

A GLIMPSE AT THE 1798/1800 REGISTERS IN THE QORMI PARISH ARCHIVES

Joseph F. Grima

When delving in local parish archives, the general expectation is that the majority of the entries tend to help

1. find details to compile a history of the locality in question;
2. trace the origins, family tree and movements of individuals under review;
3. trace information to compile national art and architectural history;
4. perhaps find some mention of customs and practices which have become part of local folklore.

However, occasionally, stray comments, entries or minutes of meetings may throw some light on particular national events. The archives of the Qormi Parish of St George are no exception to these norms.

Until 1936, there was only one parish in Qormi, a parish which was already in existence in 1436.¹ The first register in its archives dates back to 1563² and, on the whole, the collection – which is badly in need of a proper classification – consists of an appreciable number of registers showing mainly lists of births, marriages, deaths, foundations and the religious masses carried out in the parish. There are also the registers of the five confraternities which include minutes of meetings and interminable lists of masses said for the repose of the souls of the faithful who were members. This short communication is, however, limited to the Minutes Book of one confraternity and the registers for births, marriages and deaths pertaining to the French period, that is, 1798-1800.

1 Cf. J.F.Grima (ed.), *Il-Knisja Parrokkjali ta' San Ġorġ Hal Qormi – Erba' Sekli ta' Storja*, (Malta, 1984), 5, 9 and 27; *Idem*, "Meta Twaqqfet il-Parrocca ta' San Ġorġ f'Hal Qormi?", in *Bejnietna*, No. 15, (Malta, 1983).

2 Grima (1984), 109, where the first entries from this register have been reproduced in photographic form. Cf. also *idem*, *Mill-Istorja ta' Hal Qormi*, (Malta, 2001), 1, 56-7.

Confraternity Meetings

The Minute Books of the confraternities' general meetings, known as *Consulti*, are generally dull and uninspiring. The members usually met just once annually, or even just every two years, to elect their officials who seem to have carried out the business of their confraternity without the need to convene general meetings. However, in the Minute Book of the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of the Blessed Rosary for 1775-1960, there are two notable exceptions, both intimately connected with the French occupation of Malta between 1798 and 1800.

