

Healing the Body and the Soul during the Cholera Pandemic of 1837 in Malta: the role of church and clergy

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The Church in Malta has played a pivotal role in the life of the Maltese for a millenium. When the cholera pandemic attacked the archipelago in summer 1837 the church was crucial in the efforts to fight the pestilence and its devastating effects. The Bishop issued pastoral letters during the pandemic urging the faithful for prayers, suspending orders of abstinence from meat on specific days and following public health orders with regards to mass gatherings and burial arrangements. The parish priest in the pulpit was the main medium delivering notices from the Government Health Authorities to the mainly illiterate public. Many diocesan priests and the religious from monastic orders especially the Capuchin fathers tended to the sick and the dying. In situations like these the Catholic Church distinguished itself as the ultimate protector of the Maltese population.

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THE CHURCH IN EARLY 19TH CENTURY MALTA

The Clergy in Malta played a dominant role in the insurrection against the French and in establishing the aftermath. In fact, the prelate Canon Francesco Saverio Caruana was co-leader of this insurgence. Also, the respect to the catholic faith featured importantly in the text of the *Declaration of Rights* drawn by the Congress in protest against the Treaty of Amiens (1802). The declaration stated that:

- i. The King is the protector of our holy religion and should uphold and protect it.
- ii. Reference on spiritual matters shall only be had to the Pope and to the respective Generals of the monastic orders.
- iii. Freeman have a right to choose their own religion. Toleration of other religions is therefore established as a right; but no sect is permitted to molest, insult or disturb those of other religious professions.

British rule in Malta was confirmed by the Treaty of Paris in 1814 and this led Malta to become a British Fortress in the Mediterranean. The British would not let anything jeopardize their fortress and forming an alliance with the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy in Malta was very important to buttress it. This led to a strange relationship between the Protestant colonizer and the colonized Catholic. However, this relationship between the Maltese Church and the Colonial Government was quite strained. Attempts at proselytism in the first decades of the 19th century with the Bible Society of London circulating a Maltese version of the Bible translated by Dr Cleado Naudi were met with emphatic protests by the Maltese Catholic Church. In 1830, Governor Ponsonby decided to proceed with a revision of the Criminal Code

of Malta but was delayed because of issues related to the acknowledgement of the Roman Catholic Church as the 'dominant religion'.¹

In the first decades of the nineteenth century leading to and including the year under focus (1837), the British Government had gone out of its way to keep the Maltese Catholic Church and its bishop happy. Before 1831, the British Government was insisting that the Maltese Church becomes separated from the Palermitan Archbishopric which separation happened on June 1831. As a result, Francesco Saverio Caruana was appointed Bishop of Malta after the British Government's proposal.²

The Colonial Government realized that the hierarchical structure of the church from bishop to the local priest had a lot of influence on the Maltese population. In some respects, the church had a decentralized system of administration with the parish as the basic social and territorial unit. There was no local government, therefore, by default, the parish priest became the spokesman for his parishioners in both spiritual and secular affairs. The church was therefore a great asset to the British Government in implementing its policy provided it did not go against the church's wishes. Hilda Lee's summary of a note in the Colonial Office shows that in 1825 the tranquillity of the island is seen as a consequence of the British policy of non-interference in religious affairs.³ In the 1830s, the protestant population did not exceed 700 (excluding the garrison), of the remaining 120,000 inhabitants, 1020 were clergymen and the rest staunch Catholics. On the islands, there were 17 male convents, 5 nunneries and over 250 churches and chapels. The ecclesiastical establishment was supported independently by the Government. The life of the people was centred around their church:

