The cult of St. Catherine of Alexandria

The great cultus of Catherine of Alexandria has its roots in the first centuries of the Christian era. No historical particulars of her life have survived and her legend is so extravagant and preposterous, that earnest endeavours have been made to prove that she never existed outside the mind of some Greek writer who first composed what he intended to be simply an edifying romance. But great cults do not spring from mere fiction, noble and edifying though it might be. The legend relates, that Catherine was an Alexandrian woman of noble birth renowned for her beauty, wisdom and courage. She protested to the Emperor, called Maxentius, about the worship of idols. Fifty philosophers tried to sway her from her faith which she defended with so much zeal and conviction that she demolished all their arguments and they were burnt alive for their failure. Maxentius then sought her hand in marriage, but she refused him with the result that she was beaten for two hours on end and imprisoned. In her cell, she was fed by a dove and Christ appeared to her in a vision. Condemned to death, attempts were made to break her on a spiked wheel, but it broke down and flying splinters killed some of the spectators, while Catherine herself remained unhurt. This miracle brought about the conversion of two hundred spectators who were straightaway beheaded. Eventually, Catherine herself was beheaded, but milk not blood flowed from her severed veins. Her body was carried by angels to Mount Sinai and buried there. Today, an Orthodox monastery stands on the reputed burial site and her shrine has from the earliest times been a centre of pilgrimages from all over the Christian world. (1)

The veneration of St. Catherine in the Maltese Islands, has always been great, but due to the dearth of documentary and archaeological evidence relating to the early medieaval history of Malta, it is impossible to say when her cult was first introduced. It seems safe to assume, however, that it is of considerable antiquity. It has been surmised that it possibly does not date further back than the pontificate of John XXII (1316-1334) when her feast was included in the Roman Calendar and therefore became obligatory in the Western Church. (2) There is reason to believe, however, that her cult may have been introduced much earlier. It is commonly believed that during the late Roman period, the Maltese Islands were within the sphere of influence of the Byzantine Empire and that in Ecclesiastical matters the Eastern rite was practised. There is, in fact, some archaeological and philological evidence to support this view. (3) It is therefore possible that the cult of St. Catherine may be dated back to this early period in Maltese history. Indeed the saints who have enjoyed the longest cult history in Malta, such as St. George, St. Nicholas, St. Blaise, St. Helen, St. Philip and St. Catherine, are all of Eastern origin. (4) In the case of St. Catherine, it has even been suggested that throughout the Mediterranean, she took the place of the fire-goddess, especially in her aspect as guardian of sailors; she was thus the patroness of lighthouses. (5)

If the cult of St. Catherine does indeed date back to the late Roman or Byzantine period, it is doubtful whether it survived the two centuries of Moslem rule (870 A.D. to 1091 A.D.) that followed. Our knowledge of the Arab domination is hazy, but

(2) Zehafa Stefano, La Tempesta dell’Anno MCCXLIII, Malta 1847, pp. 10-11.
(5) Murray M.A., Excavations in Malta. Vol 1, London 1923, p. 20. The same is said of St. Lucy.
the islands appear to have been profoundly affected culturally and economically. Christianity, apparently, did not die out, but there is strong evidence to suggest that it became the religion of a small minority. Even after the Christian reconquest, the few sources of information that we have got reinforce the picture of an essentially Moslem Malta. Burchard, Bishop of Strasbourg, who visited Malta in 1175 on an embassy to Saladin, laments that the island was inhabited by infidels, and around 1240 A.D., the Abbate Giliberto recorded that there were only forty-seven Christian families in Malta compared to six hundred eighty-one Moslem ones. In Gozo, however, there were two hundred and three Christian families and one hundred fifty-five Moslem ones. (6) It was only after the expulsion of the Moslems by the Emperor Frederick II in 1249, that the Christians came to form the majority of the population. The position of Christianity was at the same time strengthened by the Religious Orders which in the thirteenth century started establishing convents on the island. These convents were naturally important disseminators of European culture in general and Christianity in particular and they must have played an important role in rekindling devotion to saints, among them St. Catherine. Our knowledge of the period is, however, full of important lacunae and all that we can say with certainty about the cult of St. Catherine, is that it was already well established by 1436 when the parish churches of two of the ten new parishes established in that year by Bishop Senatore de Melo, those of Zejtun and Zurrieq were dedicated to her. The lands surrounding the church at Zejtun were also named after St. Catherine thus possibly signifying that the church might have stood there long enough to give its name to the whole neighbourhood. These lands formed part of the prebend of the precentor of the Cathedral Chapter and are mentioned as item No. 6 in the rollo or inventory of prebends and simple ecclesiastical benefices compiled by order of Bishop de Melo in 1436. (7) The first pre-

censor to hold this prebend whose name has come down to us was a certain Axiak, who according to the inscription beneath his coat of arms in the vestry of the old church of St. Catherine at Zejtun, held the prebend in 1372. From the same rollo, we know of the existence of at least one other church dedicated to St. Catherine. The benefice enjoyed by this church is listed as No. 131. (8) In the form it has come down to us, the rollo is unfortunately, a mere list of prebends and benefices and therefore gives no indication of the whereabouts of this church.

