

Tensions in the practice of Marian Devotion between Clergy, Laity, and the Vatican:

The maintenance of Catholic Social Structure in Gozo, Malta

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Abstract

In Gozo, Malta, tensions exist within the ritual system of Catholic Marian Devotion, observed through a disconnect between how laity practice Marian Devotion rituals and how the Vatican defines the practice of Marian Devotion. The local clergy, as intermediaries between the laity and the Vatican, negotiate between these groups to ensure the system's stability. In Gozo, this negotiation plays out through *fešta* celebrations, devotional art, the dedication of ex-votos, and gendered distinctions. The clergy in Gozo mediate between the laity and the Vatican by tacitly accepting the laity's unsanctioned devotion practices while not actively participating, maintaining the balance of the social system of Catholic Marian Devotion in which they all operate.

Keywords: social structure, religion and ritual, Catholicism, Mediterranean

Tensions in the practice of Marian Devotion between Clergy, Laity, and the Vatican:**The maintenance of Catholic Social Structure in Gozo, Malta**

“Well...Marian Devotion is ingrained in our people. But I fear that it is very superficial.” The priest’s candid comment caught me off guard. He continued, “...Few really know...who Mary is and what Marian Devotion is for. So, we might witness Marian piety or religiosity. But I fear that it does not translate into authentic Marian Devotion.”

I had come to the Maltese island of Gozo to observe practices related to Marian Devotion and to examine the differing perceptions between the clergy and the laity. Father Dominic’s comments cut to the core tension between these two groups’ practices. He remarked further: “I don’t want to lessen the beauty of this devotion, this popular devotion, but as a pastor, I have the reservation of my office.”

Fr. Dominic dismissing the Marian Devotion practiced on the island as religiosity, superficial, and popular stood in stark contrast to the ways that I had heard Gozitan laity speaking about their devotion to Mary, the Mother of God. Laity tended to reference their shared “real love” for Mary and the ways that their devotion linked together their local identity and their faith.

After our interview Fr. Dominic and I walked the bustling street between Sacred Heart Minor Seminary and the bus station and he cheerfully greeted pedestrians we met by name – he truly did “walk side by side with [his] people” as he had commented during our discussion. Fr. Dominic left me at the bus station to return to his position at the Bishop’s Chancery and I reflected on the stark contrast between the way he interacted with the laity and the way he talked about their devotion.

Aimed at offering an explanation for this contrast, in this paper I describe some of the ways clergy and laity differ in the practice of Marian Devotion in Gozo, Malta. In the following sections I will show the ways that the clergy tacitly accept the laity's Marian Devotion practices but cannot outright condone them so as to also satisfy the Vatican's requirements. To demonstrate this, I outline four stages of ritual negotiation below. These include (1) the role reversal that takes place during *fešta* rituals, (2) the ways that devotional art demonstrates differing views of sacred and profane space, (3) the disruption of a gatekeeping ritual structure for dedicating ex-votos, and (4) gendered practices that expose the instability of the system. These tensions between the clergy, the laity, and the Vatican play out in the ritual field of Marian Devotion in Gozo, Malta. Ultimately, I propose that the clergy maintain this ritual system's balance by mediating between the Vatican and the local laity.

Catholic Social Hierarchy and Religious Practice in Gozo, Malta

In June of 2018 I came to the island of Gozo, Malta to observe Gozo's central site of Marian Devotion, the National Shrine of Our Lady of Ta' Pinu, where a Marian apparition occurred in the 1800s. I chose Malta as a study site because of my interest in Mediterranean Catholicism as I am both a practicing Catholic and an Italian American. As a Catholic woman, I was drawn to Marian Devotion as a topic of interest because of its gendered dynamics. Before arriving in Gozo, I found that there was little ethnographic scholarship on Our Lady of Ta' Pinu, especially compared to other more widely studied apparition sites like Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico (Turner, 1978). Some scholars have investigated the site, beginning with Paul Cassar's "Medical Votive Offerings in the Maltese Islands," published in 1964. More recently, Philip Kao (2012) provides an updated account of the same votive offerings that Cassar had described in the 1960s. In addition, Avril Maddrell (2016) examined gendered practices at Ta' Pinu's

shrine and their relationship to spatiality and authority. Building upon these studies, my research links these rituals at Ta' Pinu to the broader practice of Marian Devotion on the island and its relationship to Catholic social hierarchy.

When I arrived in Gozo, Malta, I became interested in the broader trends of Marian Devotion and Catholic culture that extended beyond the Ta' Pinu shrine and ultimately expanded the scope of my research because of these trends. Malta is one of twenty-two countries worldwide where Catholicism is the nationally established religion. There are thirty-one churches dedicated to Mary in just the twenty-six square miles that make up the Diocese of Gozo. Over 60% of the population attends mass – Catholics' central, weekly religious ritual. Many people church-hop in Gozo, moving between different Marian parishes, shrines, and chapels, which adds to a shared sense of Catholic identity. Even those who do not regularly attend mass largely identify as Catholic, remaining active participants in the cultural Catholicism that dominates the island, although there are also Gozitans who do not identify as Catholic. In addition, Gozo boasts an abundance of priests, many of whom are of Gozitan descent. A significant number of Gozitan priests move abroad because there are not enough clerical assignments on the island or even on mainland Malta.

The Diocese of Gozo is situated within the broader context of the social hierarchy of the Catholic Church. In Gozo, as well as throughout all Catholic culture, clergy are the ordained local leaders who teach and administer sacraments and laity are those who follow Catholic tradition outside of clerical positions (Holy See, 2018a). In simplest terms, the clergy is composed of deacons, priests, bishops, cardinals, and the Pope, while the laity are the people who attend mass. The Vatican includes bishops, cardinals, and the Pope, those who govern the Church and dictate doctrine. However, some bishops and most clergy remain outside of the

Vatican, governing over local regions. These local clergy – who are the focus of this study – act as intermediaries between the laity and the Vatican.

