regarding an aged woman who "never set foot in church again after being denied absolution by her priest when she was heavily pregnant and had just been told by her doctor that due to serious complications - she and her infant were on the possible brink of death". This woman, whom Sant met during his routine house visits in 'Lazy Corner' Sliema, was still evidently bitter for "having to choose between God and her party," in such a precarious moment in her life.

Proficient in several languages, the 76-year-old anthropologist who first came to Malta as a chief of mission for the American Care relief organisation CARE, still has close ties with the islands. Two of his children were born in Malta and one of them also lives here. He has been conducting research and studying Malta's social life for over 40 years.

He also published 'Saints and Fireworks', which studied the relationship between religion and politics in Maltese village feasts back in the sixties. Irrespective of having spent the whole morning travelling, he is raring to go, meticulous about every single detail including names, times and places.

During one of his field trips in Qala, the anthropologist bumped into Labour MP Guze Ellul Mercer. Boissevain quotes the prophetic remarks Ellul Mercer had made when they discussed the interdett: "It can only get worse before it gets better. The Bishop is making an anticlerical party out of the Labour Party. An anticlerical party of a group of people who are and who wish to remain practising

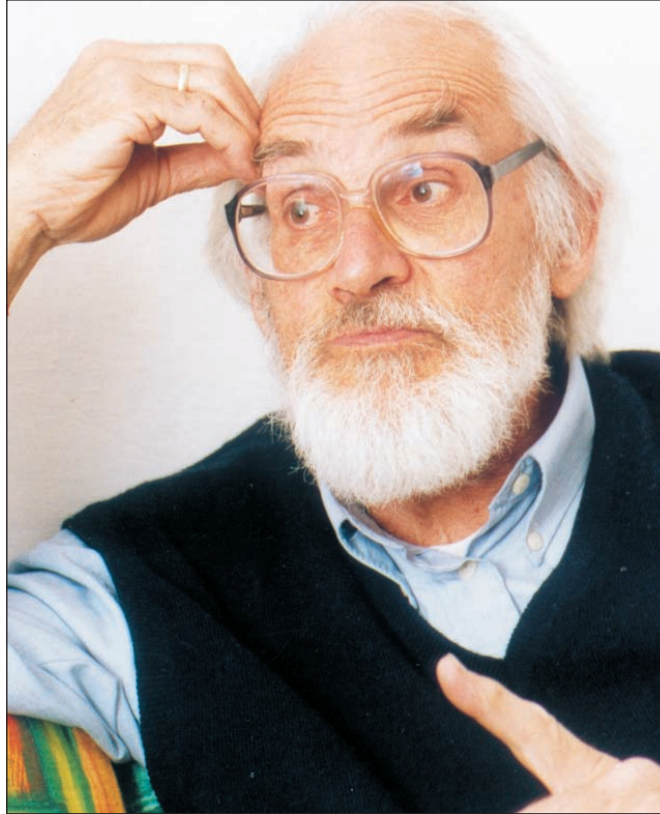
Catholics".

As an afterthought Boissevain says that he later heard many others, including priests say the same thing. Boissevain's accurate memories come from the notes he had made when he was doing comparative research. The excerpt continues: "On 9 April 1961 I was staying in the hotel of *il-Gaggu* in Qala. Also staying there was Joe Ellul Mercer, who was in Gozo for a week's hunting. That Sunday morning, the morning the interdett was read out, he went to early mass and went to go out hunting. The telephone at the hotel's bar kept ringing for him the whole morning. But he was out. At dinner that night we talked for hours. He spoke a lot about his life, including his loneliness after the death of his wife."

Boissevain recalls seeing young MLP supporters swaggering into the Naxxar church with copies of the party organ *Il-Helsien* sticking out of their back pockets. "Kalc. Agius (Labour MP) told me that the circulation in Naxxar of the over the counter copies of *Il-Helsien* rose from a handful to around sixty a week, excluding the subscriptions."

Boissevain thinks that strangely enough, it also helped promote literacy among the less educated Labour rank and file. "For the first time, they started buying *il-Helsien* as a badge of loyalty and defiance. Once they bought it, they began to read it. They learned more about the party, and its ideology followed."

An ideology consisting of Mintoff's homemade brand of socialism - which in the anthropologist's view was "certainly light years away from communism and not a direct threat to the church," further confirming the redundancy of Archbishop Michael Gonzi's assumed fears. The drastic, needless and very foolish steps of the church simply



escalated the confrontation. Mintoff wanted the church to stay out of politics. It did not, only to strengthen the MLP as an institution.

"By anathematising Mintoff, by equating him with the devil in such a simple minded black and white dichotomy - 'jew ma' l-Isqof, jew max-xitan' (with the Bishop, or with the devil) - the church insulted the idolised leader of the party and the intelligence of his followers," Boissevain says.

Ironically, part of Mintoff's rhetorical techniques included peppering his speeches with religious undertones that according to Boissevain served "to warm the audience up and to show his defiance." Mintoff's brazen com-

ments also showed the way for others to voice their experiences and share them with each other - he "legitimised speaking out" by giving a voice to the people.

Shortly after the start of the interdett, Boissevain says he had overheard his neighbour, a devout Catholic and a teacher, but also an ardent Labour supporter, "recounting to a number of men in a blacksmiths shop, his grim, joyless experiences as a long time MUSEUM member. Before the interdett such behaviour would have been unthinkable."

Boissevain says the extreme measure of the interdett alienated people so much that many members of the clergy were openly in extreme difficulty "that it boomeranged. Resulting in the

church losing many followers and became willing to reach an agreement with the MLP. Although one should add that throughout this saga the MLP also lost followers."

Not all the MLP supporters were prepared to risk raising the ire of God and suffer the eternal damnation of hell. So the cleavage between the Church and the MLP grew deeper by first interdicting the leadership and especially then after forbidding people to read the papers. "The church shot itself in the foot. It deprived thousands of devout church attendees from receiving the sacraments, insulting them and of course alienating them."

Boissevain once again illustrates his argument from his notes: "The new *Kappillan* of Kirkop, Dun Guzepp Theuma, had invested an enormous amount and devotion in building up the boys' Catholic Action. In less than a year he increased membership from virtually nothing to over 50. Then, after the pledge of allegiance the Church demanded of all Church organisations, all but 12 members of the village's Catholic Action dropped out. This upset Dun Theuma greatly."

The interdett certainly speeded up secularisation, leading to a very steady decline in church attendance: "It did not start with the interdett. But the interdett certainly contributed to it." It also led to a more open and much more independent frame of mind regarding the pronouncements of the church on divorce, church attendance, contraception and pre marital sex. "But this is part of the general trend of secularisation, and in this respect it is not much different, though much slower, than the secularisation among Catholics that has taken place in the Netherlands since the 1950s."

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