

# THE ARCHIEPISCOPAL ARCHIVES, MALTA (\*)

by

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Archives are the historian's main source of information, his laboratory or workshop. In them he finds the remains of the past gathered, methodically classified and jealously preserved.

Ancient Greeks kept a depository, where such records and documents were preserved. It was styled *arkaton*, whence the latin word *archium* or *archivum*. This depository was within the precincts of the Temple and considered as a holy place.

Not only Greece, the cradle of culture in Europe, but also the more ancient civilizations of Israel, Phoenicia and Egypt had reserved fitting places for the proper and safe custody of documents. The Roman Empire, Medieval States and Modern Nations continued to appreciate the value of preserving important records in archives.

Fully aware of the need of such safe custody of Sacred Vessels and of the Holy Books, the Church sought out for that purpose the house of some worthy Christian family.

Since the year of Christ 93, Pope Clement appointed for Rome 7 notaries to record and keep for future ages the sayings and sufferings of the Martyrs. Those records were joined to the Holy Scriptures and kept in some secret room in the Catacombs.

We are reliably informed of the existence of church archives in the Lateran Basilica of Rome since Pope Anterus's pontificate: 235-6. Similar archives existed also in other churches outside Rome. Such gave rise to the Episcopal Archives. Monasteries since the 5th century followed suite in keeping archives. We owe to monasteries the *scriptorium* (manuscript-room) and the *armarium* (book-chest).

For 12 centuries since the fall of the Western Empire (A.D. 476), monks were almost the sole custodians not only of Sacred Codes, but also of Greek and Latin classics, beautiful chirographs, documents on the rights of peoples, privileges of kings and treaties of nations.

The Church in Malta, too, kept important archives. Unfortunately they do not go further back than the 15th century. This is the reason why we cannot write the earlier history of our Church on written evidence, but on oral tradition and foreign sources.

Church Archives in Malta are the following: the Archiepiscopal Archives, the Cathedral Archives, the Inquisitors' Archives, the Parish

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\* This paper was read by the President of the Malta Historical Society during its General Meeting held on the 24th January 1974

and Collegiate Churches Archives and the Monastic Archives. I shall give here a brief account of the Archiepiscopal Archives, which I catalogued in 1965 and updated in the last few days.

I divided these Archives into two big sections: the Secretariat Section and the Curia Section.

### Secretariat Section

The first section includes the volumes kept in the Secretariat, which are classified into 15 groups, whose Latin or Italian titles are given below according to the mark on the spines of the volumes.

Group I — *Melivetana: Positiones, Sententiae etc.* — comprises a collection of proceedings concerning ecclesiastical bodies and individuals adjudicated in Rome, Church administration and privileges. It comprises 30 volumes ranging from 1687 to 1756.

Group II — *Brevia et Constitutiones Apostolicae: Acta et Epistulae Episcoporum* — is a collection of Papal Letters sent to local ecclesiastical authorities as well as Acts and Letters of the Bishops of Malta from the year 1541 to 1888. It contains 170 volumes, of which two (115, 116) are marked *Acta Secretariae*. In the year 1889, this classification was subdivided into two new branches, namely, the following Groups III and IV.

Group III — *Rescripta S. Sedis* — comprises the rescripts and favours granted by the various Sacred Roman Congregations to bodies and persons in Malta from 1889 to date. It consists of 107 volumes, as well as 11 volumes of Indexes and 5 volumes of petitions for subsidies.

Group IV — *Epistulae Secretariae* — includes the correspondence from and to bishops from 1889 to date, grouped in 60 volumes. Up to 1916 this correspondence, irrespective of origin, or destination, was mixed up. Since that year, this group has been divided into five parts:

- (a) Correspondence with the Holy See, the Apostolic Delegate or the Apostolic Nuncio;
- (b) Correspondence with the Cathedral Chapter;
- (c) Correspondence with the Government;
- (d) Correspondence with private persons;
- (e) Ecclesiastical appointments.

Group V — *Visitationes Apostolicae et Pastorales* — contains the reports drawn since 1570 by bishops or Vicars General or Capitular, after their pastoral visitations. Volumes 3-5 are copies of Mgr. Dusina's apostolic visitation carried out in 1575. Four volumes, containing inventories of Church property, pious foundations and burthens, are added to this group.

Group VI — *Synodus, Concilia et Statuta Capitularia* — is a collection of manuscripts and printed books — 15 volumes — containing acts and decrees of diocesan synods and the Statutes of the Chapters of Malta.

Group VII — *Ecclesia et Status* — contains some correspondence between the Bishops and the Government concerning relations between Church and State. There are 12 volumes in all.

Group VIII — *Litterae Testimoniales* — being 16 volumes of official letters issued by the Bishop or his Vicar General since 1897 to candidates for the admission to Religious Orders or for the acquisition of church benefices.

Group IX — *Litterae Dimissoriales*, or letters of recommendation given by the Ordinary to his subjects who receive Holy Orders in other dioceses. It goes from 1897 to date, and contains 5 volumes.

Group X — *Regesta Ordinationum* — contains 14 volumes, wherein a great part of Holy Ordinations are recorded.