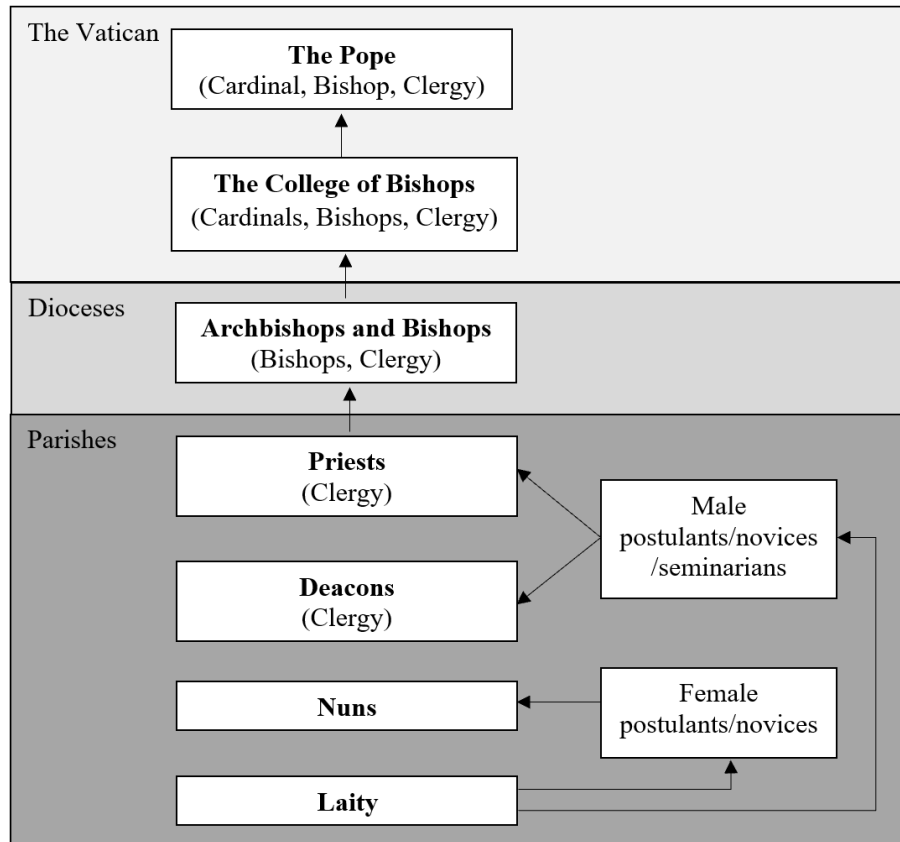


Figure 1. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church, divided by parishes, dioceses, and the Vatican.

Arrows show pathways of upward mobility.

Devotion to saints as well as devotion to Mary, the Mother of God (*il Madonna* or *Santa Marija* in Maltese), is a common tradition within Catholicism. Marian Devotion's lived ritual practice varies across historical time, culture, race, and gender (Pelikan, 1996; Turner, 1978; Fedele, 2013; Wise, 2013). Despite many variations in form, the Vatican provides specific guidelines for the practice of Marian Devotion, which is properly expressed through liturgical feasts, pilgrimage, and prayer to Mary (Holy See, 2018b).

Gozitan laity practice the Vatican's defined Marian Devotion rituals, which consist of celebrating Marian *festas* (feasts or festivals), maintaining a pilgrimage site at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Ta' Pinu, and participating in forms of Marian prayer, such as the rosary. However, one of my first observations in Gozo was that the laity's devotion far exceeds the standards set by the Vatican. In Gozo, Marian Devotion includes a wide array of unsanctioned forms, such as displaying Marian house names, naming children Maria and Mario, ending every mass with a Marian hymn, publicly displaying Marian statues and niches outside houses, privately displaying Marian niches inside houses, displaying rosaries as decorations and as bodily adornment, and dedicating votive offerings to Mary. Gozitan clergy openly express discomfort with many of these practices that operate outside of the Vatican's definition of Marian Devotion and many outright refuse to join the laity in these rituals.

In contrast with the formalized norms established by the Vatican, the laity's informal practices can produce more intimate experiences. As one lay woman explained, devotion is like "having a saint best friend." Herein lies the central tension of this research and of the social system of Marian Devotion in Gozo: there is a clear disconnect between the way that the Gozitan laity perceive of and practice Marian Devotion and the methods that the Vatican specifies. Throughout the rest of this paper I argue that the clergy, being Gozitan and also a part of Catholic hierarchy, are intermediaries who use their position to maintain the connection between these two groups and that the laity and the Vatican, in turn, exercise different pressures on the clergy that serve to drive the direction of ritual practice and of Catholic social hierarchy.