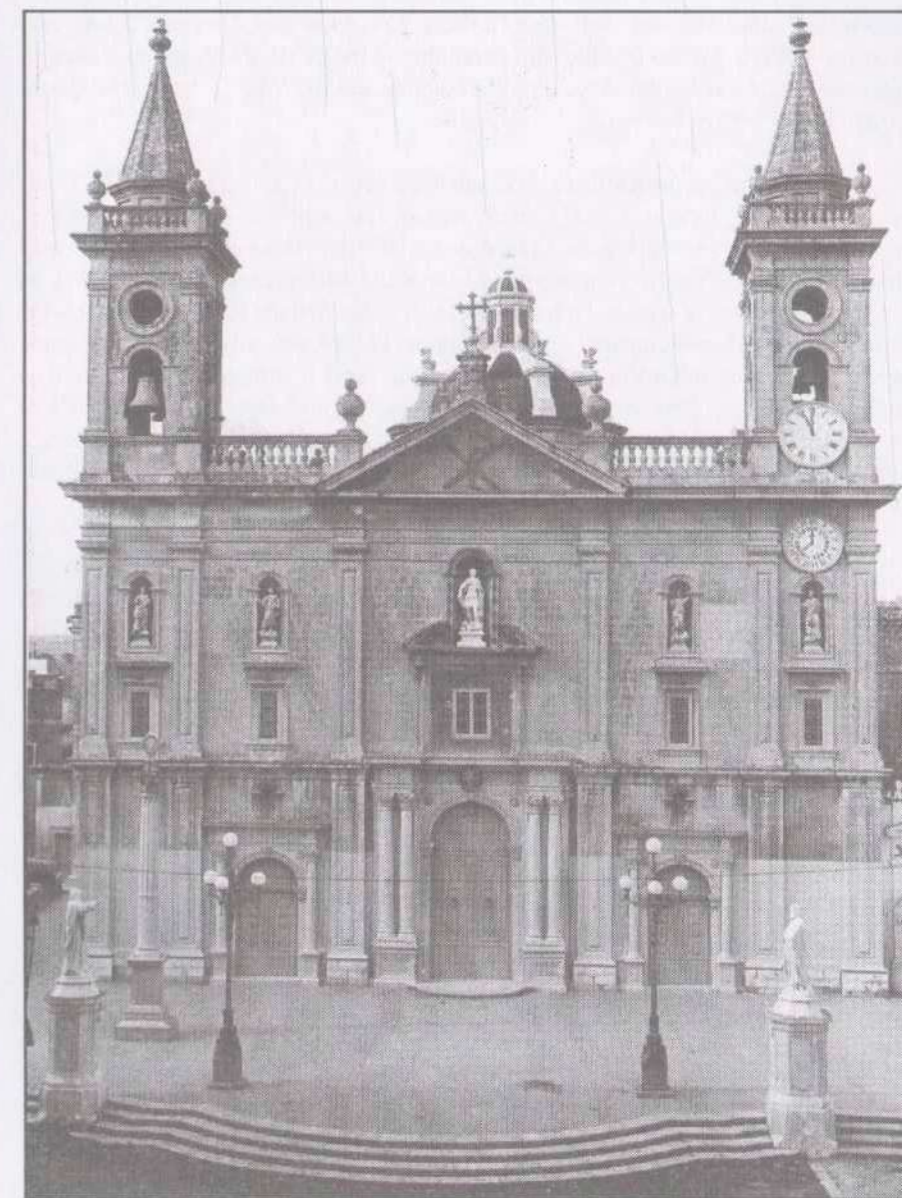
The first entry is dated 16 February 1800³ and refers to the French army's occupation of Qormi on Sunday, 10 June 1798 when the soldiery seemingly looted private houses. The meeting, held twenty months after the event, was convened to discuss what had happened to a sum of money collected for the celebration of masses for the souls of dead members, known as the *Cassa de Messe*, which had been in the possession and care of Salvatore Sciberras, the administrator of the *Cassa* and, naturally, a member of the confraternity. It was customary for these procurators to keep such sums at their own private residences and Sciberras was simply following the custom practised by his predecessors. Sciberras held that the invading French had ransacked his house and had stolen everything including the *cassa de messe*, with the exact minuted words being *quale casa fu' spogliata del tutto*. The minutes also note that all this was public knowledge.

Four priests, also members of the confraternity, corroborated Sciberras's version of events. They were Rev. Giuseppe Micallef,⁴ Rev. Benigno Gauci,⁵ Rev.

³ A[rchive] of the P[arish] of St G[eorge] Q[ormi], Meetings of the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Blessed Rosary, ff. 23v-25r, 16 February 1800. Cf. C. Testa, *The French in Malta* (Malta, 1997), 95, fn. 2.

⁴ Rev. Giuseppe Micallef (1752-1821) was also a medical doctor and one of the Qormi leaders in the fight against the French. Cf. Grima (1984), 101, 127 and 150. He should not be mixed up with another Qormi-born Rev. Giuseppe Micallef who was a parish priest of Gharghur between 1783 and 1791. Cf. M. J. Schiavone (ed.), *Il-Knejjes Parrokkjali ta' Malta u l-Festi Taghhom* (Malta, 1993), I, 158. See F. Pace, *Il-Gargur – In-Nies u l-Knejjes tieghu* (Malta, 2000), 90, 98 & 102 (fn. 27), who, quoting the Gharghur Parish Archives, says that he died on 6 August 1791 and is buried in the Gharghur Parish Church.

