

of Cassar, as his leaving of it, and is impossible to mention the Church without a word about its rear elevation. It is as if the Architect casting a longing lingering look behind at his completed work could not bear to leave it with anything that appeared untidy and produced what is, in fact, one of the neatest and most satisfying creations" (7).

We leave to the official Orator of this occasion to speak of the laying of the Foundation Stone of this monumental Temple and of the great role which on many occasions during these last four centuries it has played in the eventful history of Malta.

#### THE BICENTENARY OF THE BUILDING OF THE MALTA CUSTOM HOUSE AT THE MARINA IN VALETTA.

That tract of the Marina which extends from the Custom House to the Victoria Gate on the Eastern Side of Valetta is said to be an addition to the original building of the City taken directly from the sea of the Grand Harbour. It was 200 years ago that the present Custom House sprung out of the sea water. Chevalier Joseph Borg, K.M., Ph.C., L.P., F.R.S.H., F.Inst.Pet., the present Senior Analyst at the Custom House was asked by his Department to prepare for the occasion a study about Customs or more properly Excise Duties imposed by the Government of the day for official use.

Chevalier Borg delved deep into the subject and went as far as the Roman days and down to the present times. In such a research it is very difficult to be absolutely complete; but we are sure that the writer succeeded in gathering information about the Excise Duties which will be found very useful by other scholars who may try to add and complete still further the already long list provided by him in his paper.

This is the reason why we availed ourselves of the bicentennial anniversary of the building of the Custom House and included in the current issue of "*Scientia*" the present historical essay.

(7) EDWARD SAMMUT, *The City Architect*, in *Scientia*, XXXIII (1970), 23-24.

## THE LAYING OF THE FOUNDATION-STONE OF THE CO-CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ST. JOHN

BY THE RT. REV. MGR. CAN. A. BONNICI,  
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On my right you see the portrait of Jean Levesque de la Cassiere, Grand Master of the Jerosolymitan Order from 1572 to 1581, as depicted by the famous artist of his times Scipione Pulzano "il Gaetano".

On my left, just beneath the High Altar, in a plain sarcophagus wrought in Maltese stone, lie that Grand Master's bones. A flat marble slab reveals to us his moral portrait: "a man most devout, pious and generous, who paved his way to princedom by his feats against the enemies of the Faith. Elected Grand Master, he increased his glory through prudence, justice and honesty. He embellished the City of Valetta with the building of the Conventual church which he donated to the Order, and with the erection of the Hospital, the Magisterial Palace and other fine palaces. Called to Rome on account of troubles brewing in the Order, he was received with honours by Pope Gregory XIII and declared innocent. He died in Rome and was greatly mourned by good-willing people".

During the Fourth Centenary Celebration of the laying of the foundation-stone of this historic and monumental church, let us for a few seconds honour and revere the gallant warrior and generous Grand Master, at whose expense the Church was built.

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After their expulsion from Rhodes in 1522, the Knights Hospitallers went roaming in Europe until, in 1530, they were vested by Emperor Charles V with the perpetual sovereignty of the Islands of Malta and Gozo. They fixed their residence at

Borgo, the old maritime Capital of the Island, and used the church of St. Lawrence as their Conventual Church.

Twenty-nine years later, they definitely decided to stay for good in the Island. Several Knights and prominent people, among whom the Bishop of Malta Mgr. Domenico Cubelles, subscribed sums of money for the building of the Knights' auberges and of a new conventual church.

After the Great Siege of 1565, however, Grand Master Jean de La Valette advanced the proposal of a new City on Mount Xiberras, wherein all the auberges and the new church would be. The city was to be named after him "Valletta". He laid the foundation-stone of the new city, but inexorable death prevented him from seeing the full realisation of his dream.

On November 20, 1569, the Chapter of the Sixteen, led by Grand Master Pietro del Monte, La Valette's successor, decreed the building of the Conventual Church in the new City. A space was to be reserved beside it for the building of the Grand Prior's residence, some rooms for the Chaplains of the Order, and a closed space for the graveyard.