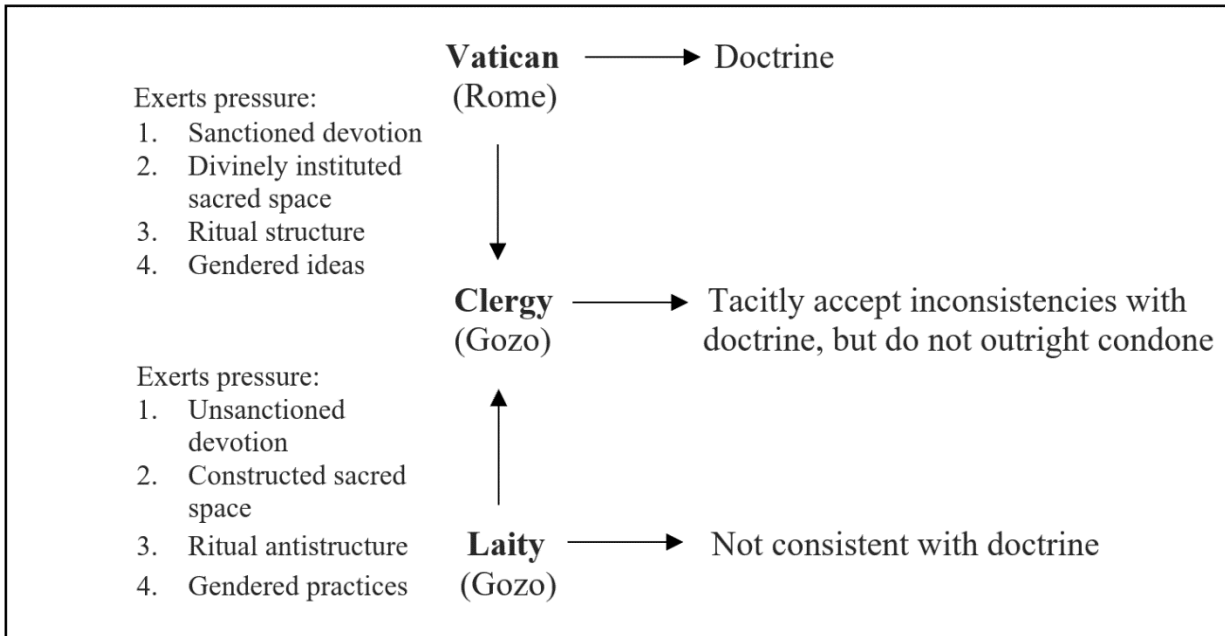


Figure 2. Conceptual map of the Vatican and laity exerting pressure on the clergy (left) and the outcomes associated with these pressures (right).

Study Site and Methods

While in Gozo, Malta in June of 2018, I conducted interviews and engaged in participant observation. I interviewed twelve people (six clergy and six laity) and had multiple interviews with two main lay informants, Fiona and Rico¹, and two main clerical informants, Fr. Dominic and Fr. Miguel. I found informants by emailing priests listed in a Diocese directory and by spending time in churches around Gozo, observing religious ritual throughout the day and interacting organically with people who came through the churches. Most of the interviews I conducted with Fiona and Rico took place as we rode the bus together from the terminal to Ta' Pinu and were largely informal. The information I gained from Fiona and Rico as well as from other lay informants mostly consisted of personal narrative and descriptions of their regular religious practices (Bernard & Gravlee, 2014: 345-347). The interviews with Fr. Dominic, Fr.

¹ Pseudonyms for interviewees are used throughout this study.

Miguel, and other priests were structured more formally, with interview guides used in most cases. I conducted one group interview of high-ranking clergy at Gozo's Pastoral Center and other clergy interviews were conducted either on site at their parishes, at the Bishop's Chancery, or at the seminary. Most other interview locations were either in the capital city of Victoria or at Ta' Pinu. Interviews varied in length, ranging from approximately twenty minutes to three hours. Once my exploratory interviews identified some of the central components of Marian Devotion in Gozo, the remainder of my interviews focused on capturing clergy and laity's attitudes toward these different practices with the goal of comparing these attitudes and exploring similarities and dissimilarities (Bernard & Gravlee, 2014: 362-365).

I also engaged in participant observation at nine Catholic Churches during eighteen total visits, including two central Marian Devotion sites, the National Shrine of Our Lady of Ta' Pinu and the Cathedral of the Assumption². At these churches I participated in Catholic mass six times, a consecration of several newborn babies, an ordination to the priesthood, two *festas*, and two pilgrimage walks. Even when not participating in a specific ritual, I spent my time throughout the day sitting in churches and interacting with the people, both clergy and laity, who would come and go, stopping in for prayer or to set up for a mass. I also conducted archival analysis at the National Archives Gozo (NAG) and the Cathedral Museums where I noted clergy's documentation of Marian Devotion throughout Gozitan history. To assess this wide variety of information, from photographs to written descriptions of rituals to recorded interviews, I used NVivo, a qualitative coding software, to code information (Appendix II) and search for trends.

² A full table of the sites where I conducted research is available in Appendix I.



Figure 3. Map of all churches, including shrines, chapels, parishes, and Cathedrals, in the Diocese of Gozo, on the islands of Gozo and Comino (Malta Mass).

Tensions within the Ritual System

In his 1978 book, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, Victor Turner provides a model through which I analyze the Gozitan clergy and laity. Turner writes that *communitas* and social structure, which are opposing processes of un-patterned and patterned social roles and statuses, “coexist and modify one another continuously over time in the same ritual field” (1978: 252). Below I elaborate on why Turner’s model of *communitas* and social structure applies to Gozitan clergy and laity, the ways that they modify each other’s ritual practices, and how this process of coexistence and modification connects Gozitan society as a whole. I term this ritual negotiation, in reference to Turner’s “ritual system,” (1978: 244). Ritual systems include rituals, written texts, objects, and other components of an entire religious complex. In Gozo, I observed tensions within the ritual system of Gozitan Marian Devotion. This ritual negotiation, which allows for the ritual system to continue without collapse, operates between the clergy, the laity, and the Vatican and will become apparent in the four examples, or cases, outlined below. These four cases are demonstrative of the trends I observed in Gozo and I have grouped them into

thematic categories based on both observed ritual practice and the theory I use to connect the practice to broader meanings.

Case 1. Festa Celebrations, Communitas, and Role Reversal

One of the most prominent markers of ritual devotion in Gozo is the *festas* that are celebrated during the summer months. Based on Turner's concept of liminality, an in-between space optimizing social bonding, outlined in his 1969 book, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, I argue that *festas* also operate as the primary method of social cohesion on the island, binding the laity together. *Festas* in Gozo are dedicated to a variety of saints and epithets of Mary and Jesus (e.g. the Sacred Heart *festa*). Each *festa* is a celebration for the saint or epithet for which the local community church is named (e.g. the Sacred Heart *festa* is planned by the Sacred Heart parish). *Festas* center on the procession of a larger-than-life-size statue, which requires several people to carry it, through the streets of the community. The laity bond as a social unit through their shared experience of liminality during *festa* rituals; *festas* become a liminal space between heaven and earth when the saints become present in the statues. Fr. Miguel, one of the priests I interviewed at the Bishop's Chancery, first explained to me the saint's presence in the statue, and his description was corroborated by the ritual action that the laity carried out in practice. The men who carry the statue do so only by touching it through a cloth, the same way that priests hold the Monstrance which is believed to be a vessel for the presence of Christ.

