

Parish Priest and Confraternity: Conflict at the Parish Church of St Catherine's in Zejtun, Malta, 1769–1801

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Summary: The Council of Trent made the parish priest the head of the parish, but for a long time priests found it difficult to affirm their authority. Chief among their opponents were the confraternities led by the parish elites. This article examines the difficult relations between Don Francesco Maria Xuereb (1769–1801), parish priest of the Maltese parish of Saint Catherine's (in Zejtun), and members of the local confraternity of the Holy Sacrament, who led a revolt against him. The charges levelled against the priest were several, but the Sacra Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari found him innocent on all counts. The assistant clergy and the parishioners of Saint Catherine's would not, however, receive him back. When, against the warning of the bishop of Malta, Xuereb returned to his parish, the women took over the church and shut themselves in it, while the men stood outside in protest against the priest. In the end, a coadjutor was appointed to run the parish and when Father Xuereb died in 1801 he was named parish priest to everyone's delight.

As the French scholar Gabriel Le Bas, for one, long ago pointed out, pre-Tridentine confraternities were normally controlled by the laity,¹ but the Council of Trent put them under the control of the bishop, who had the right “to visit ... confraternities of laymen, even those that are called schools or are known by some other name.” The Council also decreed that their administrators “shall be bound to render to the ordinary each year an account of their administration, all customs and privileges to the contrary being set aside.”² These restrictions were further reinforced by the constitution *Quaecumque* (7 December 1604) of Pope Clement VIII, which laid down

Abbreviations used: AAM = Archiepiscopal Archives, Malta; ACM = Archivum Cathedrale Melitense; AIM = Archives of the Inquisition, Malta; AC = Atti Civili; AO = Acta Originalia; Arch. = Archives; ASV = Archivio Segreto Vaticano; CEM = Curiae Episcopalis Melitensae; Corr. = Corrispondenza; Libr. = Library; Misc. = Miscellanea; NLM = National Library, Malta; PA = Parish Archives; Proc. = Processi; RAC = Registrum Actorum Civilium; RS = Registrum Supplicationum; SS = Segreteria di Stato.

Currency note: 1 scudo = 12 tari = \$6 = £3.82 = €4.35

¹ Le Bas, *Études de Sociologie Religieuse*, vol. 2, 421. For the attempts to control the confraternities in medieval France see Vincent, *Les Confréries médiévales*, 165–184.

² Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 157. Flynn, “Baroque Piety and Spanish Confraternities,” 233–240. Terpstra, *Lay Confraternities and Civic Religion in Renaissance Bologna*, 222.

that a new confraternity had to have the written consent of the bishop, who examined, approved and, if necessary, corrected its statutes.³

Synods further controlled lay initiatives and imposed clerical leadership. The one held in Malta in 1703 by Bishop Davide Cocco Palmieri (1632–1711) decreed that the parish priest was to be the spiritual director of the confraternities, counseling the *confratelli*, sermonizing to them and hearing their confession.⁴ The pastor's leadership was symbolized in other ways. He explained annually the statutes in Maltese to the members.⁵ He possessed one of the three keys to the coffer where the money was kept⁶ and examined the account books of the *procuratori*.⁷ His presence was obligatory at the election of the *ufficiali*,⁸ whom he then installed in their new offices before vespers in front of the high altar.⁹ Together with the rector he proposed new members to the other *confratelli* and exhorted them to practice the devotions of the company.¹⁰ Furthermore, petitions made by the brotherhoods to the bishop's court, say to expose the sacrament in their oratory¹¹ or to have their statutes confirmed,¹² were referred to him for his comments.

There could be much cooperation in fact between parish priests and confraternities. At the parish of the annunciation (Balzan), the incumbents had no parsonage of their own and instead rented one with the 4 scudi the churchwardens gave them. On 1 October 1750, the incumbent Don Luigi Dinè, presented a memorial to the bishop explaining that the churchwardens had lately acquired an old and dilapidated house that should be rebuilt to serve as *casa parrocchiale*. The wardens assented, but as they had only 137 scudi 6 tari they demanded that the bishop order the confraternities of the Holy Rosary, the Holy Sacrament, and the Holy Souls in Purgatory to contribute another 70 scudi.¹³ The same cooperation was witnessed at St Mary's

³ Black, "Confraternities and the Parish." See also Hoffmann, *Church and Community*, 105–14.