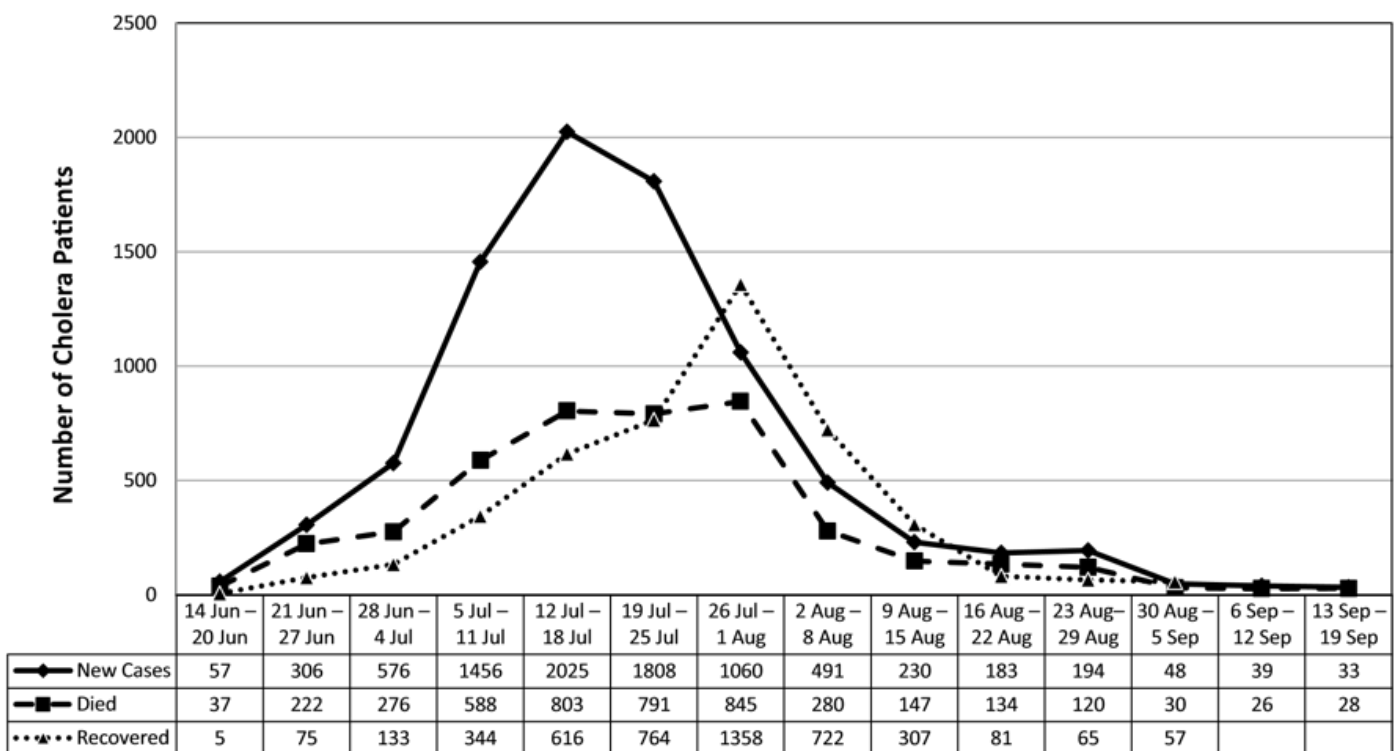
they began the day's work by hearing mass and their main recreation centred around religious festivals.¹ It comes as no surprise that when the cholera epidemic struck, the British Government and their predominantly Catholic subjects turned to the church leaders, the clergy and the religious orders for help. The faithful looked to the church for both spiritual and material help.

THE SECOND CHOLERA PANDEMIC STRIKES A POOR AND AILING MALTA

The second cholera pandemic (1829-1837) spread from Asia to Europe and across the

Atlantic Ocean to North America killing millions of people. In spring 1837 it affected Southern Italy and Sicily⁴ and by summer it reached the Maltese shores. The first cases of cholera in Malta broke out at a hospital for the elderly and the infirm, the Ospizio in Floriana on 9th June 1837, reached a peak in the week between 12 July to 18 July and dwindled by the end of August 1837 (Figure 1). The epidemic saw a death toll of 4252 from 8785 registered cholera cases [a case fatality rate of 48.4%]. The Maltese population at the time was 120,000 [incidence rate of 3.54 per 100 population].

Figure 1 Graphical representation of the number of new cases, deaths and recoveries from epidemic cholera in Malta in 1837 (Source: Malta Government Gazettes 5th July to 11th October 1837).



In 1837, the socio-economic circumstances of the Maltese people were generally poor. The Royal Commissioners John Austin and George Carnewall Lewis sent by the British Government to assess the economic and social situation of the Maltese islands in 1839 reported that the Maltese were living in abject poverty. Over 12% were poor without any means to sustain themselves and their families and another 30% were labourers, many of whom only worked during the summer season. People were miserable and hungry and this led to the theft of field produce and farm animals, especially in the winter months when work was scarce.⁵ The malnourished and underfed population was prone and susceptible to ill health and disease. The vast majority of the population was uneducated and ignorant.