Festa celebrations also include fireworks, music and dancing, food vendors lining the streets, elaborate decorations, confetti thrown from the tops of church spires, and massive crowds of people joining together in their best dress clothes to celebrate their shared devotion. The streets are shut down around the *festa* to allow for both the statue to be processed down the

middle of the street and to give standing room to the crowds of people who attend the celebration. When I attended the Sacred Heart *festa* in Fontana, Gozo, people crowded together outside of the church and in the streets surrounding it, dressed in their best clothes, eating food from the vendors, and singing along to the music as the band played. The streets themselves were lined with lights, colorful decorations, and statues of saints. The church was covered in lights and people overflowed from the building and crowded together for a chance to pray inside. At the beginning of the statue's procession, the church's bell rung and children at the top of the church's spire threw buckets of confetti that drifted down to the crowd below and lined the streets with layers of colorful, cut-up paper. This type of celebration demands an entire year of preparation on the part of the parish, which expands the communal bonding far beyond the singular day of the *festa*. The bonding also stretches beyond the local community, bringing together people from across the entire island who receive the signal that a *festa* is being celebrated by the fireworks that go off like a ritual beacon call at the beginning of every *festa*.

Not every *festa* is dedicated to Mary, but because many of the churches in Gozo are Marian, many of the *festas* are Marian as well. The culminating and most heavily attended *festa* is the Feast of the Assumption, which celebrates Mary's body and soul being assumed into heaven. The *festa* takes place on August 15 around the Cathedral of the Assumption, which boasts a massive statue of Mary. On the day of the *festa*, the statue is taken out of the back of the Cathedral to process through the streets of Gozo's capital city of Victoria. Speaking to people at the Cathedral who pray at the statue during the rest of the year, I found that the heaviness and grandeur of the statue speaks to the level of devotion. A woman I interviewed at the Cathedral told me that having people volunteer so readily to carry a statue that is exceedingly heavy only emphasizes how important Mary and the celebration of the *festa* is to the community.



Figure 4. The *fiesta* statue of Mary's Assumption, displayed at the Cathedral of the Assumption in Victoria and taken out annually on August 15, the Feast of the Assumption (photo taken by author on June 11, 2018).

When I asked Fr. Dominic, who I interviewed at the seminary, about the *fiestas*, he told me that “People...want to remain attached to traditions but...the *fiestas*, the orchestra...that belongs to the past, no? ...And yet we still go ahead with this...I would prefer to go for another mass to meet the community and then have a nice liturgy with their participation instead of the High Mass of the *fiesta*.” He was quick to dismiss the *fiestas* as a remnant of the past that the laity should have left behind after Vatican II.³ Fr. Miguel, on the other hand, seemed to have a more favorable view of the *fiestas*, telling me that Gozitans feel “deep love, sense of belonging,

³ Vatican II changed the common language of ritual practice to the vernacular and revised the mass to include greater emphasis on community participation.

overjoyed, transformed; people pray, sing, and cry,” which seemed to be an accurate description of the *fiesta* I attended. Fr. Miguel also remarked about the *fiestas* being a bonding agent for the entirety of the Catholic community on the island, including the non-mass goers, who still participate fully in *fiesta* celebrations. However, at the end of our discussion, he let me know that he would not be attending any *fiestas* because he prefers to pray in the quiet, not within the loud bustle of community prayer that occurs at the *fiestas*. This sentiment was duplicated by other clergy – none of the priests with whom I spoke attend *fiestas*, and only sometimes would a parish priest attend his parish’s *fiesta*. It is not an inconsequential observation that at the most important communal bonding occasions in Gozo, where *communitas* is created, the clergy are almost entirely absent.

Even more consequential is that without these behind-the-scenes interviews with clergy, it would appear that there are quite a few priests who attend *fiestas* because the laity use these celebrations to engage in ritual role reversal. When the bells of the church ring and the *fiesta*’s procession begins, lay men dressed in priest’s vestments process out of the church. During the *fiesta* I attended, the first group of men was dressed in light blue vestments, followed by a group dressed in white vestments, then a group dressed in bright red vestments and hoisting upon their shoulders the massive statue of Jesus, then a group in darker red velvet vestments carrying a Monstrance with the Eucharist. Those who were not helping support the statue carried candles, a crucifix, and flags. The procession included more than fifty lay men, although no women, all dressed as clergy. However, as I pointed out above, it is most likely that no priests were in attendance in actuality – although it is possible that the Sacred Heart Parish priest was there, whom I may not have recognized in the midst of the other men dressed as priests.



Figures 5-8. The procession of the Sacred Heart *Festa* outside of the church and into the street (photos taken by author on June 17, 2018).

Turner (1969) writes that members of social structure adhere to rules, hold high social status, and are iconoclasts, while members of *communitas*, or social antistructure, break rules, occupy lower social status, are iconophiles, and engage in ritual role reversal (1969, 167-173; 1978, 250-252). I propose that in Gozo, the clergy correspond to Turner's account of social structure because they adhere to explicit Vatican rules, they hold high social status as religious leaders, and they are iconoclasts, not engaging in the *festas*'s statue processions. The laity correspond to Turner's account of *communitas* because they break the Vatican's rules for Marian Devotion, they occupy lower social status as religious practitioners, they are iconophiles, as evidenced by the *festas* statue processions, and they engage in ritual role reversal by dressing as priests. Overall, the clergy and laity adhere to the identifying features of Turner's *communitas* and social structure model.