⁴ Cocco Palmieri, *Synodus Dioecesana*, 134.

⁵ They were written in Italian, the literary language of Malta. PA (Zejtun) 39, "Notamenti Diversi. Ssmo. Sacramento," 28–32.

⁶ PA (Zejtun) 338, "Statuti Confraternità SS^o Sacramento," 14.

⁷ "I the undersigned ... testify that I have seen the accounts given by Don Domenico Hellul of the Vda. Confraternità de Agonizzanti of the same parish and I find that he had administered the *procura* legitimately and faithfully.... 23 May 1728. Giacomo Berti, parish priest of Qrendi." — AAM, Conti 17 (Qrendi), p. 27.

⁸ In 1770 Giuseppe Farrugia, *procuratore* of the confraternity of the SS. Sacramento of St Andrew's (Luqa), asked the bishop to ratify his election because the parish priest had refused to attend the *consulta generale* that had made the choice; AAM, RS 9, fol. 671r–v.

⁹ PA (Zejtun) 39: 26 July 1772.

¹⁰ PA (Zejtun) 338, pp. 11–12

¹¹ AAM, RS 5, fol. 883r–v.

¹² AAM, RS 5, fol. 719r–v.

¹³ AAM, RS 6, fols. 561v–563v.

(Qrendi). Antonio Camilleri had bequeathed all his property to the parochial church, but in 1761 his heirs, led by Giuseppe Agius, demanded it back. Don Antonio Mizzi, the pastor, could not allow the church to be “strangled.” He wholeheartedly supported the churchwardens’ appeal to Rome¹⁴ because Qrendi “is one of the poorest parishes in this dominion.”¹⁵

However, records indicate that the people demanded of the parish priest, in most instances an outsider from another parish, only that he said mass, preached, and administered the sacraments, for which they paid him handsomely through surplice fees and the tithes or parish tax.¹⁶ They resented his intrusion in anything else because the parish belonged to them. So a witness testified in 1773 that the parish church of Naxxar was built from its foundation by the alms of the people and that they still maintained it in all its needs.¹⁷ Moreover, the parishioners kept control over local ceremonial life, funding most of the liturgical services themselves.¹⁸

As was the case in various Catholic countries like Italy,¹⁹ France²⁰ and Catalonia,²¹ Maltese brotherhoods with their own separate oratories or altars, their cult, and their own endowments enjoyed much vitality and constituted a source of perpetual embarrassment to the hierarchy. There are no references in the Maltese archives that their members courted religious deviancy.²² They were, however, keen rivals to the parish priest for the leadership of the parish. At St Mary’s parish in Mosta the pastor had the right to choose one of the two *procuratori* of the confraternity of St Joseph,²³ but this was not the rule everywhere. At St Andrew’s parish in Luqa, for instance, in 1770 the *confratelli* of the confraternity of S. Rosario claimed that “owing to the suggestion and sinister information” of their parish priest the ecclesiastical court had chosen Angelo Mifsud as *procuratore*. This was of great prejudice to them because they had always enjoyed the right to make such election “as is known in the village.” The assessor of the curia sided with the brothers and the parish priest was left to nurse his defeat.²⁴ In a 1783 case the brothers of the confraternity of the Holy Crucifix at Cospicua pretended to exclude the parish priest from their meetings, but eventually admitted him only because Grand Master Em-

¹⁴ AIM, AC 525, fols. 61r–66v.

¹⁵ AIM, RAC, C4, fol. 64r.

¹⁶ Ciappara, “The Financial Condition of Parish Priests,” 97–100.

¹⁷ AIM, AC 546, fol. 51v.

¹⁸ Ciappara, “The Parish Community in Eighteenth–Century Malta.”

¹⁹ Black, “Confraternities and the Parish,” 1–26, esp. 22–26; Black, *Church, Religion and Society*, 133–135.

²⁰ Tackett, *Priest and Parish*, 199–202; Gutton, “Confraternities, *Curés* and Communities.”

²¹ Kamen, *The Phoenix and the Flame*, 169–170.

²² Black, “Confraternities under Suspicion.”

²³ AAM, RS 6, fol. 305v.