When cholera struck the islands in June 1837, the local administration was unprepared, the population was scared and terrified⁶, and the doctors were split amongst themselves arguing about the infectivity potential of the illness.⁷

BISHOP EDICTS AND LETTERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

The local Church authorities, led by Bishop Francesco Saverio Caruana (1759-1847) since 1831, pre-empted the Governor by four days and issued a pastoral letter on Thursday 15 June 1837 to be read to the faithful during the following Sunday Mass. The faithful were informed that cholera had hit our shores and they were asked 'to pray, fast and perform other Christian pieties so that God would have mercy on us, forgive our sins and steer away cholera from our shores'⁸ (Figure 2).

Four days later, on 19 June, Bishop Caruana issued another pastoral letter wherein he

temporarily removed, until further directives were given, the obligation of the faithful to abstain from partaking meat on Friday and Saturday (Catholics had the obligation not to eat meat on Fridays and Saturdays). Doctors had advised him that eating fresh healthy meat helped prevent the onset of cholera. He ordered that instead of abstinence from meat, the faithful should pray, give charity to the poor and needy, and perform other pious deeds. However, the obligation to abstain was retained for the eve of the approaching feasts of St John the Baptist (23 June) and St Peter and St Paul (28 June). (Figure 3). He also prayed to 'Our Father, the Glorious Apostle St Paul (patron saint of the Maltese) and the other patron saints that protect us, to intercede with the Lord to stop this devastating malady'⁹ (Figure 4). He instructed that this letter was to be published immediately.

Bishop Caruana issued another Pastoral Letter on 22 June wherein he asked the parish priests of the diocese to promote prayers by the faithful to stop the scourge of cholera that was affecting parts of the island of Malta.¹⁰ He ordered '*la decantazione delle Litanie Maggiore ad ostium tabernaculi da farsi giornalmente la sera alle ore sei e mezza puntualmente, e cosi' precedentemente alle benedizione in tutte le Chiese Sacramentali*' (the chanting of the Major Litanies with the Host in the open Tabernacle, was to be performed daily at exactly six-thirty before the benediction at all the Sacramental Churches) (Figure 5). The following day, the Bishop issued a notification whereby permission was given to confessors to absolve reserved sins such as the procurement of abortion¹¹ (Figure 6). However, the relationship of this letter to the on-going cholera epidemic is not established.

Figure 2 Bishop Francesco S Caruana's letter to Maltese Parish priests on 15 June 1837. (Floriana, Malta, Bishop's Curia Archives, Bishop's Pastoral letter).