By 1575, Catherine of Alexandria had become one of Malta's most venerated saints. In that year, the Apostolic delegate Mgr. Pietro Dusina visited an approximate total of 411 churches scattered all over the Maltese Islands. He found these churches dedicated as follows: (9)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dedication</th>
<th>No. of Churches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady under various titles and attributes</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Nicholas (10)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Catherine of Alexandria</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. John the Baptist</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. George</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Paul the Apostle</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forty seven other saints</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Saviour</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Holy Ghost</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Saints</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of churches | 411 |

As shown by the above table, St. Catherine had the greatest number of churches dedicated to her after Our Lady and St. Nicholas. Besides the two parish churches of Zejtun and Zurrieq referred to above, these churches were distributed as follows: two in the Rabat area; one in Gozo; and one at Naxxar, Birkin-

(7) Rollo of Senatore de Melo reproduced in Abela, Della Descrittione di Malta. Malta 1647, pp. 313-316.
(8) Rollo of Senatore de Melo, op. cit.
(10) Probably St. Nicholas of Bari. There was also a church dedicated to St. Nicholas of Tolentino.
kara, Siġġiewi, Qormi, Bir Miftuh, Mqabba, Gudja, Hal Lew, Vittoriosa, Qrendi and Mellieha. There were, besides chapels dedicated to St. Catherine in the Dominican church of Our Lady of the Grotto, at Rabat, the church of Our Lady of Porto Salvo, Valetta, and in the parish church of the Assumption in the Gran Castello, Gozo; and altars consecrated to her in the parish church of Zebug (Malta) and the church of St. Paul at Tarxien.

The cult of St. Catherine, however, appears to have centred round the church and village of Żejtun. In his description of the Żejtun church, Dusina states that every Monday, a great concourse of people gathered there from all parts of the island to intercede the aid of the saint in their afflictions and to present votive offerings to the church. (11) Moreover, in most 15th and 16th century documents, including the report of the pastoral visitation of Mgr. Dusina, Żejtun is generally referred to as the village or parish of St. Catherine. In Cartography, Żejtun continued being referred to as “S. Caterina” till at least 1749. (12) It has even been suggested, though without sufficient proofs, that the annual votive procession of St. Gregory, from the Cathedral Church at Mdina to the church of St. Catherine at Żejtun, originated as a vow to St. Catherine by those devotees of her, assembled in her church at Żejtun during a great storm, reputed to have taken place in 1343. According to this conjecture, the procession became associated with St. Gregory at a later date when it started being held on his feast day. (13)

Devotion to St. Catherine was probably enhanced by the Knights of St. John, suzerains of Malta for two hundred sixty eight years, between 1530 and 1798. From the middle of the eleventh century when it was set up in Jerusalem, the Order had always nourished a special devotion to St. Catherine. The Knights of the Italian Langue, chose her as their special protectress and until the expulsion of the Order from Palestine in 1291, they were entrusted with the care of her shrine on Mount Sinai. The Knights bound themselves to protect the pilgrims who in those days

sought her shrine from all over the Christian world. (14) In the island of Rhodes which the Knights captured from the Byzantines in 1308, a church and a hospital dedicated to St. Catherine were built in the suburbs of the city through the munificence of Admiral Domenico d’Alemaigna, bailiff of the Italian Langue. (15) Pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land were housed in this hospital which in 1443 was described by Nicholas of Este as very beautifully appointed. The wards were large and very high, capable of accommodating a considerable number of people. The hospital appears to have been already standing by 1415, for this date is incised on one of the shields on the external façade of the building. (16) Also in Rhodes, the Knights consecrated one of the chapels in their Conventual church to St. Catherine and dedicated one of the main gates of the city to her. (17) It is also significant, that the set of tapestries donated to the Conventual Church by Grand Master Pierre d’Aubusson, represented scenes from her life. These tapestries were brought by the Order to Malta and on special occasions, adorned the church of St. Lawrence at Birgu, the maritime town where the Order first established its convent. They were, unfortunately, destroyed by fire on Easter day 1532 when, through the negligence of the sexton, the whole church was laid waste. (18)

In Malta, following the Rhodian example, the Order consecrated one of the chapels in its Conventual Church to St. Catherine, and the Knights of the Italian Langue, erected a church dedicated to her adjoining their Auberge in Merchants Street corner with South Street. This church is still known today as “Santa Caterina d’Italia”. There are several instances of the Order’s devotion to St. Catherine scattered throughout the Maltese Islands, but, perhaps, the most touching testimony of its special attachment to the Saint, is contained in one of the frescoes

