

# With Remarkable Love Gozo — 150 Years a Diocese

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With remarkable love, on 16 September 1864, one hundred and fifty years ago, Blessed Pope Pius IX conceded to the requests and wishes of the priests and people of Gozo and established Gozo and Comino as a separate diocese. It had all begun on 30 October 1798 and for sixty-six long years, priests and people united their efforts towards that end.

## La Nazione Gozitana

Gozo, the second largest of the three-island nation of Malta, has always nurtured a particular identity coupled with a degree of autonomy. This autonomy was in most cases the result of the island's natural isolation, rather than the outcome of a political decision.

Throughout the ages, this autonomy was sometimes enhanced, sometimes eradicated. The Gozitans slowly found out for themselves that when they had some say in the decisions affecting them, life went on more smoothly. So when their autonomy was from time to time suppressed, the Gozitans went out of their way to convince the political authorities that Gozo had its own particular needs and that this entailed a degree of self-government.

In ecclesiastical affairs, on the other hand, they had to recur continually to the bishop of Malta and the multiform problems that ensued, convinced them that the only solution was a bishop closer to home.

On 28 October 1798, the French in Gozo surrendered. The following day, “the place was delivered up in form to the Deputies of the island”. This fact is documented in a letter written by Alexander John Ball, the British captain responsible for the blockade, to Lord Nelson (Alexander J. Ball, quoted in A. MIFSUD, 1907). This means that on 29 October, Gozo with Comino became an autonomous region. The Gozitans, led by Saverio Cassar, Archpriest of the Matrice, Head of the Government, and Superintendent of the islands of



Fig. 1: Archpriest Saverio Cassar (courtesy: Cathedral Museum, Gozo)

Gozo and Comino (see Fig. 1), had organised the blockade single-handedly; the Portuguese and the British navies hastened its conclusion.

The emergency Government had taken upon itself the strenuous task to provide wages to the local troops, to import food from Sicily, and to organise the various sectors of administration. No wonder that the place was “delivered up in form” to Cassar and his deputies. Archpriest Saverio Cassar became Governor-General and Governing Head for His Majesty the King of Naples — *Governatore Generale dell'isola di Gozo and Capo Governante per Sua Maestà Re di Napoli*.

Gozo with Malta – according to a condition laid down by Emperor Charles V in the donation of the islands of Malta and Gozo to the Sovereign Military Order of St John in 1530 – had to return to the Emperor or his successors if and when the

Knights left the Maltese archipelago. Through this condition, Gozo passed under His Sicilian Majesty, then also King of Naples. The Gozitans became their own masters and their island an autonomous protectorate within the Kingdom of Naples.

On 30 October, hours after the Gozitans had taken the islands into their own hands, Archpriest Cassar addressed a petition to King Ferdinand III of Sicily (see Fig. 2) to grant permission for the establishment of a bishopric on this island. The petition was addressed to the King for two reasons: he had become the formal sovereign of the Maltese Archipelago; besides the kings of Sicily, through a privilege conceded by Pope Urban II in 1098, had the right to promote the establishment of Episcopal Sees in their territory. The Pope had the final word but, reasoned Cassar, if the King was in favour the Pope would approve.

Archbishop Alfonso Airoldi, the King's Counsellor for Ecclesiastical affairs, backed the petition: "The state of the island is such that it merits that Your Majesty, through Your benignity, exercise the rights inherent in Your Sovereignty and grant the petitioned request".



Fig. 2: King Ferdinand III (courtesy: Cathedral Museum, Gozo)

The favourable reception accorded to the petition is due to the high respect that Cassar enjoyed in the Sicilian Court as well as due to the invaluable service of Francesco Pace, the ambassador of Gozo in Palermo.

However, hardly anything could be done at the moment. The King was then doing his utmost to overthrow the Parthenopaeian Republic and could not be bothered about the petition; while Pope Pius VI was under house arrest in France. Besides, the French blockade in Malta further augmented the difficulties.

On 5 September 1800, Malta and Gozo passed under British protection and Cassar died on 5 September 1805, without seeing his wish fulfilled. The first petition had failed.

### **Petitions to the Pope, the King, and the Governor**

The idea of a diocese was not entombed with Cassar. The abnormal situation prevailing in Malta during the first decades of British rule put the plan in hibernation for more than three decades.

The idea was revived in 1836. On 30 December, three representatives of the Gozitans – Canon Gaetano Bondi, Canon Francesco Portelli, and Notary Nicolò Tabone – personally presented a petition to Pope Gregory XVI. It was signed by 136 persons, amongst them the members of the Gozo Collegiate Chapter, of the Għarb Chapter, and all the professionals on the island. After a long description of their island and the many problems of a pastoral nature that they faced due to their isolation, they beseeched the Pope "to be kind enough to dismember the islands of Gozo and Comino from the Diocese of Malta and erect them into a separate diocese".