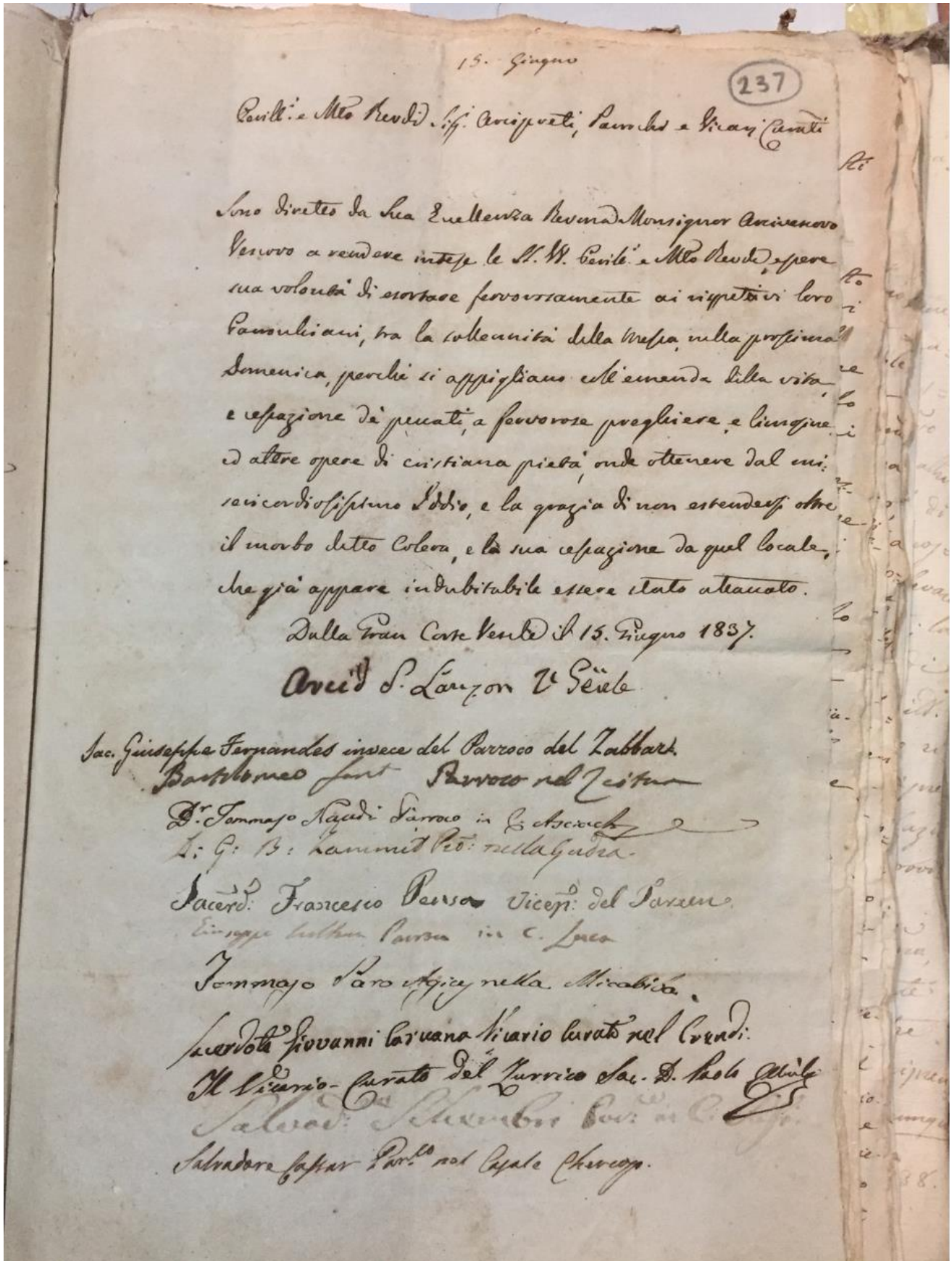


Figure 3 Pastoral letter dated 19 June 1837 page 238^v (Floriana, Malta, Bishop's Curia Archives, Bishop's Pastoral letter).

(238)

Reverendi e Most. Reverendi Signori Arcivescovi, Parrochi, e Vicari Curati.

Si come per sentimento dei Medici egli è un salutare e forte preservativo a non contrarre l'infezione del morbo che affligge alcuni locali della Isola, l'evitare i cibi magri e cibarsi di carne salubre: siccome pure le Leggi della Chiesa come Leggi di benigna e pietosa madre non mai obbligano con grave danno di suoi figli amatissimi, Sua Eccellenza Reverend. Monsignor Arcivescovo Vesovo da tali infelici condotte e ricercata ancora dai Medici e dai suoi ben amati figli in Cristo vi impone di significare alle S. S. Reverendi Most. Reverendi, che permetta la predetta Eccellenza Sua Reverenda a tutti i Fedeli dell'uno e dell'altro sesso compresi anche i Negozianti di questa sua Diocesi di poterli cibare di Carne salubre nei giorni di Venerdì e Sabbato fino a suo nuovo ordine: ben inteso però che nelle due prossime viglie cioè in quella di San Giovanni Battista e di Santi Apostoli Pietro e Paolo non si permetta sal'uso della suddetta Carne anche nell'unica commestione, ma che permetta soltanto l'uso de' latticini, rimanendo in vigor suo la legge del digiuno.

Questa materia trattata con discrezione della benigna Chiesa, che il nostro vigilantissimo Pastore Monsignor Vesovo pratica con noi in simili critiche e pericolose circostanze dee sperare da noi ricompensata abbondantemente con vive dimostrazioni di sincera emenda con fervore orazioni con limosine verso i bisognosi ed altre opere che

Figure 5 Pastoral Letter dated 22 June 1837 (Floriana, Malta, Bishop's Curia Archives, Bishop's Pastoral letter).