Turner's model is not only a way to describe religious ritual but provides a commentary on each group's position within social structure as well. Turner writes that *communitas* typically arises through being in a position of inferiority (1969: 125-129). This corresponds with laity's position at the bottom of Catholic social hierarchy (Figure 1). Turner also writes that *communitas* and social structure exist in spaces where the other does not, with members of social structure sometimes going as far as to view *communitas* as dangerous and something that should be avoided (1969: 128-130). Viewing *festas* through Turner's model of *communitas* and social structure offers an explanation for why clergy do not attend *festas* and why clergy have opposing reactions to many of the laity's Marian Devotion practices.

However, *communitas* and social structure are not groups that never come into contact. As I described above, they exist within the same ritual field, both being Catholics in Gozo, and are therefore tied together in a continual process of modification. Fr. Dominic outrightly stated

to me that he sought to reform the way that the laity practiced *festas*, suggesting a mass instead. There is clerical pressure on the way that the laity practice their devotion, and I propose that the laity exert pressure on the clergy as well. The laity exert their pressure by continuing to practice their *festa* rituals with or without the clergy's presence, even wearing priest's vestments in an act of ritual role reversal. This role reversal shows how the laity outrightly replace the clergy within the context of ritual, not only suggesting, but clearly demonstrating, that the laity will continue to perform their devotional rituals without clerical approval.

Turner's model of *communitas* and social structure is not all-encompassing. Turner has been criticized for failing to consider women's perspectives – for example, Caroline Walker Bynum (1996) provides an argument that his theory of liminality applies only to men. Turner's model offers no convincing explanation for why women are entirely absent from the *festa* procession and excluded from participating in ritual role reversal. I will return to this question in *Case 4* below, but first present two additional examples of ritual negotiation to describe the system that these excluded women may be situated to disrupt.

Case 2. Contrasting Displays of Devotional Art among Clergy and Laity

The most immediately observable aspect of Marian Devotion in Gozo is the way that the laity outwardly expresses their devotion through art, niches, house names, and rosaries. Niches are shrines that are built into the walls of houses that contain statues of saints – in Gozo, almost singularly of Mary – and sometimes candles or other devotional objects. Laity display niches both outside and inside their homes, with their Marian niches always being displayed outside and their inside niches being more personal, with other saints in addition to Mary. There are several stores around Gozo dedicated to selling the statues that are displayed in these niches; the statues sold in these stores are almost life-size and seem at first glance like they could only possibly

belong inside a church. However, a worker at one of these stores assured me that people buy the statues for their own homes.



Figures 9-12. Niches outside of homes in Gozo (photos taken by author on June 7, 2018 through June 15, 2018).

Alongside many of the public niches displayed on the outside of homes are house names dedicating the house to Mary. This is such a common practice that when Gozitans ask for an address, they are expecting a name, not a number. Observable by walking around any Gozitan

town, but also confirmed by laity with whom I spoke, is that most families choose a house name that reflects their personal devotion to Mary. Common Marian epithets after which houses are named include “*Ave Maria*” (“Hail Mary”), “*Regina Pacis*” (“Queen of Peace”), and “*L-Immakulata*” (“Immaculate”). Stores, especially grocery stores, tend to use religious names as well. One of the infamous stores on the island is the “Conception Store,” which confuses many tourists, but is named in reference to Mary’s Immaculate Conception.



Figures 13-18. Marian house names in Gozo (photos taken by author on June 7, 2018, through June 16, 2018).

The Gozitan laity also display their Marian Devotion through the rosary – beads used for praying to Mary – by using their rosaries to adorn their cars and their own bodies. In Gozo, there are more cars with rosaries hanging from rearview mirrors than not. Laity sometimes wear rosaries as necklaces as they go about their daily business in public places. In contrast, Fr. Miguel told me that he keeps a rosary in his pocket, which he showed me for proof, but says that he prefers to feel Mary's presence in his pocket instead of displaying his devotion outwardly.

The only artistic devotionals that clergy display are within their churches, or just outside of them. Within the last few years, new artistic depictions of Mary were placed along the walking path to the shrine at Ta' Pinu for pilgrims to follow as they make their way to Ta' Pinu by foot. However, Ta' Pinu is located in the middle of farmland and is not extremely accessible by foot. The many laity who do regularly make their way to Ta' Pinu do so via bus. Laity have converted their bus ride into a pilgrimage, praying with their rosaries out loud on the way. In each case devotionals are being used to mark a specific path as the pilgrimage path – the clergy mark their footpath with art while the laity mark their bus ride by displaying and praying their rosaries.



Figure 19. One of the many artistic markers along the footpath to Ta' Pinu (photo taken by author on June 8, 2018).

Gozitan clergy and laity both use devotionals, including art, as markers of sacred space. The areas that are marked by each group display a disconnect between what clergy and laity consider sacred. Clergy's devotionals are kept hidden unless in the structurally appropriate context of a church building or other Vatican-approved sacred space, such as the pilgrimage path – consistent with the Vatican's definition of devotion. Laity, on the other hand, mark their houses, stores, cars, buses, and even their own bodies as sacred space. Mircea Eliade, in his 1957 book, *The Sacred and The Profane*, writes that religious practice is characterized by separating and designating spaces as sacred (i.e. religiously significant) and profane (i.e. religiously meaningless). Eliade specifies that sometimes sacred spaces are marked with signs, which convey religious meaning. More often than not, these signs are divinely instituted but

they may also be constructed through consecration (1957: 20). Gozitan clergy constrain themselves to recognizing only signs that have been divinely instituted. In the case of the Catholic Church, divine inspiration is interpreted through the Vatican, which must approve sites for churches and shrines. Gozitan laity, on the other hand, construct their own sacred spaces through consecrating. They consecrate their houses to Mary through naming and niche display and they consecrate their cars, buses, and bodies to Mary through the rosary.