(11) Vistatru Dusina, op. cit, p. 105.
(12) Vella E.B., Storja ta’ Żejtun u Marsaxlokk, Malta 1927, p. 34
(13) Zerafa S., op. cit.
(14) Buttigieg P., Xi Haga milli hemm f’San Gwann — Il-Kapella ta’ Santa Katarina V.M., in Lehen ta-Seeww, 16th July 1947.
(15) Ibid.
(16) Baron de Belabre, Rhodes of the Knights, Oxford, the Claradon Press 1907, pp. 146-147.
(17) Baron de Belabre, op. cit., pp. 86-87.
(18) Farrugia G.M., Il-Knisja ta’ San Lawrenz tal-Birgu, in Il-Malti, March 1927, p. 29
of the cycle representing episodes from the Great Siege of 1565, painted between 1576 and 1581 by Matteo Perez d’Aleccio for the Grand Council Chamber of the Grand Master’s palace in Valetta. This fresco shows the landing of the invading Turkish army on the Maltese littoral. Five Christian galleys stand off the harbour mouth but are helpless to interfere. Above them, the Virgin, St. Catherine, St. John the Baptist and St. Paul intercede with the Holy Trinity for the safety of the Order and Malta. This is a sure indication that St. Catherine was one of the saints whose intercession was most constantly sought by the beleaguered Knights and Maltese.

The feast of St. Catherine on the 25th November, was celebrated with great solemnity by the Order. On the eve of the feast, the Grand Master accompanied by the Knights Grand Cross proceeded processionally from the Conventual Church to the Church of Santa Caterina d’Italia, where the Conventual Chaplains of the Italian Langue intoned first vespers. On the morrow, at about eight o’clock in the morning, the Grand Master and the dignitaries of the Order, assembled again in the Church of Santa Caterina for solemn high mass. Another high mass was intoned at the same time in the chapel of the Saint in the Conventual Church. After mass, the assistant prior of the Order, holding a silver reliquary containing the arm bone of St. Catherine, led a procession through the main door of the Conventual Church and up Zachary Street to the Church of Santa Caterina where the antiphon of the “Benedictus” was intoned. The procession then returned to the Conventual Church, passing through Merchants Street. On its return journey, the procession was accompanied by the Grand Master and the dignitaries of the Order, holding burning tapers. When it reached the Church, the reliquary of St. Catherine was placed on the high altar and incensed by the assistant prior. Solemn high mass was then intoned once more and during the Offertory, the Grand Master and the other dignitaries mounted the altar steps to kiss the reliquary. (19).

(19) Buttigieg Paul, op. cit.

The relicary of St. Catherine was a magnificent piece of fine silver workmanship encrusted with precious stones and decorated with enamels of saints. An inventory of the gold and other precious objects in the Conventual Church and other churches pertaining to the Order, drawn up in October 1687, describes it as follows:

“Un braccio d’argento con reliquie della mano, e piede di S. Caterina, Vergine et Martire, con l’arme dell’omo G. Mro. Villenova, quale pese con il puoco d’oro, che vi è libre quattro et oncie nove. Intorno di detta reliquia vi sono sei zafiri stimati scudi trenta e gli’altre pietre che sono di pucca valuta, stimati pero altri scudi trenta che in tutto sono scudi sessanta.” (20).

The relic of the arm, originally consisted of the arm bone with three fingers, but one of these had been removed by Grand Master Fra Hughes Loubens de Verdale and sent as a gift to Catherine of Austria, wife of Philip III of Spain. The gift was conveyed to the Queen by the Bishop of Malta Fra Tommaso Gargallo. (21)

Together with the other reliquaries and most of the precious objects in the Conventual Church, the relicary of St. Catherine was looted by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798, but the relics were retained and are today venerated with other relics of saints in the large gilt wooden reliquary on the altar of the chapel of the Anglo-Bavarian Langue. They are not the only relics of the Saint in Malta. Zurrieq claims to have another finger preserved in a beautiful silver reliquary and there are other relics in the parish church of Zejtun and in the church of St. Publius in Rabat. (22) Other relics of St. Catherine are also said to have been used in the consecration of the main altar of the church of Our

(21) Royal Malta Library, Liber Bullarum (1566-87), Vol. 443, fol. 268 v Archives.
Lady “Tal-Mirakli” at Lija by Bishop Labini on the 23rd December 1787.23

Yet another instance of the devotion of the Knights to St. Catherine is the fact that three of the galleys or “galere” of the Order’s naval force were named after her. These galere were built in 1519, 1535 and 1647 respectively. In 1704, we read of a “Vascello Santa Caterina” and in 1788 of a “Fregata Santa Caterina”. Like the other galere, the “Galera Santa Caterina” had its own shed in the docks of the Order. This shed, today in the precincts of the Malta Dry Docks still bears the name “Nave Santa Caterina” (24).