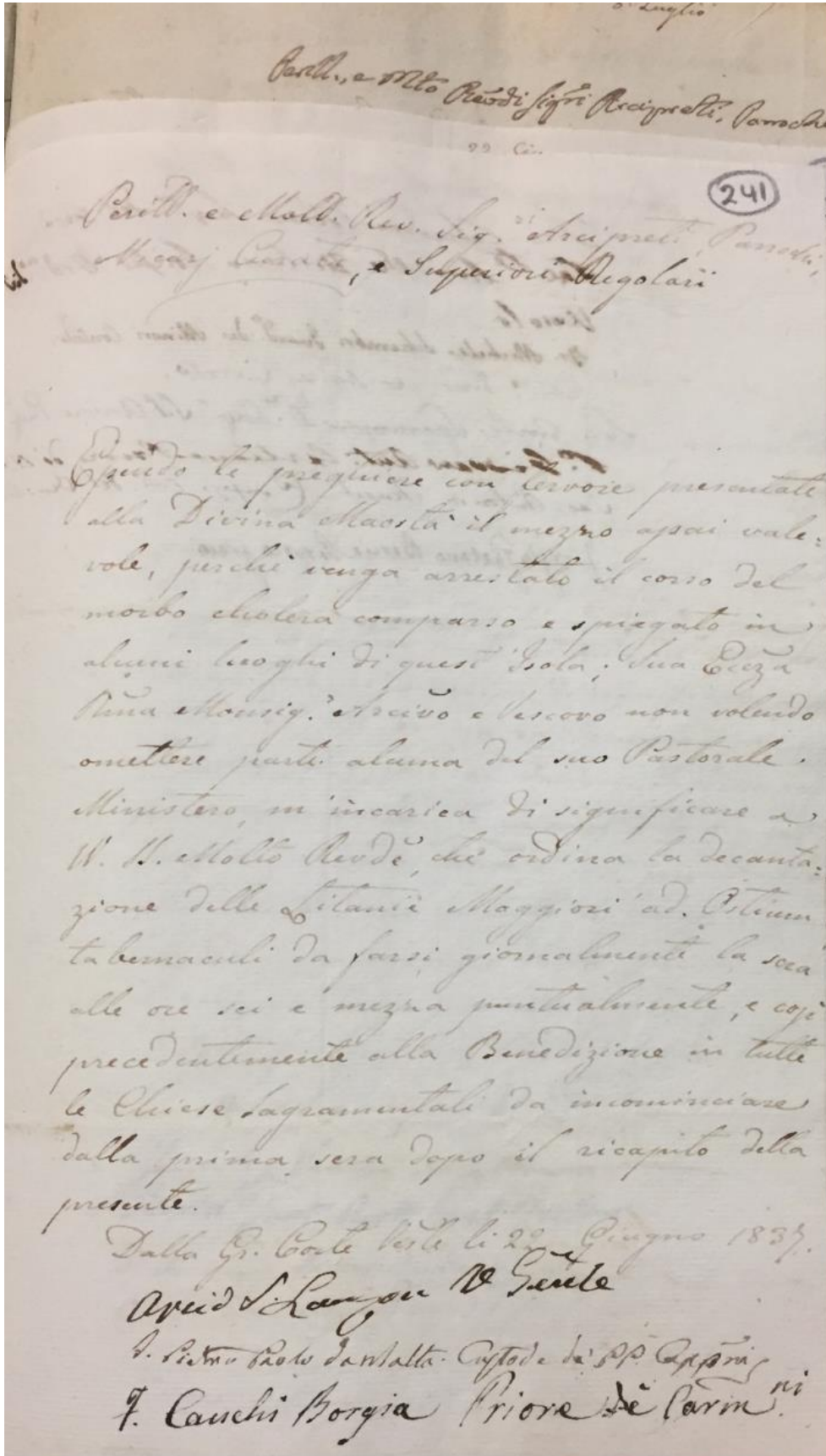


Figure 6 Pastoral Letter dated 23 June 1837 (Floriana, Malta, Bishop's Curia Archives, Bishop's Pastoral letter)

(244)

Alti Past. e molti Presidi Signi Augusti, Canochi
 Regj Curati, e Superiori Regolari

loro diretto da sua Eccellenza Patria Monsignor
 Arcivescovo Segno a significare alle S. S.
 Past. e Mts Preside, onde le medesime vedano
 in notizia a tutt'i Confessori della sua Dio-
 cesi, che la predetta Eccellenza sua Patria
 allega la nota proibizione dell' Isola di Mal-
 ta fino a nuovo ordine comunica la quena
 facolta a tutti loro di absolvere dai casi sia-
 no ordinari, o dalla medesima riservati, sieno
 alla medesima dalla S. Sede riservati, come
 sarebbe il caso della promissione degli abosti,
 di diffensione ad petendam debitam conjuga-
le, di ricevere tutte le denunzie di qualun-
 que grado specie, e di commutare i voti sem-
 plici, solti commutarsi da sua Eccellenza Pe-
 sercardissima Mons. Arcivescovo Segno.

Dalla Gr. Corte delle 23. giugno 1837.

Uscio Leonora V. Guata

M. Vicario Curato del Curato San. D. Paolo (Mulg
 e S. Ambro. Bari in C. S. S. S.)

Salvad. Capor Par. nel Curato Chiepp.

