

HOSPITAL SERVICES IN GOZO AT THE TIME OF THE KNIGHTS

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In the main town of Gozo, then known as Rabat, Grand Master De Vilhena, who had built so much for the Order and for Malta, saw to the erection of the hospital at St. Francis's Square, providing it with its two main large entrances leading to the male and female sections. The architect was Michael Cachia (1760-1859) the son of the more renowned Dominic (1710-1790) from Zejtun; Michael, incidentally, had been the leader of the Zejtun inhabitants during the insurrection against the French in 1798. The Grand Master dedicated the men's section to the Blessed Virgin Mary with St. John the Baptist and St. Anthony of Padua and the women's section to the two Brother Doctor Martyrs, Saints Cosmas and Damian and he presented two paintings for the wards (the first one commonly referred to as "St. Anthony"), which complete with his coat-of-arms, are a perennial reminder of the princely interest. These paintings are

now in the Medical Superintendent's Office. Vilhena also made the necessary endowment to provide funds for the celebration of Holy Masses on Sundays and on Days of Obligation, on the feast days of St. Anthony, St. John the Baptist, St. Cosmas and St. Damian, St. Theresa of Avila and on all the feast days of Our Lady. This great benefactor also procured for his hospital the services of two medical men (one of whom as Senior), two Surgeons (one of whom provided with free living quarters attached to the hospital), a clerk, an accountant (in whose office was later placed a large canvas showing St. Thomas from Villanova, distributing alms to the poor), a cook (for whom the Chancellor of the Order Fra Louis Belardes provided a more spacious kitchen complete with the necessary utensils), two servants and a gate-keeper.

The first Senior Physician was Dr. Leonard Dalli, from Gozo, who was fol-

lowed in 1739 by Dr. Fra Angelo Bonnici, also from Gozo, a worthy pupil of the famous Dr. Fra Joseph Zammit, from Balzan, who in 1676 at the request of the Spanish Grand Master Fra Nicholas Cotoner (1663-1680) had founded the School of Medicine and Surgery.

The Gozitan Dr. Bonnici, was a great friend of the Reverend Thomas Saliba, who had built the rural, beneficial "Church of the Valley" on the approach, from Rabat on the Zebbug road, to the village of Ghasri. had dedicated it to the "Patronage of Our Lady" and in 1739 obtained from the Vatican the authority for removing it from the parochial jurisdiction of Zebbug and annexing it to St. John Lateran's Major Basilica in Rome, obtaining thereby for it the honorific title of Minor Basilica, just as their friend Dr. Balthasar Debono, M.D. (1666 — 28.12.1746) of Zebbug-Malta had obtained for his church of the "Addolorata" somewhat previously in 1720.

Dr. Fra Bonnici was followed as Senior Physician in Gozo by Dr. George Locano, M.D., on 8th February 1754 on the recommendation of the "Protomedicus" Dr. Gabriel Henin, ("an expert in Medicine, Surgery and Histology, from 1723 teacher of Anatomy, Physiology and Pathology" who died shortly afterwards aged 56 years on 15th October 1754), and confirmed by his successor Dr. Peter-Paul Azzopardi. Dr. Locano was followed by Dr. Gregory Bajada, on 20th February 1796 (cf. R.M.L. Arch. 1198, pages 85/96), a pupil of the famous Dr. Michael-Angelo Grima, (1731-1798).

The bulk of the funds for the building of this hospital, originally intended for use of men patients, had been given a few years previously, (with the approval of the Order's Venerable Council given on 21st June 1719 and registered in the Order's Chancellery on 12th December 1729 as well as in the Acts of Notary Blaise Zammit of 22nd December 1718, 16th June 1719 and 13th July 1721) by the Very Reverend Canon John-Mary Camilleri, born at Gozo in 1646. Parish Priest of Vittoriosa from 1676. the first Parish Priest of Gharb-Gozo (15.9.1679 — August 1712) and subsequently Canon of the "Matrice". Canon Camilleri was wickedly assassinated at the

age of 77, together with his servant Theresa de Azzopard aged 40 years, on the 30th August 1723 at his abode in the Citadel (where the Gozo National Museum is now housed, formerly called "Casa Bondi" from its last owners).

Grand Master De Vilhena donated about 1,000 "scudi" to have the works completed. The hospital began to be used for men patients in June 1728, but soon became fully operative for both sexes as from St. John's Day 1729. It was soon endowed with the property of the Gozitan Jurat Joseph Cassar confiscated by order of the Criminal Court of 16th August 1729 and thus disposed of at the wish of Grand Master De Vilhena as per Act of Notary Bartholomew Paschali of 28th October 1729, bringing the income of the hospital to 1,060 scudi per year.