Thus with the example and probable encouragement of the Government of the Order, the cult of St. Catherine in Malta was further consolidated. Altars dedicated to her were consecrated in various parish churches and paintings depicting episodes from her life commissioned for a great number of churches. Excluding the parish churches of Zejtun and Zurrieq, there are today ten churches dedicated to her situated in Birkirkara (also dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua); Gudja; Gharghur (at tax-Xwejki); Mqabba; Naxxar (at Wied il-Ghasel); Qormi; Qrendi (Tat-Torra); Rabat (Tad-Dahla); Valletta (Santa Caterina D’Italia); and Zejtun (the old parish church popularly known as ta’ San Girgor). A monastery of cloistered nuns dedicated to St. Catherine was, besides, founded in Valetta in the 17th century and in 1863, Bishop Pace Forno instituted, in the Church of St. Roque, in Valetta, a society under her patronage, for the teaching of Christian doctrine to girls. (25) There is a confraternity or solidarity of St. Catherine in the parish church of St. Lawrence at Vittoriosa. This confraternity, made up mostly of the rope-makers, once numerous in the Three Cities, celebrated the feast of its patron saint with great pomp and the portable statue of St. Catherine, venerated in the parish church, was carried in procession through the streets of the city. This procession was discontinued with the outbreak of hostilities in the Second World War and has not been revived, but till a few years ago, the feast of St. Catherine continued to be celebrated with solemn high mass with panegyric on the altar of the saint, in the parish church. The confraternity, owned some property, mostly in Britannia Street, which is distinguished by the emblems of St. Catherine — the spiked wheel surmounted by an open crown and the palm of martyrdom — carved in low-relief on the façade. (26) Another confraternity of St. Catherine was instituted by an apostolic brief dated 5th April 1652, in the parish church of Zurrieq. (27) This confraternity was entrusted with the care of the titular altar in the parish church. (28) It has long been suppressed.

One very significant aspect of the cult of St. Catherine in Malta, is the number of streets named after her. Out of a total of eight hundred forty streets and other throughfares, named after one hundred sixteen different saints, listed in the “Malta Street Guide” of 1958, twenty nine are named after St. Catherine. (29) The following table shows how St. Catherine compares with other saints in streets naming:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Saint</th>
<th>No. of Streets etc.</th>
<th>Name of Saint</th>
<th>No. of Streets etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady under various titles and attributes</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>St. Andrew</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Paul</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>St. Peter</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Joseph</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>St. Michael</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. John</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>St. Nicholas</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Anthony</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>St. Lucy</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. George</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>St. Roque</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Catherine</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>St. James</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Francis</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>99 other saints</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>840</strong> (30)</td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>840</strong> (30)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(24) This information is based on the unpublished research of Mr. Joseph Muscat of Rabat to whom I am greatly indebted.
(26) See, for example premises No. 19 Britannia St.
(28) Ibid.
(30) This list does not include streets named after our Saviour or the Holy Trinity.
Finally, St. Catherine’s day marked the beginning of the Christmas season: “Santa Katarina, il-Miied jibqaghlu xahar gentili” (From St. Catherine’s day to Christmas, there is a ‘gentle’ month left), and it was common belief that the outside festivities of the feast of the Immaculate Conception, depended on the weather prevailing on the feast of St. Catherine who was, therefore, called “issettura tal-Künċizzjoni” (the handmaid of the Immaculate Conception).

Devotion to St. Catherine in present day Malta, is not as great and widespread as it used to be. Her churches at Gudja, Mqabba, Naxxar, Qormi and Qrendi, are either abandoned or utilised as store rooms for the festa decorations. The church at tax-Xwejki, Gharghur, has been allowed to become derelict and is today a heap a ruins. But at Zejtun and Zurrieq, her cult is as strong as ever and both rural towns still celebrate her feast with great pomp and pageantry, attracting large crowds from all over the island. Oleographs and pictures of the saint, or more often, a photograph of her portable statue (to popular mentality, the parish church’s most precious possession) adorn most bars and shops of the two towns, and the houses of the stauncher among her devotees are sometimes easily recognizable by the wrought-iron screen of the fanlight surmounting the main doorway, the centre part of which is shaped into the symbols of her martyrdom. (31) These symbols are also painted on some of the route-buses that ply between the two towns and Valetta. The publication of the revised Roman Calendar of Saints which has removed the feast of St. Catherine and cast serious doubts on her actual existence, has naturally been greeted with popular resentment and is not likely to have any adverse effects on the cult of the Saint, at least for the time being.

(To be continued)

(31) Such fanlights are sometimes met with in other towns and villages, and usually belong to the houses of people from these two towns who have settled elsewhere on the island but still retained their devotion to St. Catherine.