Tommaso Par. Aguir nella Curia di S. Maria
 sacerdote presbitero Curato Curato nel Curato

G. B. Hammel Parroco nella Curia

D. Tommaso Sardi Parroco in C. Aswad

D. Bartolomeo Sant. Bari nel Curato
 Uscio S. Maria nel Curato

Beside transmitting directives from the ecclesiastical authorities, the parish priests also disseminated instructions issued by government bodies such as the Malta Medical Committee for the prevention and treatment of cholera which issued instructions for the treatment of the disease on 22 June.¹²

In a subsequent letter dated 8 July, the Bishop ordered that the poor and miserable dead from cholera should be given proper Roman Catholic funerary rites, free of charge if necessary. He, however, also instructed the parish priests to be very attentive to ensure that the relatives of the dead person were not pretending that the dead person was poor to avoid paying their dues to the Parish.¹³

When the Government Gazette on 19 July 1837 reported a marked increase in cases, Bishop Caruana issued a new Pastoral Letter (dated 21 July) wherein he wrote that it has become more necessary to pray '*presso il trono Della Divina misericordia per ottenere la grazia della cessazione di questa maligna infezione, atteso che le preghiere speciali si ascoltano piu da Dio*' (kneeling in front of the throne of the Divine mercy to gain the grace of cessation of this malignant infection, with the expectation that special prayers reach more the ears of God). He suggested that special masses should be adapted to various situations and ordered that on the 24 July '*una messa cantata solenne – Pro vitanda Mortalitate – in paramenti violace senza Gloria con Credo in tutte le chiese sacramentali, applicando il frutto del Santo Sacrificio*' (a Solemn Sung Mass – Pro-Vitanda Mortalitate – in purple vestements with the recitation of the Creed but not the Gloria in all the Sacramental Churches, applying the fruit of the Holy Sacrifice) will be celebrated for the needs of the population and the suffrage of

the souls in Purgatory. The Bishop wrote that 'we are giving them (souls in Purgatory) a chance again so that they can prove themselves yet again during the present affliction.' Apart from this, he directed that *la Colletta – Pro vitanda Mortalitate* – be said every day including days in which First Class feasts are celebrated¹⁴.

On 3 August 1837, the Bishop decreed that after discussions with the doctors and the need for people to eat salubrious meat during the cholera epidemic, its consumption was permissible on the eve of St Laurence's feast (9 August) and on the eve of the Assumption of Our Lady (14 August) as a once only concession¹⁵. On 18 August he repeated the order for the eve of St Bartolomeo (23 August) also as a once only concession¹⁶.

On the first days of September, as the cholera cases decreased to single figures, the Bishop distributed a pastoral letter (on 5 September) stating that since 'it seems at present and '*per la misericordia di Dio*' (for the mercy of God) there was no reason to fear (cholera) any longer, gatherings of people for solemn Eucharistic functions could resume in the usual manner'. Bishop Caruana further urged the parish priests and superiors of convents to recommence celebrating all the usual solemnities that occurred in their respective parishes¹⁷ (Figure 7). In a decree signed on the 14 September 1837, the Bishop stated that although the cholera epidemic was by then in decline and at its tail end, one could not confidently say that it had finished completely and therefore after consulting with the doctor who advised in this matter, the Bishop decided to renew the permission for people to eat salubrious meat on Fridays, Saturdays and eves of feasts.¹⁸

Figure 7 Pastoral Letter 5 September 1837 (Floriana, Malta, Bishop's Curia Archives, Bishop's Pastoral letter).

5. 76^a 253

Penill. e Mto Rev. S. P. Anziceti, Parochi, Vicarij Curati
e Superiori Neglari

Non sembrando al presente per la Misericordia di Dio esser
servi più motivo di temere, che le unioni del Popolo per
oggetti di funzioni dulcissime solennizzate nella ma-
niera consueta, possano riuscire pregiudizievole alla
Salute pubblica, Sua Eccellenza Rev. Monsignor
Arcivescovo Rev. permette a tutti i Penill. e Mto
Rev. S. P. Anziceti, Parochi, Vicarij Curati, e Superiori
Neglari di riprendere il solito tenore di celebrare le
solennità che occorrono nelle loro rispettive Chiese.

Dalla Fran Corte Vened. li 5. Settembre 1837.