²⁴ AAM, RS 9, fols. 678v–679v.

manuel de Rohan de Polduc (r. 1775–97) issued a *bando* threatening them with exile from Malta should they remain adamant.²⁵

At St George's parish in Qormi, Father Gaetano Palma (1776–1793) also had to back down: the right to dower two poor girls belonged to the brotherhood of the Holy Viaticum and not to him.²⁶ Evidence shows serious conflicts in this parish between the incumbent and the confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament, among whose members Andrea Psaila, Giuliano Zammit and his two sons Paolo and Don Giovanni “do nothing else but incite their colleagues against their parish priest.”²⁷ Who was to pay, for example, the visiting confessors who were called from outside the village on the main feast days?²⁸ In which altar were relics to be preserved?²⁹ When were spiritual exercises³⁰ and the Forty Hours Adoration to be held?³¹ Was the litany of the saints to be sung before the vesper service or after the procession had returned to church?³² The *confratelli* expressed their disdain for Don Gaetano by donating him a candle of just the same weight as that of a confraternity brother on Candlemas (2 February).³³

These brotherhoods were a constant threat to parish priests. We are not speaking here of personal quarrels — the fact that in 1768 Orsola hit Don Giuseppe Speranza of Zebbug (Gozo) with a stone³⁴ or that in 1791 Rosa Mallia of St Helen's parish in Birchircara interrupted the provost as he was preaching from the pulpit³⁵ is of secondary interest to us. We are more concerned here with collective disorder, when the community banded together to reinforce its strength. So in 1737 the people and clergy of Senglea sent a memorial to the pope accusing Don Fortunato Vella of leading a scandalous life.³⁶ In another memorial for the year 1739 Don Giovanni Battista Crispo of Cospicua was castigated before the *Sacra Congregazione del Concilio* for

²⁵ Moreover the next day, 1 May, the rector of the *fratellanza* and four other members were summoned to the court of justice to be handed a copy of the law. They were to keep it in their archives so that no one would be ignorant of its contents; NLM, Libr. 429 (vii), fol. 149r.

²⁶ AAM, RS 10, fols. 344v–345v.

²⁷ AIM, RAC, C6, fol. 282r.

²⁸ AAM, RS 10, fols. 681v–683v.

²⁹ AAM, RS 10, fol. 270r–v.

³⁰ AAM, RS 10, fols. 377v–378v.

³¹ AAM, RS 10, fols. 623v–624v.

³² AAM, Informationes 5, no. 88.

³³ PA (Qormi), Liber Matrimoniarum 1756–1803, p. 257. See also CEM, AO 701, fols 429r–430v.

³⁴ AIM, RAC, C4, fol. 338r.

³⁵ The provost had reported her to the hospital authorities for bad language, as a result of which the child she was fostering was taken from her. When he was preaching on the duty of loving one's neighbour, she interrupted him saying: “Say one more lie!” AIM, Proc. 137, fols. 161r–188v.

³⁶ AIM, Corr. 26, fols 247r–248r, Cardinal Otthoboni to Inquisitor Durini, 30 Nov. 1737.

his greed that overshadowed his pastoral duties.³⁷ Don Giuseppe Marco Az-zopardi of St Philip's parish in Zebbug was another embattled parish priest. When he died in April 1762³⁸ he was buried in the presbytery in a grave he had ordered to be dug for him and his successors, but the parishioners protested that the tomb was beneath the high altar, contrary to the decrees of the synod of Bishop Cocco Palmieri. They petitioned the bishop to transfer the corpse to a grave in the choir, which was duly executed at about noon, but it was also rumored that bones of animals and other refuse had been thrown into the tomb, amidst injurious words addressed to the poor parish priest.³⁹

These examples point to an important consideration: during these conflicts with their flock parish priests could not rely on the assistant clergy who, being local men, identified with their fellow villagers. This opposition from the lesser clergy was not an innocuous nuisance to be shrugged off at will because in late-eighteenth-century Malta the number of priests was excessively high. In 1782 at Zebbug, fifty-four assistant priests formed a veritable army; at Naxxar there were forty-one; at Qormi, thirty-six.⁴⁰