The Gozitans despatched a similar petition to King William IV of Great Britain to further their cause and begged Sir Henry Frederick Bouverie, the Governor of Malta (1836-1853), to give them his support. They also expressed their desire that the person chosen as a bishop be a member of the clergy of Gozo.

These petitions almost accomplished the desired effect. The Governor made it clear that he "was

not averse from recommending such request to the favourable consideration of His Majesty, he having in view the spiritual advantages of the Gozitans". Yet further progress was halted by Francesco-Saverio Caruana, bishop of Malta (1831-1847), and Monsignor Filippo Amato, his Vicar-General, who could not hear of or bear a division of the diocese of Malta. They explained to the Governor that, according to Canon Law, a diocese could not be split or diminished during the incumbency of a bishop. They further added that the Gozitans had exaggerated their difficulties and that a diocese was definitely not necessary.

Due both to their aversion as well as to a diplomatic tug-of-war then going on between the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the papal Secretary of State concerning the right of presentation to the Malta bishopric, the question had to be shelved for another eighteen years.

### **A Diocese was a Must**

The Gozitans based the utility of the establishment of the Diocese on several factors, foremost amongst them, and from which all the others stem, is the isolation of Gozo from Malta. We who have lived in Gozo all our lives perfectly understand the perils, the loss of time, and the costs involved in travelling from Gozo to Malta and viceversa.

The situation was worse in the early nineteenth century. A voyage from Mgarr, Gozo, to the Grand Harbour, Valletta, took from four to five hours depending on the wind. Crossings were quite frequent, but there could be disruptions as long as four or five days long, when strong winds, not uncommon in Malta, prevailed. Mgarr harbour offered little shelter from the winds. There was neither a regular passenger service. Crossings could only be made by the cargo boats that offered neither shelter from the hot summer sun, nor protection from the cold wintry weather. They left at four in the morning and returned in mid-afternoon. The distance was created more by these circumstances, rather than by the stretch of space.

To make matters worse, the bishops of Malta were reluctant to cross over to Gozo. Between 1798 and 1857, when the Gozitan-born Gaetano Pace-



Fig. 3: Pope Pius IX (courtesy: Cathedral Museum, Gozo)

Forno became bishop, only six pastoral visits were carried out in Gozo – an average of one every ten years. Actually there were five up to 1822 and one in 1849, twenty six years later. Bishop Francesco-Saverio Caruana never set foot on Gozo, while his successor Bishop Publius Sant came only once. For this reason, the sacrament of Confirmation was conferred at widely spaced intervals. The majority never received this sacrament.

The poor means of communication also caused hardships to the those preparing for the priesthood. Difficulties in procuring board and lodging led many to desist from studying at the Seminary. They had nonetheless to travel to Malta for the examinations preceding every minor and major Order and subsequently for the Ordination itself. Rough seas sometimes hindered their presence to one or both.

The Gozitans rightly argued that with the foundation of the Diocese many of these difficulties would be overcome. Besides, the opening of a Seminary would follow suit and this would also put an end to rumours that were rife in Malta that the priests of Gozo lacked but the basic knowledge in ecclesiastical sciences.

## Pope Pius IX Pities the Gozitans

After a hibernation for eighteen years, the Gozitans decided on a more direct line of action. On 9 June 1855, three representatives of the Gozitans – Canon Michelangelo Garroni, Canon Gaetano Bondi and Don Pietro Pace – brought up the matter of the diocese at length in a private audience with Pope Pius IX (see Fig. 3). The Pontiff pitied the petitioners and promised his support. A few days later, the Gozo Collegiate Chapter sent a formal petition to the Pope as a follow-up. Matters however would soon have stalled once more were it not for two great born leaders who entered the scene to direct the proceedings.

The first was the indefatigable Don Pietro Pace (1831-1914), a young Gozitan priest then terminating his University studies in Rome (see Fig. 4). He was born in Rabat, Gozo on 9 April 1831. He received private tuition from a number of priests, amongst them Dun Frangisk Mercieca, a saintly man. He proceeded with his studies at the Malta Seminary and, eventually, at *La Sapienza*, the University of Rome, from where he obtained a doctorate in Theology on 13 November 1852. He was ordained priest in Rome on 17 December 1853. In 1856, he also gained a doctorate in Canon and Civil Law. Up to 1858, he



Fig. 4: Monsignor Pietro Pace (courtesy: Cathedral Museum, Gozo)



Fig. 5: Sir Adriano Dingli (courtesy: Cathedral Museum, Gozo)

was private secretary to Vincenzo Cardinal Santucci. In Rome, he befriended many personalities within the Curia circles, foremost amongst them the great Jesuit Theologian Giovanni Perrone, who authored the dogmatic Bull of the Immaculate Conception. Towards the end of 1858, the bishop recalled him to Malta to lecture at the Seminary. He also lectured at the University of Malta.