Group XI — *Documenta SS Ordinationum* — gathers the documents required for the reception of Holy Orders. This collection, consisting of 32 volumes, goes back to 1915.

Group XII — *Confirmationes* — comprises 44 volumes, containing records of confirmations administered by bishops in Malta since 1831.

Group XIII — *Praecipui Eventus* — collects in 15 volumes documents, descriptions and publications concerning some chief ecclesiastical events in the diocese since 1860.

Group XIV — *Contentiones* — contains 5 volumes of documents regarding litigations between ecclesiastics and ecclesiastical bodies.

Group XV — *Relationes de Paroeciis* — consists of 2 volumes containing

annual reports drawn by parish-priests from 1921 to date.

Group XVI — *Professiones Fidei* — contains 4 volumes of Profession of Faith by adults received in the Catholic Church.

Group XVII — *Statistics* — the group comprises statistical data of births, confirmations, marriages and death in each parish; information about the spiritual status of each parish, the number of priests (diocesan and regular), of nuns, of church schools, orphanages, hospitals and hospices.

Group XVIII — *Miscellanea* — a collection of documents relative to Diocesan Boards, Nuns, the Seminary, Sacred Music and so forth.

Group XIX — *Maltese Episcopal Conference* — the acts, correspondence, and documents belonging to the Maltese Episcopal Conference have been included in this group. They close the Secretariat section.

### **Curia Section**

The Curia Section has been subdivided by me into 15 groups.

Group I — *Atti Civili* — contains decrees, pious foundations, ecclesiastical appointments and resignations, authorizations and so forth. It goes from 1614 up to date and comprises 196 volumes.

Group II — *Suppliche* — is a collection of over 400 volumes, containing petitions for the buying and selling of church property, building of churches and presbyteries, reduction or redemption of burdens, correction of official records and so forth. The first volume bears the date 1668.

Group III — contains instruments for the erection and conferment of parishes since the 16th century. Grouped with it are the records of the erection of Collegiate Chapters, as well as the conferment of canonries.

Group IV — is a collection of Curia Edicts, Circular and Pastoral Letters of a religious, liturgical, devotional and social character, from the year 1827 up to date.

Group V — concerning Marriages, is subdivided into 4 classes:

(i) Applications filed by parish-priests for marriages of their parishioners;

(ii) Marriage bans, or public notices, made in churches, of intended marriages. They go from 1895 up to date: 101 volumes in all.

(iii) Marriage Dispensations consisting in the relaxation of canonical impediments to marriage. There exist 78 volumes of dispensations from the impediment of mixed marriages from 1889 to date; and 120 volumes of dispensations from other impediments from 1894 to date.

(iv) Certificates of freedom to marry in the diocese from 1892 to date: 229 volumes in all plus others of the 17th and 18th centuries and certificates to marry abroad, from 1892 to 1973 over 140 volumes.

Group VI — In this case of a judiciary character one finds, albeit separated from each other, two collections:

(i) Civil cases adjudicated in the Bishop's Court from the beginning of the 16th century up to 1775, when the Bishop's jurisdiction was limited by the Holy See; and

(ii) Matrimonial Cases, or proceedings for the declaration of invalidity of marriages and for the dispensation from non-consumated marriages.

Group VII — contains (1) the *Depositaria* or the record of the deposits of sums of money made by the Administrators of Ecclesiastical property for safe custody. There are 32 volumes, ranging from 1604 to 1848.

(ii) the proceedings for the concession of long-leases since the year 1705;

(iii) the accounts kept by the Curia Cashier: including revenues, payments of salaries and expenses.

Group VIII — *Benefici* — contains a collection of documents and proceedings for the conferment of benefices and Sacred Patrimonies, since the 16th century. It comprises over 100 unbound volumes and over 20 bound volumes. This group has been professionally catalogued in 1958 by Can. V. Borg.

Group IX — *Inventari* — comprises detailed lists of ecclesiastical furniture, vestments and goods belonging to the churches of the Diocese.

Group X — contains the canonical proceedings for the canonization of saintly men who resided in Malta.

Group XI — encloses the Secret Archives of the Vicariate.

Group XII — *Miscellanea* — is a collection of documents of various nature not included in their proper places. It started in the 16th century.

Three Departments attached to the Curia have their own archives. These are:

Group XIII — (a) the Office for the administration of Masses, where stipends for manual masses and funds for pious legacies are deposited, and applications of masses are distributed among the secular clergy: the office was inaugurated in 1918 and has 64 volumes;

Group XIV — (b) the Office *Revisione dei Conti*, which has for its task the auditing of all ecclesiastical administrations in the Diocese: it started in 1829 and has 243 volumes;

Group XV — (c) the *Cassa Pie Amministrazioni*, a sort of Church Bank, in which funds pertaining to churches and ecclesiastical bodies are deposited with interest for safe custody. It replaced the old *Depositoria* in 1848. All records since that year are to be found in its 210 volumes. To this Cassa is attached the administration of devolved and vacant benefices, amounting to 150 in all.

Following the McKenzie report there will surely be some alterations and additions in the Archiepiscopal Archives, particularly in the financial branch.

This short description of the Archiepiscopal Archives, will undoubtedly be a useful research aid to our present and future historians.