The struggle between the parish priest of St Catherine's (Zejtun) and the members of the confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament provides us with more insights into what went on in these contests.⁴¹ The parish priest Don Andrea Xuereb died on 18 February 1769, just one day before the death of Bishop Rull.⁴² According to the vicar general, Canon Pietro Francesco Gristi, the best candidate both for his prudence and his exemplary life was Don Pietro Decelis, the confessor of the monastery of S. Maria Maddalena in Valletta.⁴³ The choice, however, fell quite unexpectedly on Don Francesco Maria Xuereb, who was in Rome at that time. This was an unfortunate choice because the new incumbent was known for his "rough manners," for which he had already been removed as rector of the sanctuary of Mellieha.⁴⁴ Xuereb was received as a *confratello* of the SS^o. Sacramento on 13 August and made his profession a week later,⁴⁵ but already that same year a long struggle between him and the

³⁷ ACM, Misc. 24, "Clero e popolo della Burmula contro paroco Crispo," fols. 430r–431r, 21 Nov. 1739.

³⁸ PA (Zebbug), Liber Defunctorum IV, p. 98.

³⁹ NLM, Libr. 14, pp. 373–374.

⁴⁰ AAM, Corr. 20, fol. 29r — "Stato della Chiesa di Malta, 1782."

⁴¹ For a dossier on the subject, consult AIM, Misc. 32, *Melevitana Remotionis Parochi per il clero e popolo della terra Zeitun, diocesi di Malta*. Rome 1785. See also AIM, Guze Galea collection, "Querele contro il Sacerdote D. Francesco Maria Xuereb Paroco della Chiesa di Malta circa l'amministrazione de SS^{mi}. Sacramenti," fols. 225r–260r. For his defense see ACM, Misc. 362, fols. 1r–80v.

⁴² PA (Zejtun), Liber Mortuorum 4, p. 153.

⁴³ AAM, Corr. 16, fol. 130r, Pietro Paolo Visconti to Canon Pietro Francesco Gristi, 30 Oct. 1769.

⁴⁴ AIM, Corr. 96, fol. 263r, Inquisitor Zondadari to Sant'Ufficio, March 1778.

⁴⁵ PA (Zejtun) 13, "Libro delle Consulte Generali dei fratelli del SS^o Sacramento," p. 95.

confraternity began to develop. On 24 September a *consulta privata*⁴⁶ met to elect the annual preacher for the *terza*, the sermon held on the third Sunday of each month, but the decision was deferred to 8 October because the parish priest could not attend. Xuereb excused himself by saying he was not feeling well, but informed the rector of the SSo. Sacramento that he would preach the sermons himself. That was an unacceptable decision because only the *confratelli* had the right to chose the preacher.⁴⁷ Xuereb attended the last *consulta* on 19 August 1770 and from then onwards it was open warfare.⁴⁸ Having succeeded in harnessing the support of the Rosary confraternity,⁴⁹ he raised the stakes and demanded to be paid for several services he had rendered to the *confraternità*, for instance for the office for the dead (*officio dei defonti*) and the sermon on the last day of each year. He also demanded to be given the candles on the induction of each *confratello* and *consorella* as well as the key of the oratory's door that gave access to the parish church. Only two of the 45 members of the *consulta generale* sided with him. The *procuratore* Salvatore Mifsud together with three other priests Don Tomaso Chetcuti, Don Giuseppe Mifsud and Don Andrea Cammilleri were chosen to represent the confraternity in the bishop's court and "other superior tribunals." Besides this, each member of the confraternity made a donation to finance the lawsuit.⁵⁰

Priests and people demanded for the removal of the parish priest. According to the canons of the cathedral the charges against him were enough to suspend a bishop from his diocese.⁵¹ Undeterred, Xuereb frequently picked quarrels with the company over how the bells were to be rung or vespers sung. He prohibited members from lighting the number of candles they wished. He would not tell them the route of the *viaticum* so that he went one way and the *confratelli* another.⁵² Other charges were decidedly more serious. He reported some of the parishioners to the government, but after being imprisoned they were found to be innocent. Another serious accusation was that he left the parish without appointing any priest to replace him in his absence. He would

⁴⁶ Unlike the *consulta generale*, which was attended by all the *confratelli*, the *consulta privata* consisted only of the elected *ufficiali* — the rector, two *assistenti*, two *procuratori*, the *segretario*, the eight *consultori*, the *depositario*, the *maestro dei novizzi* and the *ammonitore*.