Arcid. S. Lorenzo V. Sede

Dr. Tommaso Audi Parroco in C. Azzicchi
Sac. Giust. Fernandes invece del Parroco del Zabbar.
Sac. Vincenzo Galea Vic. Curato del Zebbar
Paolo Camilleri Par. nel Tarsien.
G. B. Zammit Vic. nella Padia
Salvatore Capar Par. nel l. Chioq.
Sac. Vincenzo Carrara conto Micabba
Sac. Celestino Camilleri par. Vic. del Curato
Il N.º Curato del Zebbar Sac. Paolo Camilleri
Sac. Pietro Costar in vece del Sac. D. C. Lucas.

The Church authorities compelled doctors to perform post mortem caesarean sections in pregnant women and this was in force during the cholera epidemic.¹⁹ This followed an edict published on 14 June 1788 by Bishop Fra Vincenzo Labini (1780-1807) to enforce the obligation to perform post-mortem Caesarean sections²⁰. During the cholera epidemic of 1837 Dr G.M. Stilon never neglected to perform Caesarean sections on dead pregnant women,²¹ while Dr Tommaso Chetcuti recorded the extraction by Caesarean section of three living foetuses "who were immediately baptised by the chaplain"²²

On the 17 October 1837, when the cholera had abated completely, the Bishop wrote a long pastoral letter where he thanked God and the intercession of Our Lady and St Paul Our Father "for listening to our fervent prayers' that led to the cessation of cholera that had been raging for 4 months. He ordered special prayers of thanksgiving to be said at the Mdina Cathedral, St. John's Church in Valletta, the churches of Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua on Monday 23 October 1837. The parish priests from country districts were to hold these prayers the following Sunday (29th) in their respective churches. There was to be joyous church bell ringing on the eve of the day of thanksgiving at Ave Maria and on the morning of the day itself. The day was to be celebrated by a votive solemn mass of thanksgiving with singing 'Pro gratiarum actione con Gloria, Credo and Prefazio' (thanksgiving with singing of the Gloria, Creed and Preface) followed by the incantation of the *Te Deum* during the procession. The Bishop added that a requiem mass for those who perished from cholera would be celebrated on Saturday 21 October at the Mdina Cathedral, in Valletta and other harbour area churches, and on Friday 27 October in the countryside churches. At the end of the letter, the bishop reversed the

special decrees he had ordered during the epidemic such as those given on 23 June 1738 to the confessors regarding reserved sins²³ and presumably introduced the obligation not to eat meat on Fridays, Saturdays and eve of feasts.

UNTRUMPETED SERVICE OF THE CLERGY DURING THE PANDEMIC

The Governor visited Fort Ricasoli Hospital on Sunday 25 June and he was satisfied with the medical and religious arrangements for the inmates. The Governor '*si compiacque esprimere la sua sodisfazioni per le disposizioni mediche, che si erano date per la cura degli ammalati e per lo zelo con cui i due cappellani dello stabilimento avevano disimpegnato i loro spirituali doveri: essi ora sono assistiti da' PP Capucchini. Nessuna delle vittime della malattia mori' senza i conforti della consolazione religiosa ne' suoi ultimi momenti*'²⁴ (was pleased to express his satisfaction with the medical provisions, which had been given for the care of the sick and for the zeal with which the two chaplains of the establishment had carried out their spiritual duties: they are now assisted by Cappuchin fathers. None of the victims of the disease died without the comforts of religious consolation during their last moments of life)

Many religious men and women did their duty with love and compassion towards the sick and the dying. John Stoddart, the Chief Justice in Malta during that fateful summer of 1837 wrote:

'When I mention a good man (Dr Stilon), however who was engaged in this great work (heading the Cholera Hospital), I must not forget another whose self-devotion ought to render his memory dear to his countrymen, and to every friend in humanity. There was a Roman Catholic priest, named Teuma, who no sooner heard that there was a large hospital opened for the reception of cholera

patients, many of whom would infallibly die, than spurning the danger of contagion in which most of his countrymen firmly believed, he took his bed with him into the hospital, and there remained day and night, so long as the epidemic lasted; for the sole purpose of administering to the dying those sacraments, which smooth with them the awful entrance into the valley of the shadow of death. Whether this heroic man has since been recompensed by any earthly distinction, I know not; but surely, he may expect the infinitely higher reward – “Well done, thou good and faithful servant! Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”²⁵ One could not have been given a better commendation than that!