Fiona, one of my main lay informants, elaborated on the importance of this difference in marking sacred space. She told me that Mary is an abstract concept in churches, but that the laity's devotional images make Mary real and concrete. This difference between whether the sacred is exceptional (only accessible at churches and shrines) or everyday (accessible in homes, on streets, and even within human bodies) is one of the central differentiators between lay and clerical Marian Devotion. The type of intimate devotion that results in a "saint best friend" is only achievable when sacred space is not exceptional. Especially for those who do not attend mass or do not feel Mary's presence in churches, the devotional art displayed around Gozo connects the laity not only to each other but also to their shared religion.

Case 3. Laity Subverting Clerical Guidelines through Ex-Voto Dedication

Behind Ta' Pinu's main sanctuary, rooms upon rooms display ex-votos dedicated for medical healing miracles. Ex-votos are objects, traditionally bodily representations, offered to the divine to attain pardon for suffering and convey gratitude (Cassar, 1964: 23-28). Every room and connecting hallway's walls are filled floor to ceiling with curated glass displays of ex-votos. These ex-votos are largely in the form of pictures of people, but also include sections of rosaries, crutches, body braces, jewelry, paintings, baby clothes, and other objects. Ex-votos from the last two hundred years are displayed, with varying styles of objects from different time periods.

Earlier votives are more likely to be depictions of body parts, while later votives are more likely to be personal photographs. Each of the votives is accompanied by a description in Maltese, or occasionally in English, that explains what the ex-voto depicts and who was healed, including the following captions: “I thank the Holy Lady of Ta’ Pinu from my heart for the miracle I received as she watched over me, and may the name of the Holy Lady of Ta’ Pinu be blessed always,”; “We prayed to our Lady of Ta’ Pinu to cure her and our prayers were heard,”; “Thank you Madonna Ta’ Pinu. Thank you so much for answering my prayers, helping me recover from my operation without harm and giving me strength to be strong,”; “The fear and shock that ran through our blood turned into a miraculous blessing gifted to us by the Madonna Ta’ Pinu. Forever grateful for the blessing,”; “Dear Mother Mary, through your Immaculate and sorrowful heart, and in the Name of Jesus, I thank and praise God Our Father for the wonderful miracle I received.” One of the more noticeable ex-votos is a golden rose dedicated by Pope Benedict XVI. Golden roses are traditionally dedicated at Marian sites, especially where apparitions have occurred, in a display of the pope’s devotion to Mary.



Figures 20-23. Ex-votos at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Ta' Pinu (photos taken by author on June 8, 2018).

A lay volunteer sacristan, who manages the behind-the-scenes elements of ritual and ex-voto dedication, and the clergy who maintain Ta' Pinu explained to me that the ex-votos are given in thanksgiving, not in exchange for a cure, because they are dedicated only after the cure occurs (consistent with Kao, 2012). A priest at Ta' Pinu also remarked to me that only a fraction of the people who were healed bring ex-votos – below I expand on where others were bringing their ex-votos instead. The sacristan at Ta' Pinu also enumerated for me the proper ritual process of dedicating an ex-voto, which includes obtaining a picture frame, framing a small object or picture, writing a letter of thanksgiving to accompany the object inside the frame, and submitting the ex-voto to one of the sacristans.

The laity developed a convenient way to subvert this somewhat strict process and dedicate their ex-votos as they saw fit. A few days after meeting with the sacristan, I took a walk on the path across from the Shrine of Our Lady of Ta' Pinu that led up Ta' Ghammar Hill, which led me along a Stations of the Cross path. At the top of the hill as the path leveled out, there sat a makeshift grotto built out of rocks. Inside the rock overhang, there was a small Marian shrine image, decorated with candles and plants. People had been visiting the shrine, because it had rosaries and beads draped over it. Others had left bracelets, prayer cards, pictures, and baby clothes around the shrine. Some of the objects were left around or draped on top of the Marian shrine image, but even more were inserted into the rock wall that created the shape of the grotto, almost as if they were stuffed into the wall out of reach of anyone who might be clearing the area so that their ex-votos could remain with Mary even longer.





Figures 24-26. The Marian Shrine on Ta' Ghammar Hill (photo taken by author on June 13, 2018).

Later I had an interview with one of the clergy, Fr. Lawrenz, at Ta' Pinu and I asked him about the makeshift shrine on Ta' Ghammar Hill. Fr. Lawrenz insisted that the objects left at the grotto were not *ex-votos*, even though they were the same types of objects – largely pictures, baby clothes, and rosaries – that were left at the main Ta' Pinu shrine. He conceded that they were evidence of devotion, but absolutely not *ex-votos*, specifying that only the objects dedicated through the process at Ta' Pinu described above were truly *ex-votos*. Fr. Lawrenz accompanied his description of true *ex-votos* with a story about an atheist girl who traveled to Ta' Pinu from another country, had a tearful conversion in the chapel, and was now preparing to become Catholic. Fr. Lawrenz's insistence on the *ex-votos* outside of the physical location of Ta' Pinu not being “real” *ex-votos* coupled with his story about a conversion inside the chapel indicated his persistent emphasis on the importance of religious ritual that occurs inside a structure, in this case the physical structure of a shrine's sanctuary, that can be mediated by the clergy (consistent with Maddrell, 2016). As our interview ended, Fr. Lawrenz emphasized again

that the graces bestowed by Mary can only be captured within the actual Shrine of Our Lady of Ta' Pinu – not outside of it.

The dedication of ex-votos at Ta' Ghammar Hill instead of at Ta' Pinu is the most concrete example of the laity directly subverting the clergy's guidelines and clearly pushing against the boundaries of clerical authority. This example demonstrates the clergy structuring ritual guidelines, gatekeeping how and where ritual can take place, and defining sacred space. However, it also shows the clergy's choice to allow the makeshift grotto to persist. The clergy may clear the shrine occasionally and denounce it vocally, but ultimately simply accept that the laity will continue to dedicate their ex-votos on Ta' Ghammar Hill.