⁴⁷ They nominated five preachers to elect one of them later: Don Michele Dimech, Don Michele Lacorte, the capuchin padre Anselmo, the friar minim padre Ferdinando and the Augustinian padre maestro Bonnic; PA (Zejtun) 13, pp. 96–97.

⁴⁸ PA (Zejtun) 13, p. 100.

⁴⁹ This may seem a trivial issue but as it involved precedence it mattered so much. The *confratelli* of the Holy Sacrament pretended that being members of the oldest *fratellanza* in the parish only they had the right to stand on the steps of the presbytery. This was keenly contested by the *rosarianti* who, with the consent of Xuereb, defied them. PA (Zejtun) 39: (16 March 1772).

⁵⁰ PA (Zejtun) 13, pp. 101–103.

⁵¹ ACM 16, fols. 323r–324r.

⁵² AIM, Corr. 96, fols. 262v–264r, Inquisitor Zondadari to Sant'Ufficio, March 1778.

not conduct the induction ceremony of the *confratelli*,⁵³ despite the decree issued by the bishop's court on 12 December 1771.⁵⁴ Nor would he enroll in the company those on the point of death.⁵⁵ He did not attend the singing of the memorial service for the deceased brothers and sisters before vespers on every third Sunday of the month.⁵⁶ He did not allow the brothers to collect alms in church;⁵⁷ nor did he bless the candles to be distributed to the confraternity brothers on Candlemas.⁵⁸ In 1772 he refused to give communion to the *confratelli*⁵⁹ and on *Corpus Christi* 1773 he denied the *confratelli* access to the church through the oratory. The bishop's prosecutor tried to persuade him to grant it, but failed. In the face of Xuereb's resistance, access was forcibly granted by breaking open the door.⁶⁰ That same year on All Souls' Day the priest did not bless the graves in the confraternity's oratory.⁶¹

The *Sacra Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari* suspended Xuereb from his duties on 12 May 1775. On 10 June the bishop's prosecutor together with three *alarii* (marshals) went to Zejtun to arrest the priest. They found him in the confessional, took him to the sacristy, and ordered him to hand the keys of the church to Don Giuseppe Mifsud, his sworn enemy. Xuereb went home and then took a carriage to Valletta, where he was kept under arrest in the convent of the grey friars.⁶² Although he was warned not to leave the place, the next day Inquisitor Lante reported to the *Sacra Congregazione dell'Immunità Ecclesiastica* that Xuereb had gone out of the convent to buy some food. Because it was rumored that he was trying to escape from Malta he was taken to the bishop's prisons at Birgu on 14 June at about 2 pm.⁶³

In 1780 Xuereb was in Rome to defend his case in person. He had the support of Grand Master Rohan who, in the absence of any local govern-

⁵³ PA (Zejtun) 39: 20 March 1774.

⁵⁴ PA (Zejtun) 13, p. 108.

⁵⁵ PA (Zejtun) 13, fol. 108v.

⁵⁶ PA (Zejtun) 39: 19 Sept. 1773,

⁵⁷ PA (Zejtun) 39: 20 Feb. 1774.

⁵⁸ PA (Zejtun) 39: 1774.

⁵⁹ PA (Zejtun) 13, p. 108.

⁶⁰ PA (Zejtun) 39: 16 May 1773.

⁶¹ PA (Zejtun) 39: 1773.

⁶² AIM, Proc. 135A, fol. 845r.

⁶³ AIM, Corr. 96, fol. 234v, Lante to the Sagra Congregazione dell'Immunità Ecclesiastica, 21 Aug. 1775. In his stead was placed Don Pietro Decelis, who resigned after fifteen days. He was succeeded by Don Salvatore Bonnici and then in 1776 by Don Giovanni Battista Correo. When Father Bonnici was in charge of the parish he made some remarks in the *liber status animarum* on the dishonest life of some priests and laymen who were the friends of Xuereb. The inquisitor Mgr Zondadari ordered these remarks to be erased; AIM, Corr. 38, fol. 47r-v, petition by Don Salvatore Xuereb, Don Gabriele Xuereb, Giuliano Mallia and other inhabitants of Zejtun to the pope, 27 December 1779.