⁵ Rev. Benigno (popularly known as *Dun Belinn*) Gauci (1742-1836) was the Vice Parish Priest and one of the supervisors of provisions for the Qormi regiment during the fighting against the French. Cf. Grima (1984), 127 and 150; Testa (1997), 422; W.L. Zammit, *Il-Mexxejja Maltin tal-Kungress Malti 1799-1800* (Malta, 1999), 65, fn. 13.



Parish Church of St. George, Qormi, ransacked by the French on Sunday, 10 June 1798

Giuseppe Psaila⁶ and Rev. Salvatore Casha.⁷ Two witnesses, Giorgio Chircop and Francesco Grixti, agreed that the sum pertaining to the *Cassa de Messe* amounted to 108 scudi 8 tari and 8 grani. Presiding the meeting was the Vice-Curate of the Qormi parish, Rev. Pietro Schembri.

I have not as yet been able to ascertain the location of Sciberras's house. However, this meeting indicates quite forcibly that an appreciable amount of looting was carried out in private residences. The minutes of the next meeting⁸ also expressly state that the French soldiers went round to loot the village streets, a quite common occurrence in times of war, and it is not at all surprising that the better-looking houses were pillaged. This document remains, as far as I know, the only concrete evidence of specific looting in Qormi. Very probably, the same treatment was meted out to similar residences. However, a *relazione* by Rev. Ignatius Debono of Vittoriosa to the last Inquisitor of Malta, Mgr. Giulio dei Conti Carpegna, also mentions general looting, wanton killing of animals, and rape by the French in Naxxar, Birkirkara, Lija, Balzan and Qormi.⁹

Writing in 1928,¹⁰ Professor Guzè Galea said that it was traditionally¹¹ held that Qormi did not fare too badly at the hands of the French and, although the small church of St Francis de Paola was looted, the parish church itself was spared. He also notes that the beautiful church vestments and church silver still exist. Actually, although he was right in his remarks about the 18th century liturgical vestments, he was rather off the mark with regards to the silver since few of the present silver objects in

6 Rev. Giuseppe Psaila was born in 1762 and died in 1841. Cf. Grima (1984), 150.

7 Rev. Salvatore Casha was born in 1762 and died in 1846. Cf. *ibid.*

8 APGQ, Meetings Rosary, ff. 25v-26v, 15 April 1800. I published this document in 1984 but without really analysing it. Cf. Grima (1984), 143-5; Testa (1997) refers to it on p. 69, fn. 13 and p. 95, fn. 2.

9 This *relazione* was the subject of a lecture delivered by Professor V.G. Griffiths on 21 January 1999. The text of this lecture is being published *infra*.

10 G. Galea, *Il-Knisja ta' Hal Qormi - Bicċja Storja* (Malta, 1928), 12-3.

11 His exact words are *ix-xjüh Qriema*, literally meaning *the old people of Qormi*. Naturally he was referring to oral tradition transmitted from one generation to another.

the church seem datable to pre-1800.¹² In fact, the meeting held by the Rosary Confraternity on 15 April 1800¹³ amply shows that Galea was utterly mistaken in his assertion.

This particular meeting was held to discuss the accounts and assets pertaining to the confraternity and it includes a written statement signed by five persons in front of Notary Aloisio Saverio Grech on 10 March 1800. The five signatories affirmed that, when the French invaded Malta in June 1798, a great number of soldiers¹⁴ went round the village streets but the majority entered the parish church of Qormi and despoiled it of the silver, gold and other objects¹⁵ which were in place for the religious solemnity of the Octave of the Feast of *Corpus Domini*. The statement goes on to say specifically that the French despoiled¹⁶ cases found near the altar of the Holy Rosary from all the silver objects contained therein and also carried away the silver oil-lamp suspended in front of the altar. The signatories were Stanislaus Gatt, Rev.