Michel Foucault's theories of power and knowledge, explored in his 1995 book, *Discipline and Punish*, explain why the clergy must continue to publicly denounce the laity's devotional practices to maintain their power. Foucault's book centers on themes of punishment, including the ways that punishment can be utilized by powerful groups to promote specific forms of knowledge or ideologies (1995: 23-27). I add that within the structure of the Catholic Church, the clergy and the Vatican operate on the premise of mutually agreed upon knowledge, in the form of religious doctrine, which outlines, among many things, the acceptable practices for Marian Devotion. Subverting the Vatican's guidelines would call into question the knowledge that the Vatican controls, including the hierarchy that gives the clergy their status. I submit that the clergy refuse to publicly endorse devotion outside of Vatican-approved methods because to question the Vatican's doctrine would be to question the Vatican's hierarchy. Gozitan clergy do not outwardly endorse the laity's unorthodox way of practicing Marian Devotion for fear of appearing to subvert the Vatican's guidelines and losing their position of power in Gozo and within Catholic hierarchy. Through my interactions with clergy, I came to realize that in their

statements to me, clergy were more concerned with reproducing their hierarchical standing within Catholic social structure than they were concerned with making any actual judgement about the rituals of Marian Devotion the laity are practicing.

Foucault's theories provide an explanation for why the clergy instill a ritual structure for ex-voto dedication even if they do not strictly enforce it – the hierarchy in which they operate deems ritual structure as necessary. The laity, with different motivations, do not value the clergy's ritual structure as highly and are willing to operate outside of it. However, Foucault's theories do not provide a clear explanation for why these ritual structures can be constantly subverted without the ritual system collapsing. For this reason, the account of ex-voto dedication should also be viewed within the ritual negotiation process, where it is one example of the broader tension between clergy and laity in Gozo. Within this ritual negotiation, there are multiple pressures operating on the clergy and the laity, causing the system to remain suspended in the process of ritual modification instead of ending in an immediate collapse when ritual structure is subverted. However, in my final case I will explain that the system has a potential disruptor to its equilibrium.

Case 4. Gendered Dynamics of Marian Devotion

Any discussion of Catholic ritual, especially Marian Devotion, would not be complete without considering women's perspectives. The Catholic Church has a patriarchal power structure, but here I have provided an example of a culture whose laity forms their religious identity around Mary, the Church's symbolic matriarch. In Figure 2, which depicts the pressures from the laity and the Vatican on the local clergy, at neither the Vatican level nor the clergy level are women present in the process of ritual negotiation. Only on the lowest level of the hierarchy,

at the lay level, are women active participants, including the four lay women I spoke with who volunteered as lectors, sacristans, and informational guides at churches and museums.

In some instances, my access to women was restricted in ways I did not expect it to be. When I ate lunch at the Pastoral Center with several clergy, two women cooked our food but did not join us at the table to eat. They ate standing in the kitchen, while the priests set a space at the table for one of the women's young son. Women are also relegated to secondary status in Gozitan rituals: they may plan the *festas*, but they cannot process in them nor dress as priests; statues of women adorn sacred spaces, but no women may serve in those spaces as Eucharistic Ministers or Altar Servers; clergy may sit on the sanctuary during mass, but nuns may not; women may set the altar before the mass, but they may not say the mass. Because women are not the main drivers of ritual, their influence on the process of ritual negotiation is limited.

I propose that nuns are the one group of Catholic ritual participants who could disrupt the flow of ritual negotiation as women who hold some level of authority that sits ambiguously between that of clergy and laity. Nuns are a hybrid category, neither clergy nor laity, which makes them dangerous to the social order that rests on the clergy/laity dichotomy. The role of nuns in Gozo merits more investigation, specifically in examining how nuns disrupt or subvert the process outlined above. I did not interview any nuns, only lay women, so I cannot draw any conclusions about nuns' role in this process. However, I offer the below model as a way to pursue the study of nuns' role in Gozitan Catholic social structure in the future.

Mary Douglas' theory of symbolic purity and impurity, outlined in her 1966 book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, brings both lay women and nuns into a model that may aid in the investigation of these categories of women in the future. Douglas writes that societies categorize and separate based on their understanding of what is

clean and what is unclean. Categorization as unclean makes something not only dangerous, but also powerful, because it can disrupt the system. Douglas explains that women are regarded as unclean because of menstrual blood and this perception of uncleanliness has remained present within Catholicism. However, religious ritual gives practitioners the opportunity to encounter that which is usually unclean, making Marian Devotion rituals a place for this uncleanliness to be reversed (1966: 97-168). As I specified above, nuns are hybrids within the clergy/laity dichotomy. Because nuns disrupt the social system of religious hierarchy by their status as hybrids, becoming both dangerous and powerful, they have a unique opportunity to disrupt the mediation that the clergy sustain between the Vatican and the laity. I propose that this area of Gozitan Catholicism is ripe for future research on Marian Devotion and social structures.

Conclusions

The clergy in Gozo carry out a balancing act between the conditions set by the Vatican, laid out in religious doctrine, and the practices of the Gozitan laity, performed through religious ritual. Fr. Dominic's comment at the outset of the paper – "I don't want to lessen the beauty of this devotion, this popular devotion, but *as a pastor, I have the reservation of my office,*" (my emphasis) – is now much clearer. This comment, as well as his remarks on Marian Devotion as popular religiosity and not genuine devotion, I propose, are the comments he believes he has to make to maintain the favor of the Vatican. At the same time, the actions he takes to remain on friendly terms with the laity, greeting them by name in the streets, are the actions he believes he has to take to maintain the favor of the Gozitan laity.