ment, regarded local parish priests as the government's representatives with the right to register the rites of passage⁶⁴ and issue attestations to the poor to enable them to receive charitable assistance from the Order.⁶⁵ The Grand Master ordered his ambassador in Rome, the bailli Henri-François de Guiran la Brillanne (1727–1790), to help Xuereb in any way against the hatred and malign lies of his adversaries.⁶⁶ This support served Xuereb well because on 12 August 1785 the *Sacra Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari* acquitted him of all charges. Bishop Vincenzo Labini (1735–1807) of Malta was urged to try to reconcile the two sides, convince the people to receive their parish priest back with all the respect and reverence he merited, and to regulate the relations between the confraternity and the parish priest's rights so that no such problems would arise in the future.⁶⁷

Bishop Labini thus sent two preachers to the village who, for nine consecutive days, urged the local clergy and the parishioners to obey the orders of the congregation. He also called to his palace at Valletta those priests who were leading the revolt against their pastor and warned them to calm the people down. This was impossible, they responded, because the parishioners were decidedly against the parish priest. When Labini realized the difficulties that still existed he warned Xuereb not to go to the parish, but it was all to no avail—on Sunday, 16 October 1785 Xuereb started for Zejtun, where he arrived towards vespers time. On his arrival about 700 women shut themselves inside the church. The men gathered in front of his parsonage, protesting they did not want him back.⁶⁸ Someone was heard saying, “Not even God can enter the church.”⁶⁹ Xuereb was afraid and Marquis Carlo Antonio Barbaro (c. 1720–1798), who had accompanied him, warned him in those critical circumstances to go back to Valletta. When he mounted the coach, the shouting and the whistling increased; someone even threw stones.⁷⁰

With all these difficulties, Xuereb continued to believe he could one day return to his office. He was backed by Inquisitor Mgr Giovanni Filippo Gallarati Scotti (1747–1819), who warned Grand Master Rohan and Bishop Labini that the decree of the congregation was to be respected and the small group of the clergy who headed the revolt defeated.⁷¹ For his part the Grand Master issued a *bando* on 19 October 1785 ordering anyone who had any

⁶⁴ Ciappara, *Marriage in Malta*, 13–15.

⁶⁵ AAM, Corr. 12, p. 175, “Memorial by clergy and people of Cospicua to the pope,” 21 Nov. 1739.

⁶⁶ NLM, Arch. 1532, fol. 102v, Rohan to La Brillanne, 10 July 1780.

⁶⁷ AAM, Corr. 19, fol. 816r–v, Cardinal de Zelada to Bishop Labini, 12 Aug. 1785.

⁶⁸ The matter had taken a national aspect and there were even people from outside the parish to see how the affair would end, among whom Paolo Zahra and the carpenter Vincenzo Zarb, both from Cospicua. AAM, Corr. 19, fol. 822Rr–v, Bishop Labini to Cardinal De Zelada, Oct. 1785.

⁶⁹ AIM, Proc. 134A, fols. 13r–14r.

⁷⁰ AIM, Corr. 101, fol. 175r, Inquisitor Gallarati Scotti to Cardinal Boncompagni, 22 Oct. 1785.

⁷¹ ASV, SS (Malta) 165, Gallarati Scotti to Cardinal Boncompagni, 14 March 1786.

information about who had prevented the parish priest from entering the church to report this person within four days. Rohan was unwilling, however, to use force and would not send armed troops to the parish.⁷² On the other hand, Xuereb, with his characteristic lack of prudence, was doing nothing to win back the thrust of his flock.⁷³

On 28 January 1786 Bishop Labini visited the parish.⁷⁴ On his arrival, a great number of people, especially women, surrounded his coach and, because they thought Father Xuereb was accompanying the bishop, started shouting, “We don’t want the parish priest! We don’t want him!” Bishop Labini sent for the mayor of Zejtun and exhorted him to bring peace to the village. It was all in vain and the bishop was obliged to bring his visit to an end, having lost all hope that Xuereb might ever return to his duties as parish priest. The parishioners were so much against him that they would not even accept the *bollettino* or communion tickets signed by him, so the bishop ordered his vicar to sign them instead.⁷⁵