12 For a biography of Qormi-born Guzè Galea cf. L. A. Grasso, *Guzè Galea 1901-1978* (Malta, 1998); L. Cuschieri, *Il-Professur Guzè Galea 1901-1978* (Malta, 1991); a special number of *Il-Malti* (Malta, 1981); M. J. Schiavone, L. J. Scerri (eds.), *Maltese Biographies of the Twentieth Century* (Malta, 1997), 291. Prof. Galea, a former Vice-President of the Malta Historical Society, was best known for his literary efforts, especially his historical novels, though his historical contributions are not to be ignored.

13 Cf. note 8, *supra*.

14 *Ibid.* The exact words are *una loro colonna consistente di gran numero di soldati*.

15 *Ibid.* The word used to signify 'objects' is *utensili*.

16 *Ibid.* For 'despoiled', the Minutes record the words *aver violentato*.



The church of St. Francis de Paola, Qormi, commonly held to have been looted by the French

Benigno Gauci, Benedetto Scicluna, Ignazio Farrugia and Emanuele Gellel.¹⁷ The first four reaffirmed their testimony under oath on 26 March 1800 in front of the same Notary Grech.¹⁸

This document amply proves that the Qormi parish church was despoiled of its gold and silver ware. It also indicates quite strongly that it was not a question of looting at an individual level by the French soldiery but that pillaging was carried out at least at regimental level. What is more surprising is that the Minutes of the *Consulti* of the senior village confraternity, that of the Blessed Sacrament, are completely silent about the matter.¹⁹ This confraternity must have been a loser too because, after all, the feast of *Corpus Domini* was celebrated by this confraternity and various objects pertaining to it would have been exhibited on the church's main altar and its own altar situated directly opposite that of the Holy Rosary. A plausible explanation is that the Sacrament confreres simply accepted a *fait accompli* without much ado whilst their Rosary counterparts wanted to place their losses on record.

¹⁷ Rev. Benigno Gauci has already been noted; cf. note 5 *supra*. Stanislaus Gatt (c.1743-1811) had been the local jurat from 1778 to 1781, and Qormi mayor in 1781-84 and 1797-98; cf. NLM, Univ 33, ff. 359r-v and 431r-v; 34, ff. 30v, 31r-v, 78r, 162r; 35, f. 441r. AOM 582, f. 277v; 583, f.305r; 584, f. 193v; 585, ff. 95v-96r; 586, f. 252v; 587, f. 280v; 623, f. 94v. For short biographies of Gatt, cf. G. Cardona, 'Stanislao Gatt', in *Heritage* (Malta, 1979), II, 619-20 and W. L. Zammit (1999), 64-5. Cf. also Testa (1997), 175, 422 and 553. Gatt's house in St Catherine Street, Qormi is still standing and features a commemorative marble plaque on the facade. Emanuele Gellel later (1801-04) became the *Luogotenente* of Qormi but was relieved of his duties and position because of maladministration. Cf. Cardona (1979), 620. Gellel is the protagonist of a 1961 historical novel by Qormi-born Gużè Cardona (1922-88), a well-known Maltese literary figure. There is no available information, at least at the time of writing, on Benedetto Scicluna and Ignazio Farrugia.

¹⁸ Notary Aloisio Saverio Grech carried out his professional work between 1793 and 1822. Cf. *Malta Government Gazette*, Supplement X, 8 February 1952, vi (110).

¹⁹ APGQ, Minutes of the Meetings of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament 1775-1960, unpaginated.