In this study, I have examined differences in the practices of Marian Devotion among clergy and laity in Gozo. These differences stem from tensions within the social hierarchy of the Catholic Church and pressures exerted on the clergy both from the Vatican and from the laity. In

the ritual field of Marian Devotion in Gozo, the tensions between the clergy, the laity, and the Vatican play out in four ways that I highlighted in this paper. These include 1) role reversal, in which laity demonstrate their ability to replace clergy within the context of religious ritual, 2) devotional art, which the clergy use to mark sacred space as exceptional and the laity use to mark sacred space as everyday, 3) the dedication of ex-votos, in which the laity subvert a specific clerical ritual structure, and 4) gendered practices affecting the role of lay women and nuns within the ritual field. As demonstrated through these cases, the clergy are influenced by their role in Catholic hierarchy to adhere to the structure of Vatican sanctioned Catholic practices. The laity, for their part, continue to practice the veneration of Mary through rituals not accepted as legitimate forms of devotion by the Vatican. I propose that the clergy tacitly accept the laity's version of Marian Devotion through their inaction and quiet reforms that allow the laity to continue to practice Marian Devotion as they so choose.

The Gozitan clergy play an important role in mediating the balance of power and the direction of ritual practice between local laity and the Vatican. The implication of this within Catholic social structure is that the Vatican, although the symbolic head of the Catholic Church, does not, in actuality, control all of the power nor the entire direction of practiced religious ritual. The Vatican controls religious dogma and written rules – including the rules for Marian Devotion – but the laity control the practice of religious ritual on the ground level, such as *festas*, devotional art, ex-votos, and gendered behaviors – choosing when and how to step around the Vatican's guidelines. The clergy sit in a position of ritual leadership over the laity but only as long as they abide by the Vatican's rules and maintain the laity's favor. Although the clergy appear to be situated in a place of significant power, they do not prevent the laity from practicing religious ritual as they see fit, due to being powerless to do so and even possibly because they

see the value in the laity's culturally Catholic traditions. The clergy in Gozo mediate between the Vatican and the local laity to maintain their hierarchical standing by tacitly accepting the laity's unsanctioned Marian Devotion practices while not actively participating in them so as to satisfy both the laity and the Vatican.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Site and Methods

Site	Location	Participant Observation/Interview
Bishop's Chancery	Victoria	Interview (clergy)
Bus	Victoria to Għarb	Interviews (2 laity)
Cathedral of the Assumption	Victoria	Mass, Ordination, Rosary, Interview (laity)
Karmni Grima House (Religious/Historical Site)	Għarb	
National Archives Gozo	Victoria	Interview (clergy), Archival Analysis
National Shrine of Our Lady of Ta' Pinu	Għarb	Mass, Anniversary Celebration, Consecration, Pilgrimage Walk, Interviews (2 clergy, 1 laity)
Our Lady's Flight from Egypt (Chapel)	Comino	
Our Lady of Pompeii (Church)	Victoria	
Our Lady of Mount Carmel (Church)	Xlendi	
Pastoral Center	Victoria	Group Interview (clergy)
Sacred Heart Minor Seminary	Victoria	Interview (clergy)
Sacred Heart (Church)	Fontana	Sacred Heart <i>Festa</i>

San Lawrenz (Church)	San Lawrenz	
Shops and Restaurants	Victoria	Interviews (2 laity)
St. Cecilia (Chapel)	Mgarr	
Ta' Ghammar Hill	Għarb	Dedicated Ex-Voto, Pilgrimage Walk
Ta' Savina (Church)	Victoria	

Appendix II: Codebook

Churches

Ta' Pinu- any mention of this church

Cathedral of the Assumption- any mention of the Cathedral

Ta' Savina- any mention of this church

St. Cecilia Chapel- any mention of this chapel

Our Lady's Flight to Egypt- any mention of this church

Small Church- mention of or visit to a small church that is not covered under a specific code

Devotionals

House Names- mention of the practice of naming houses

Names- names given to human children at any religious stage of development (i.e. baptism, consecration, confirmation)

Songs- mention of songs in the context of worship or otherwise

Statues- observation or mention of statues

Niche- observation or mention of a religious shrine that is more complex than a single statue

Rosary- mention of the physical object of rosary beads or the prayer

Mass- participation in daily or Sunday mass

Prayer- observation of, participation in, or mention of a prayer that is neither a song, nor the rosary, nor Mass

Art- observation or mention of art in a religious context

Festa- mention of or participation in a *festa*

Symbolism- any religious symbol that is not strictly a statue, shrine (niche), rosary, or art

Devotion- the actual word “devotion” used

Mary- the words “Mary”/”Maria”/”Marija” being used, not in the context of a house name or name given to a child

Ex-Votos- money, candles, rosaries, or other objects left at religious sites, whether formally or informally

Pilgrim- description of a tourist in a religious setting

Consecration- houses or children being dedicated to a religious figure

History

History- reference to relevant historical context

Temple of Juno- reference to the physical temple, to Juno herself, or to religious practice performed in relation to the temple or Juno

Ggantija- reference to the Neolithic temple, venus figurines, fertility alters, Mother Nature, or to religious practices performed in this context

Church Hierarchy

Government- any mention of the government (this excludes the Diocese)

Diocese of Gozo- any mention of the Diocese or of the Chancellery as a whole, excluding individual people (such as the Bishop)

Church Leadership- anything as categorizing a person as being a leader in the church
(including status as a priest, nun, or Diocesan employee)

Parishioner- anything categorizing a person as participating in religious practice but lacking a position as a church leader (including volunteers or people seen in churches)

Other

Feast of the Assumption- mention of the assumption not in the context of the Cathedral name, but in reference to the *fiesta*/Holy Day of Obligation

Secularism- any mention of Gozo changing or becoming more secular

Sea- any mention of the Mediterranean Sea or of water

Catholic Identity- any mention of personal, national, or universal Catholic identity, excluding identifying a church as Catholic

Gender Roles- anytime stereotypical gender roles are reinforced

Noteworthy- any noteworthy piece of information that is not covered in any other code