The other was (Sir) Adriano Dingli (1817-1900), an eminent son of Gozo then slowly establishing himself as the *de facto* Governor of Malta (see Fig. 5). He was born in Valletta of parents from Rabat, Gozo. His father Paolo was the writer of the petition presented to the Pope in 1836. He studied in Malta and abroad and soon became one of the most eminent lawyers of Malta. In 1849, he was elected from Gozo to represent the island in the Government Council in the first ever elections held in the British Colony of Malta. Towards the end of 1854, he was chosen by the British Colonial Office as Crown Counsel in Malta. He slowly became the most trusted Maltese person by the Governor and without doubt he became one of the most authoritative officials after the Governor.

These two great leaders vowed that they would not rest until their dream of a Diocese became true.

The former was to pave the way at the Vatican, the latter was to obtain the indispensable approval from the British.

The promoters of the Diocese had by then understood that success could only be achieved during a *sede vacante* that is during the vacancy of the episcopal see. As Bishop Sant of Malta was then ailing in bed, they knew they must act without delay. So while the Vatican was dealing with the British concerning a successor to Bishop Sant, Pace and Dingli were striving hard to further their plan with the Vatican officials and the Colonial authorities.

On 18 June 1857, when it was sensed that the election of Sant's successor was imminent, the Gozo Collegiate Chapter despatched still another petition to Pope Pius IX. They reminded him of the audience granted to their deputation two years earlier and how much understanding and support he had shown them, and renewed their pressing request.

On 25 September, the Vatican elected an Augustinian friar from Gozo, Gaetano Pace-Forno as coadjutor to Bishop Sant. The Gozitan longings seemed wrecked, but in fact they were not; for in the *Propositio* or document of election, the Vatican reserved the right to alter the limits of the diocese of Malta at the will of the His Holiness. To the joy of the Gozitans, Pace Forno, who had previously supported the idea of a separate diocese, succeeded to the bishopric in December.

### The Approval of the British

The Vatican, however, would not proceed without a crystal clear approval of the British authorities with whom the papal Government was then striving hard to keep the best of relations to convince them from taking sides in the thorny question of Italian unification. The Gozitans were convinced that if they succeeded to gain the British approval other difficulties would simply dissolve.

After being induced from Gozo, the Vatican sought that approval on 12 September 1860. The Foreign Secretary, Lord (John) Russell, sought in turn the views of the Colonial Office. On 26 September, Henry, Duke of Newcastle, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, asked the Governor of Malta, Sir John Gaspard Le Marchant whether there was any

reason to object to the proposed appointment. The Governor discussed the matter with Adrian Dingli, his Crown Advocate, and on 25 October drafted his approval (see Fig. 6).

In his letter, which stretches thirty two pages and has seventeen lengthy enclosures appended, Sir John Gaspard Le Marchant, the Governor of Malta, not only consented to the proposed erection of a Diocese but also expounded on the bountiful benefits that would be reaped as a result. The import of this despatch was unfathomable: enough to say that 25 October 1860, marked the beginning of the longed-for solution.

After further considerations, the Colonial Office conveyed the approval to the Foreign Office. On 21 November, Lord Russell acceded to the proceedings and duly informed Odo Russell, their representative in Rome, about the whole matter. Early in December, the latter eventually passed on the British approval to Giacomo Cardinal Antonelli, the papal Secretary of State.