Bishop Labini, who held several meetings with Xuereb, decided that a coadjutor should be nominated. In his opinion, the coadjutor had to be completely independent of the parish priest since, if he were to be under his tutelage, the people would not consider him their shepherd and great spiritual scandals would result. Several names were proposed. The bishop would have liked Don Giuseppe Azzopardi, but when this diligent priest of exemplary life refused he proposed Don Giovanni Xuereb instead. The Inquisitor, Gallarati Scotti disagreed because the nominee was one of the leaders of the revolt against the parish priest. At this point Grand Master Rohan suggested Don Giuseppe Grech, a consultor at the royal court at Palermo. The inquisitor agreed with this nomination and the *Sacra Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari* asked the bishop whether Grech could reconcile the two sides, otherwise the parishioners would have obtained their goal — the expulsion of the parish priest.⁷⁶ This time it was Labini who refused this suggestion, but Cardinal Ignazio-Gaetano Boncompagni (1743–1790), the secretary of state in 1786, threatened him that if he continued making difficulties the pope would choose a coadjutor himself.⁷⁷

Xuereb himself suggested various other candidates, including *abate* Cilia, but none were accepted. At last, two candidates were found who had the necessary qualifications, Don Giacomo Tortella and Don Bert Caraffa. Inquisitor Gallarati Scotti decided in favour of the former. Tortella had been parish priest of St Mary’s (Mqabba) for thirty years and was praised by the

⁷² NLM, Arch. 1536, fols. 139r–140v, Rohan to La Brillanne, 22 Oct. 1785.

⁷³ AIM, Corr. 101, fol. 177r, Inquisitor Gallarati Scotti to Cardinal Boncompagni, 31 Dec. 1785.

⁷⁴ AAM, Pastoral Visitations 41, fols. 188r–192v.

⁷⁵ AAM, Corr. 19, fols. 822Dr–822Ev, Bishop Labini to Cardinal de Zelada, 11 Feb. 1786.

⁷⁶ AAM, Corr. 39, fol. 29r, Cardinal Antonelli to Inquisitor Gallarati Scotti, 31 July 1786.

⁷⁷ AIM, Corr. 73, fol. 206r–v, Cardinal Boncompagni to Inquisitor Gallarati Scotti, 3 Oct. 1786.

bishop for his pastoral work. Besides, and this was an important point, both Grand Master Rohan and the people of Zejtun were willing to accept him.⁷⁸ Tortella was nominated coadjutor on 12 January 1787 and was installed as parish priest in 1802 after Xuereb had died in Rome on 25 November 1801.⁷⁹

The crucial point about this sharp conflict that saw the people remove a pastor from his charge is that the Tridentine model of a centralized parish under the command of the pastor was not acceptable in eighteenth-century Malta.⁸⁰ In several Maltese parishes it was the confraternities, not the parish priest, who had the power to negotiate with the ecclesiastical authorities on behalf of the local faithful. When the parish priests tried to assert their authority, the confraternities fomented dissension between the faithful and the parish priest, who thus was unable to exercise the considerable powers given to him by the Tridentine decrees and post-Tridentine synods. In the specific case we have examined, the parish priest failed to win the sympathy of his subordinate clergy and of his parishioners, especially his parish elites who led the confraternities.⁸¹ These conflicts and the clergy's lack of control over confraternities created what Angelo Torre calls "the polyphony of local religious life."⁸²

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⁷⁸ AIM, Corr. 101, fol. 191r–v, Inquisitor Gallarati Scotti to Cardinal Boncompagni, 2 Dec. 1786.

⁷⁹ PA (Zejtun), Liber Mortuorum 7, p. 86. The last days of Xuereb were pathetic. He demanded to be elected a canon of the cathedral (ACM 16, fols. 321r–322v) but, though he had the backing of Rome, the chapter refused his request (AIM, Corr. 74, fol. 204r–v, Secretary of state to Inquisitor Gallarati Scotti, 27 Nov. 1787.). Accompanied by misery and his old age, Xuereb had decided to return to Malta when he fell ill and was taken to the Fatebenefratelli Hospital. In an undated letter he asked the pope with tears in his eyes to have mercy on him and help him enter a religious house where he could live till the end of his life. AAM, Corr. 25, fol. 424r–v.

⁸⁰ On this point see Bossy, "The Counter-Reformation and the People of Catholic Europe"

⁸¹ Ciappara, "Parish Priest and Community," 343–344.

⁸² Torre, "Politics Cloaked in Worship," 86.

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