Grand Master del Monte was succeeded by Jean Levesque de la Cassiere, a gallant warrior who saved the colours in the attack of Zara (1552), Marshal of the Langue of Auvergne, a Knight of high reputation in the Convent and in the Courts of Europe. The new Grand Master immediately took into his hand the building of the Church at his own expense. The Order's historian Bartolomeo Dal Pozzo says of him: "in the midst of the din of Turkish weapons and of civil clashes within the Order, inflamed by his religious zeal and piety he started its building in 1573".

It was at first decided to build that church near the Holy Infirmary, i.e. near Fort St. Elmo, but, on second thoughts, that site was deemed unfitting because it was out of the way (at the end of the City), and the church bells would disturb the sick in the Hospital. Hence another site was chosen — more elevated

and almost in the middle of the City. The site had been formerly granted by the Order to the priests Angelino and Manoli Metaxi of Rhodes, papasses of the Greek community, to build a Greek church thereon.

The new Church was designed on the Order's Conventual church at Rhodes by Girolamo Cassar, the Architect and Engineer of the Order, who built also new fortifications, auberges and other churches in Valetta.

According to one of the inscriptions on the main door of this Church, the foundation-stone was laid on the 1st of November 1573 and the building of the church was completed on the 22nd day of June 1577. We could not find any description of the former event.

Foreseeing the eventuality of the Order's departure from Malta (the Knights had already been forced to leave Cyprus and Rhodes), in the foundation deed of the Conventual church, published by Notary Matteo Briffa on November 23, 1577, Grand Master La Cassiere laid down that, in the event of the Order leaving the Island, that Church was to be officiated by the Clergy of Malta.

In his earnestness to see it consecrated, the Grand Master did not wait for the appointment and consecration of Mgr. Tommaso Gargallo, who had been presented to the Bishopric of Malta. He obtained an Apostolic Brief whereby Mgr. Ludovico de Torres, Archbishop of Monreale, was delegated to perform the function. The church was solemnly consecrated on the 20th February 1578, with the title of "The Major Conventual and Parochial Church of the Jerosolymitan Order, dedicated to St. John the Baptist". It was immediately subject to the Holy See and enjoyed episcopal privileges.

On the 20th December 1578, with the Chapter's consent, La Cassiere decided to endow the church with his personal possessions, so that it could at all times be officiated and served. He bequeathed for that purpose some fields bought by him in

Malta from Gio Paolo Haius, the *spolium* which he inherited from Lucas Xara, Dean of the Cathedral Church, and half of the goods confiscated from the heretic Matteo Falson, assigned to him by a Papal Brief.

For 220 years Grand Masters and Knights vied with each other to embellish that church and its chapels with sculptures by famous artists, such as Mazzuoli, Soldani Benzi, Pradier, Gagini, and with paintings from the renowned brushes of Preti, Caravaggio, Favray, Brescianone, Penni, Pieri, Potenzano and Perez d'Aleccio. Undoubtedly, the best two donations or "gioie" offered by Grand Masters were the precious High Altar, donated by G.M. Gregorio Carafa, and the 29-piece set of tapestries from the Belgian looms of Jodocus de Vos, donated by G.M. Ramon Perellos.

On the 12th June 1798, the Knights capitulated to the French led by General Napoleon Bonaparte. The next day, the General decreed that he was putting the Church of St. John at the Bishop's disposal to serve as a Co-Cathedral. On the 16th, he issued a decree, whereby he ordered 15 Capitular canons to officiate at that church and the remaining 5 to officiate at the Cathedral.

At the request of Bishop Labini, on August 30, Mgr. Michele di Pietro, the Apostolic Delegate in Rome during Pope Pius VI's imprisonment by the French, ratified that uncanonical act and temporarily raised St. John's church to the dignity of a Co-Cathedral of St. John and St. Paul, where a section of the Cathedral Chapter was to officiate. In compliance with Bishop Mattei's wish, Pope Pius VII, on the 27th January 1816, granted that Church the honours and prerogatives due to a Cathedral "ad beneplacitum S. Sedis".