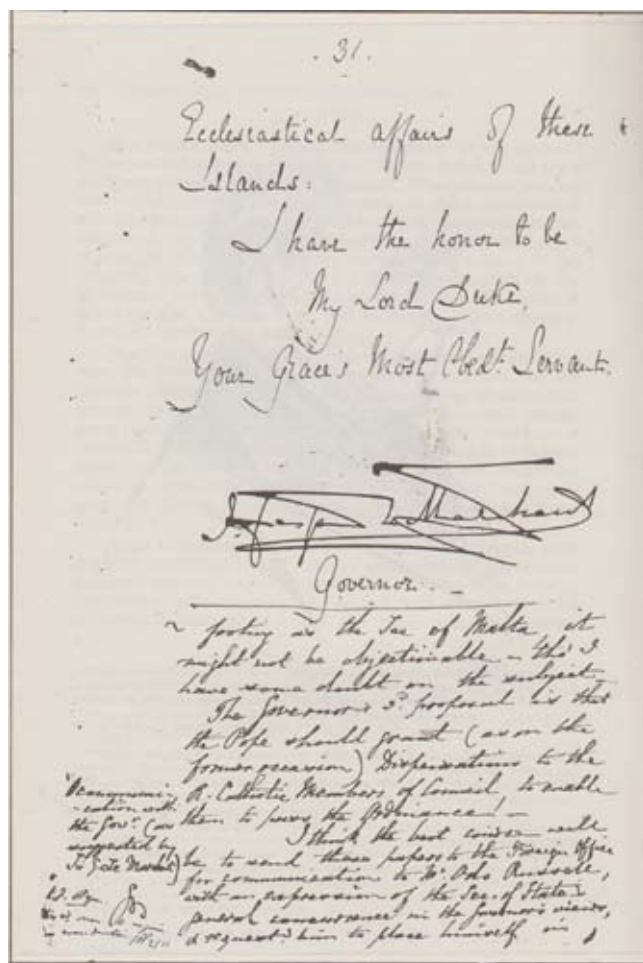


Fig. 6: The important letter signed by Sir John Gaspard Le Marchant (courtesy: National Archives, Malta)

## The Difficulties to Overcome

It was only after this unequivocal reply by the British that the Sacred Congregation for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs – the Congregation that dealt with matters in which religious and political interests were intermingled – started to tackle seriously the other related problems. These concerned the deficiency of a proper endowment for the bishopric; the candidate that was to be chosen as first bishop of Gozo; the setting up of a seminary; the never-ending resistance to the Diocese from certain ecclesiastics in Malta; and the perturbed political situation in the Papal States that further complicated matters.

The *second* difficulty was related to the *mensa*, a proper endowment for the bishopric. In the establishment of a diocese, the Vatican wanted to be rest assured that the bishop would have the financial means for himself and for his chancery. Many Gozitans were poor and the Church in Gozo did not have enough income from capital and property to provide for the running of a diocese. However after a fund raising campaign among the higher classes of the Gozitan society, enough funds were amassed to provide a temporary capital from the income of which a bishop would be able to survive.

A *third* hurdle was the finding of a suitable candidate for the bishopric. Local ecclesiastical circles were unanimous on their choice. The best candidate was Mikiel-Frangisk Buttigieg, at that time, archpriest at the Gozo Matrice, the highest position of the Gozo Church (see Fig. 7). Buttigieg – born in Qala, Gozo on 3 November 1793 and ordained priest on 21 December 1816 – was respected by everyone for a very simple reason. Beggars never knocked in vain at his door. In the parishes he directed, the churches were draped with fineries and embellished with decorations, for he provided the money that lacked; all sorts of pious practices were realised for he sustained and supported them. Above all, the Colonial Government found no fault in him either for it was known that he never got involved in affairs foreign to his ecclesiastical duties. By the beginning of 1863, the Vatican had no more doubts on the right choice.

The *fourth* problem that prolonged the process of the erection of the Diocese further was the provision for a seminary. One of the reform decrees of the



Fig. 7: Bishop Mikiel-Frangisk Buttigieg (courtesy: Cathedral Museum, Gozo)

Council of Trent had clearly laid down that the setting up of a seminary was at that time a *sine qua non* necessity with the establishment of every diocese. The problems related to such a foundation were threefold. First, there had to be a building spacious enough to accommodate boarding facilities and lecture rooms; secondly, there had to be enough funds for such a large-scale institution to function and survive; thirdly, there had to be a number of professors in ecclesiastical sciences to lecture to those preparing for priesthood.

These seemingly unsurmountable difficulties did not knock the Gozitans down. They suggested that the Church-owned Saint Julian Hospital for women, inaugurated in 1783, could be easily converted for that purpose. The hospital had become partly superfluous since 1838, when the Gozo Government Hospital opened its wards for females. The Saint Julian hospital offered its services free of charge, due to the number of bequests that the institution had received from benefactors since it began to function in 1454. The Gozitans argued that with the closure of the hospital, these funds could be transferred to the Seminary, with the permission of the Pope. The third difficulty was the hardest to crack. The Gozitans made contact with Pierre-Jean Beckx, the twenty-second General of the Society of

Jesus, seeking his help. After long discussions, it was agreed that he would happily send some Jesuit Fathers from Sicily to Gozo if a Seminary was to be established.