Other Registers

A look through the *Liber Baptizatorum*²⁰ shows that the number of births fluctuated but was never less than 130 every year between 1797 and 1801, although in the period September 1798/August 1799, the first full year of the Maltese insurrection against the French, the number decreased to just 102. This is shown quite clearly in the following two tables:

Table 1

1797 - 143 baptisms
1798 - 182 baptisms
1799 - 138 baptisms
1800 - 167 baptisms
1801 - 130 baptisms

Table 2

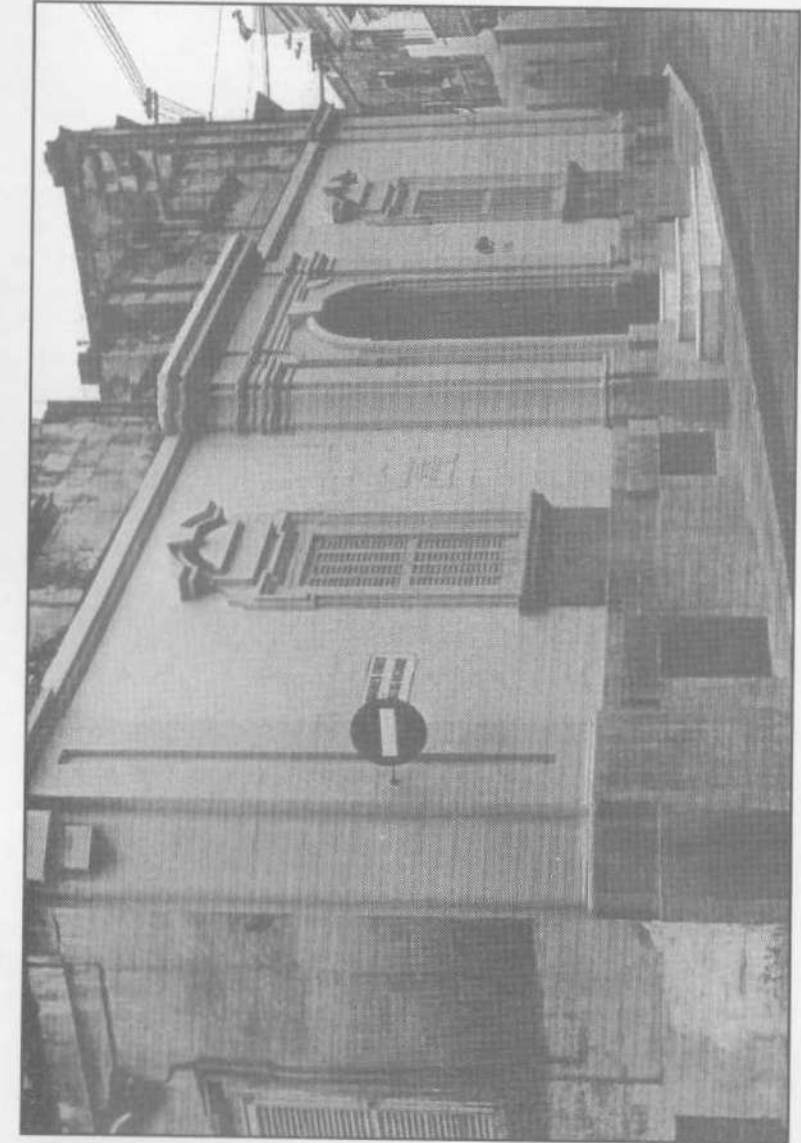
September 1797 to August 1798 - 137 baptisms
September 1798 to August 1799 - 102 baptisms
September 1799 to August 1800 - 137 baptisms
September 1800 to August 1801 - 131 baptisms

However, the number of illegitimate births did increase somewhat. In the periods preceding and following the siege, there is recorded only one such birth in all but eleven are registered during the two-year siege period. War, privation and death do not seem to have considerably lessened to any degree the local sexual ardour. This register also records a number of foreign-sounding surnames like Lorienti, Cotroffo, Hyman, Mirabato, Di Batta, De Gregorio, Rodo, Roscica, Taglia, Francischi, Ruper, Gamcou, Francis (which could also be the Maltese word denoting 'Frenchman'), and Campis.

In the *Matrimoniorum* register,²¹ the number of marriages doubled from an average of 23 before the anti-French outbreak, to 52 in the last year of the siege. However, this number remained fairly constant in 1801 and 1802.