The French pillaged all the gold and silver-plate of the church, leaving only what was strictly necessary for the daily religious services; besides they appropriated all the revenues accruing from its legacies and lands.

When they capitulated on the 15th September, 1800, Bishop Labini thought the time was not far when the Diocese would get back St. John's possessions. But, to his great surprise, the Civil Administrators, on the instructions of Sir Alexander Ball, the British Commissioner, kept all the abovementioned revenues, on the ground that the British Crown had reserved all rights formerly enjoyed in Malta by the Grand Master as Sovereign of the Island.

Bishop Labini argued that (i) St. John's church belonged to the Grand Master as Head of a Religious Order, not as a Sovereign, (ii) when the Church was elevated to a Co-Cathedral in 1798, the Holy See appointed the Bishop Delegate Apostolic to administer the churches of the Order, (iii) the Founder of the church willed that, in case of the Order's departure from Malta, the church was to be taken over by the Maltese Clergy. All these arguments, however, were of no avail.

In 1812, Bishop Ferdinando Mattei again raised the issue before the Royal Commissioners. The latter, however, laid down "as the endowments and revenues of St. John's were considerable, the British Crown could not waive its right over them". In 1813, Governor Thomas Maitland was instructed by the British Government to categorically deny the Bishop's claim over them.

The British Government and, later on, the Maltese Government, continued to administer those possessions and to appropriate the income they yield. Both Governments, however, have successively provided for the upkeep, though not for the servicing of St. John's. And, but for some rare exceptions, all requests by the Bishop and the Cathedral Chapter for repairs etc. have been granted. It would seem that neither the Civil Government nor the Bishop of Malta has ever formally withdrawn the claim to the ownership itself of the former possessions of St. John's, but the abovementioned *modus vivendi* has always been observed.

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In this Church Grand Masters were once elected, and

Knights received the accolade. Here the Knights and the Maltese gathered in moments of distress — epidemics, droughts and enemy attacks — to seek the mercy of God and the intercession of Our Lady. In this church bishops and priests are consecrated. Here, too, men and women from all walks of life meet to thank God for Malta's past victories and to pray for the fallen in war. The best sermons and sacred orations in Maltese, Italian and English, have been delivered from the pulpit of this church. Diocesan processions and pilgrimages start and end here. Religious Congresses, National or International, have been inaugurated here.

This is the holy place where one can best hear the throbbing heart of Catholic Malta.

## THE CUSTOM HOUSE — MALTA

BY CHEVALIER JOSEPH BORG

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On the happy occasion of the 200th Anniversary of the laying of the foundation block directly in the sea-water in 1774 for the building of the Malta CUSTOM HOUSE by the clever architect Joseph Bonnici (1707-1779) from Luqa — scholar of architect John Barbara (1640-1730) from Lija, and Donat of the Order, also famous, incidentally, for his other great works, I mean, the building of the Parish Churches of Floriana (began in 1733), of Cospicua (during Parish Priest John-Baptist Crispo, 1742-1759) and of Nadur, Gozo (begun on 7th December, 1760 during the time of Parish Priest Saviour Galea, 1743-1778), as well as the rebuilding in 1739 of St. Barbara's church for the Langue of Provence, of "Our Lady of Liesse" church for the Langue of France and of the "Gran Castellania" palace or Court of Justice (now the Ministry of Health and Health Department, and which was begun in 1748 by architect Francis Zerafa who died on 21st April, 1758 but finished in 1760) all three in Valletta — which CUSTOM HOUSE is most fittingly described as having an astonishingly Venetian air in the true style of the Academic School, one of the few local Government edifices which had never changed the use for which it was purposely constructed, I was asked to write a small study about our fiscal provisions from a Customs point of view.

Customs, or more properly Excise, Duties were imposed locally since very far off times, indeed we know, for examples: (1) that the Roman Governor Verres of Sicily (73-71 B.C.)