A *fifth* problem was brought about by a section of ecclesiastics in Malta who, with one letter after another to Rome, opposed the proposed Diocese. They even succeeded to win Archbishop Gaetano Pace-Forno, the Gozitan-born bishop of Malta and Gozo, to their side. These priests could not bear the fact that the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Malta was going to be diminished by the establishment of another Diocese. On 27 May 1862, during a private audience that Pope Pius IX conceded to Bishop Pace-Forno, the Pope himself invited the Bishop to terminate his opposition to the Gozitan petition.

Combined with these, there was a *sixth* problem related to the delay at the Vatican. At that time, the *Risorgimento*, the movement for the unification of Italy was at its best. Its leaders wanted to wipe off the map of the Italian peninsula the 1000-year old Vatican States and annex them to a united Italy. This was causing much worry to both the Pope and his congregations. The question of tiny Gozo was not a priority in comparison with this mammoth political and ecclesiastical issue. However, the Vatican eventually took the matter up.

### **An Auxiliary Bishop for Gozo**

In the meantime, Pietro Pace and Adrian Dingli put their whole weight in their respective spheres of influence to hasten a solution. By 15 August 1862, when most difficulties had been evened out, the Chapter of the Gozo Matrice and the leading inhabitants of Gozo sent a fifth petition to the Vatican to reaffirm their situation and accelerate matters.

As a matter of fact, a few months afterwards the Vatican took the first definite step. In the Secret Consistory of 16 March 1863, Pope Pius IX appointed the already mentioned Mikiel-Frangisk Buttigieg as Titular Bishop of *Lete in partibus* and Auxiliary Bishop of Malta with instructions to reside on the island of Gozo. Soon afterwards, he travelled to Rome where he was consecrated bishop on 3 May 1863 by Niccola Cardinal Clarelli-Paracciani. The ceremony took place at the church



Fig. 8: The Bull Singulari Amore (16 Sep 1864) (courtesy: Cathedral Archives, Gozo)

of the *Santissima Trinità a Montecitorio*, a church that eventually was demolished to make way for the chamber of deputies of the Lower House of the parliament of Italy.

On 14 June 1863, Bishop Buttigieg made his solemn entry in Gozo. Hundreds of Gozitans journeyed to Mġarr harbour and gave him a rousing welcome as soon as he set foot on the island. The main street from the harbour to Rabat, the town of Gozo, was bedecked with banners and palm fronds. As soon as the carriage carrying the bishop arrived next to the Governor's rest house, at the entry of Rabat, the horses were unbridled and the carriage was pulled up the whole length of *Strada Corsa* (Triq ir-Repubblika) and *Salità della Città* (It-Telġħa tal-Belt) by the populace in jubilation. Two local bands accompanied the cortege from the crossroads (Is-Salib tat-Tigrija) to the Matrice within the Citadel.

A *Te Deum* of thanksgiving was sung within the Matrice and the celebrations proceeded throughout that whole Sunday.

### **With Remarkable Love**

In the following months, events quickly headed to the desired conclusion. On 14 July 1864, the Vatican initiated the proceedings for the eventual establishment of the Diocese. On 14 September, Archbishop Alessandro Franchi, the already mentioned Secretary of the Congregation for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs, briefed the Pope on the final developments. That same morning, the Pope formally conceded to the diocese and the



Fig. 9: The solemn entry of Bishop Buttigieg (courtesy: Cathedral Chapter, Gozo)

redaction of the Bull, a papal document issued for important matters and referred to by its first two or three Latin words.

It is indeed an honour for Gozo that the initial words of the Bull that might have been suggested by the Pope himself declare the papal love for the Gozitans. *Singulari Amore* – With Remarkable Love, Pope Pius IX established Gozo and Comino into a separate Diocese directly subjected to the Holy See (see Fig. 8). It also established the Matrice of Santa Marija or mother-church of Gozo as the Cathedral of the new diocese. The Bull, dated 16 September 1864, is one of the treasured documents at the Gozo Cathedral Archives.

On Sunday, 23 October 1864, Bishop Mikiel-Frangisk Buttigieg made his solemn entry into the new Cathedral amidst the deafening cheers and enthusiastic applause of his devoted flock (Fig. 9).

One hundred and fifty years afterwards, the Diocese of Gozo, led by its eighth bishop, His Lordship Monsignor Mario Grech, still strives strenuously to fulfill its purpose – that can be summed up in one word: evangelisation – in face of the challenges brought about by modern times. Though one of the smallest in the Roman Catholic Church, with a population that, according to the 2011 census, has risen to 31,296, the Diocese is certainly trying to fulfill its purpose of being in a laudable way.

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