Sarah Austin in her essay on ‘Cholera in Malta’ stated that although there were clergymen who were frightened and the panic was general and overpowering, there were priests who reacted honourably. ‘The Capuchin friars never shrank from their duty and endured great fatigue [...] The Cappellano of the Dominicans was unwearied.’ The latter suffered from epileptic fits but he attended to the sick and dying day and night without experiencing a single fit. He attributed this freedom of fits as a Divine favour for his compassion and he kept going without receiving any assistance. Austin reported that the work of the priests increased by ten times because very often all the doctors could do when faced with the sick was to order the viaticum.²⁶

In addition, the superiors of the convents in Valletta promptly offered their co-operation by making wholesome soup to be given out to the most necessitous poor at their district. The first distribution was made on Friday 14 July 1837 and during the four days from 16th to 19 July, 1800, 200 and 1200 daily portions were distributed to the poor of Valletta, Floriana and Vittoriosa-Senglea respectively.²⁷ This relieved some of the suffering and helped

check the disease especially in those who were poor and destitute in the cities of the harbour area. There were also plans to extend this service to the ‘country districts’ but no evidence is available to confirm that this ever materialized.

The Conventual Franciscans and the Capuchins were requested by Bishop Caruana to help provide services to some parishes because: ‘*Alcuni Parrochi intimoriti, ed altri indisposti di diversi Casali, si ritirano ed i preti non volevano amministrare i Sacramenti [...] ed i nostri furono per amministrare i Sacramenti in Casal Lia, nel Nasciaro, in Casal Asciac, in Birchircara e nel Vallone di detta, chiamato Misida o Pietá*²⁸ (Some frightened parish priests, and others who were indisposed from different villages will retire and the priests did not want to administer the Sacraments [...] and (therefore) ours (the Franciscans) were to administer the Sacraments in Casal Lia, in Nasciaro, in Casal Asciac, in Birchircara and in the Valley called Misida or Pietá). This was acceded to and Fr Anton Salvatore Spiteri assumed the post of vice-parish priest in Birkirkara, Fr Serafin Agius helped in Cospicua, and Fr Giovanni Battista Mifsud gave his services to the Msida parish. On 6 July 1837, the ailing parish priest of Casal Lia Francesco Saverio Galea requested the bishop to substitute him since he was very weak and he could not perform his parish duties since ‘*giacché nessun prete vuol mettersi assolutamente*’ (none of the priests wants to present himself absolutely). This led to two Franciscan monks replacing him immediately and another monk joining later. Their contribution was acknowledged by the bishop on 13 September 1837.²⁹

The Oratorians of St. Philip Neri in Senglea made their church and convent available to serve as a quarantine hospital during the epidemic. It was subsequently used as a

communal kitchen to serve the poor.³⁰ The parish priest of Senglea Mons Leopoldo Fiteni, on 30 June, remarked that there had been so many deaths in the parish that only nineteen empty graves remained and that he was considering opening the ancient plague burial grounds³¹. Later on, he praised the priests of his parish and remarked that they have attended to the cholera sufferers with great zeal and devotion, with Canon Jaochim Audibert receiving special mention.³²

In a panegyric delivered on 2 July 1837 on the titular feast of the church annexed to the Oratorio of St Philip Neri, Fr Francesco Saverio Baldacchino preached about 'the great love the Virgin Mary has towards humanity. It is the love of a mother towards her children that drives Her to intercede with her son Jesus Christ to save us from the affliction.'³³ Cholera is not mentioned by name during the sermon, but the priest from Senglea would have had received the circular from the Bishop on 15 June and by the 2 July, there were already deaths from cholera reported in Senglea. Also, in the manuscript *Memorie Diverse* written by the same Francesco Saverio Baldacchino, he reports that he delivered the panegyric which was supposed to be given by Fr Ludovico Mifsud. Mifsud 'did not do it because he had left with his family to Livorno to escape the perils.'³⁴ It is interesting to note that Fr

Baldacchino gave the same panegyric he had given at the same feast during the plague epidemic of 1813.³³

It was in situations like the cholera epidemic that the Catholic Church distinguished itself as the ultimate protector of the Maltese population. The government did help with some relief funds but it was church organisations that came all out to aid the afflicted. The parish priests throughout the country strived to relieve the sufferings of the poor and destitute in their parishes. Despite that the majority of the population were dreading the cholera onslaughts, it was the Capuchin fathers, in particular, who showed the heroism of Christian Charity.

Some parallels may be drawn between the church's role during the cholera pandemic of 1837 and the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-2021. The Maltese bishops followed the doctor's advice to protect the elderly in the church's nursing homes. They stopped mass activities such as feasts, and removed the obligation to attend mass on Sundays and other days of obligation. For a time, the churches were closed. The Bishops invited the Maltese population to pray for the sick, the souls of the dead and the carers. The church through Caritas provided hundreds of daily meals to the old, poor and vulnerable and psychological and material help to those in need.

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