Before this hospital there had been consecutively in Gozo two very small hospitals or more properly asylums, both originally dedicated to St. Julian, as the oldest hospital known in the world, that at Rome erected in 755 by the noble Cesarini family, with its adjacent church had been dedicated. St. Julian, a saint who was a diplomat and a medical-man himself, was credited with having provided an asylum for poor pilgrims and sick people.

The first one of these asylums, at first catering for only two sick women and for some tired-out poor female pilgrims but later for a few more female patients, had been instituted on 22nd February 1454, as per Act of Notary Andrew de Benjamin, by the Gozitan philanthropist Francis Bonnici in the two store-rooms adjacent to St. Barbara's chapel under the "Matrice" in the Citadel, where, incidentally, the famous, church- and tower-architect Victor Cassar (1550-1607), Donat of the Order and son of the equally famous, Jerome (1520-1586), from Gudja, was buried, as a memorial tablet therein records and therefore not, as commonly believed and repeated, at St. Barbara's church in Kingsway-Valetta. In the Gozo chapel burial for the general public was stopped in 1899 and for Canons and Priests as from 25th June 1934. Francis Bonnici on his death-bed disposed that this hospital should be managed by his sons John and Andrew and that,

if these died without issue, then it should become the property of the clergy of this Mother Church and be provided for by them from a vineyard and some building land which he bequeathed for the purpose. It was visited by the Apostolic Visitor Monsignor Peter Dusina in 1575. In time, however, its income proved to be too little for its proper running. Indeed its medical-man, who gave his services there free of charge, Dr. Joseph Siricha, M.D., from Gozo had to pass his last days as a pauper at the "Sacra Infermeria" where he made his last will on 18th January 1666 (cf. R.M.L. Arch. 1758, page 87v) at the time of the "Protomedicus" Dr. Archangelo Grech, M.D. This asylum was later named after St. John the Evangelist by the Gozitan clergy. Fortunately, towards the end of that century it obtained help from another legacy.

The second small hospital, or rather a successor to the one mentioned, under better auspices, naturally also for women, with 12 beds and on occasions even with more, was established in 1732 at the place of the present local Seminary (in amicable rivalry with the other new larger hospital), by the French Archbishop-Bishop Fra Paul Alpheran de Bussan (1728-1757), using for its set-up the proceeds of the original one of St. Julian in the Citadel. De Bussan named it after this saint, but then changed the name to St. Cosmas and St. Damian. His uncle Fra Melchior Alpheran de Bussan, Grand Prior of St. John's Conventual Church (1713-1734), who had just given 5.000 "skuti" to the "Casa della Carità" at Malta, donated, as per Acts of Notaries Joseph Calleja of 25th November 1732 and Charles Cauchi of 30th September 1734, the sum of 1.600 "skuti" so that from their annual interest Holy Masses should be perpetually said for the sick inmates there on all Sundays and other Days of Obligation.

This second small hospital was

definitely closed down in 1838 when its few patients were transferred to the larger near one. Each section of the latter was purposely provisionally provided with a main ward altar, though the administration of the sacraments to the patients was still carried out from the Parish Church of St. George. Soon, however, in the following year 1839 the present common chapel was built and dedicated to "Our Lady and St. John". An altar painting, showing "Our Lady and Holy Child and St. John the Baptist" was presented by the then Archbishop-Bishop of our Islands Monsignor Francis-Xavier Caruana, from Żebbuġ-Malta (1831-1847), who directed that the Holy Eucharist for the use of the patients and the staff should be kept therein. It was somewhat enlarged in 1893 when it was re-dedicated to the "Sacred Heart of Jesus" by the then Bishop of Gozo Monsignor Fr. John-Mary Camilleri. The old altar canvas is now at the Medical Superintendent's office; and was consecrated by the late Bishop of Gozo Monsignor Joseph Pace, on 23rd November, 1954. In this hospital there are also to be found the following canvasses: "Our Lady and the Holy Child" (now in the old Females' section). "Our Lady of Sorrows" (now in the chapel) and "St. Theresa of the Child Jesus" (which had been in the hospital named after her at "tal-Ibrag" and is now in the Medical Superintendent's office).

This Gozo hospital is now mostly referred to as "Victoria Hospital", while its Geriatric or so-called Incurable section situated at the lower-level apartments, opened in 1851 and now provided with 172 beds, is usually called "St. John the Baptist Hospital" in memory of the Order. The Gozo hospital was never meant to cater for all the sick in Gozo and we know from testamentary records that many died at the Holy Infirmary in Malta.