²⁰ APGQ, *Liber Baptizatorum 1772-1806*, ff. 168v-218r, *passim*.

²¹ APGQ, *Liber Matrimoniorum 1756-1803*, 230-86, *passim*.



The residence of Staislao Gatt, one of the Qormi leaders against the French

A look at the register for deceased persons²² for this period also yields some interesting information as shown in the following table:

September 1796 to August 1798: 106 deaths
 September 1798 to August 1800: 594 deaths
 September 1800 to August 1802: 119 deaths

The number escalated by over 560 per cent when one compares the 'peace' years to the two-year siege period. However, this does not mean that all the deceased were all born at or were normally domiciled at Qormi. The village had welcomed within its parochial limits a large number of displaced persons who had either fled from or had been forced to leave Valletta, Floriana and the Three Cities (Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua). During the period 1798-1800, the only year for which the provenance of every deceased person is spelt out is the year 1799 when no less than 463 deaths are recorded out of which 168 were not Qormi people. Their provenance is recorded thus: Valletta - 106; Cospicua - 24; Floriana - 13; Senglea - 10; Vittoriosa - 8. The others came from Zebbug (in Malta) - 3, Siggiewi - 1, and Birkirkara - 1. A certain Joannes de Sylva is recorded as hailing from Portugal.²³ However, it has to be pointed out that, even though due allowance is made for the registration of non-Qormi people in the *Defunctorum* register, it is a fact that the population of the town decreased from 3595 in 1797 to 3186 in 1805.²⁴

Yet it must be stressed that this decrease in population did not pertain solely to Qormi but was present in all the other towns and villages. By way of comparison and to quote but one example, at Attard - a much smaller village - the number of deaths was 22 in 1797 and 19 in 1801 but had shot up to 80 in the intervening 1799,²⁵ an increase of about 400 per cent. Again, the population of this village decreased from 849 in 1797 to 731 in 1805.²⁶

²² APGQ, *Liber Defunctorum B 1778-1822*, unpaginated.

²³ De Sylva is also mentioned by Testa (1997), 358, fn. 5.

²⁴ Figures quoted from S. Fiorini, 'Status Animarum I: A Unique Source for 17th and 18th Century Maltese Demography', *Melita Historica*, viii No. 4 (Malta, 1983), Table One foil. 343.

²⁵ H. Frendo, *Attard - The Life of a Maltese Casale* (Malta, 1997), 26.

²⁶ Fiorini (1983), Table I foil. 343.

Apart from the 'Portuguese' entry, only two notable deaths are recorded. The first was the demise of the Qormi parish priest, Rev. Joseph Caruana, who passed away on 3 April 1799.²⁷ The second is an entry about Vincent Remix who was executed by firing squad at Santa Venera in front of Casa Leone and then buried in the Qormi parish church on 10 February 1799. But this entry poses a problem. A marginal note says that Ignatius Ellul from Vittoriosa died on the same day,²⁸ and Ellul is known to have been executed. Were two persons executed or is it possible that Remix and Ellul were one and the same person?

²⁷ Rev. Joseph Caruana had been parish priest of Qormi since 1794. Cf. Grima (1984), 135.

²⁸ The entry reads thus: "Vincens Remix per sententia Judicij in platea vulgo d.ta la Torretta fuit fucilatus et in Ecclesia sepultus." Cf. APGQ, *Liber Defunctorum, o.c.* Ignatius Ellul was the main protagonist in the Qormi-born Ġużè Muscat Azzopardi's historical novel *Nazju Ellul* (Malta, 1909), where his innocence is discovered after his execution. No mention of guilt or innocence is mentioned in the parochial entry, as is to be expected after all. For a biography of G. Muscat Azzopardi, known as "The Father of Maltese Literature", cf. G. Cassar Pullicino, *Ġużè Muscat Azzopardi* (Malta, 1991).