The Jesuits' Mission in Hospitaller Malta: Confronting Spiritual, Financial and Political Challenges in the Mediterranean Frontier (17th–18th Century)

Nicholas J. Doublet

Perched at the heart of the Mediterranean, Hospitaller Malta was both fortress and threshold: a bastion of Catholic Europe against the Ottoman world, yet also a crossroads of cultures where corsairs, merchants, enslaved Muslims, Jews, and Protestant sympathisers mingled in the bustling harbour towns. In this liminal space – what exasperated Jesuits, arguing for the financial subsistence, described as a *«horrido scoglio»* and a mission «*in esiglio per amore del Signore*»[1] – the Catholic Church confronted challenges that went far beyond the island's modest size. Clergy often lacked proper formation, the laity remained vulnerable to superstition, and competing jurisdictions between the bishop and the Grand Master frequently divided the Hospitaller state. It was into this contested frontier, poised between the pressures of reform and the threat of Islam, that the Society of Jesus entered in 1592. The foundation of the *Collegium Melitense* (Fig. 1) was not simply another act of institutional expansion by a particular religious congregation, but a decisive experiment in adapting Tridentine reform to one of the most exposed peripheries of Christendom.

In 1592, Pope Clement VIII (1592–1605) ordered the bishop of Malta, Tommaso Gargallo (1578-1614) (Fig. 2), to establish a College for twelve Jesuits in Valletta to offer spiritual assistance to and advance the ideals of reform among the island's faithful. As will be demonstrated, this was not merely an act of institutional expansion by the Roman authorities or an exercise of control over the Hospitallers, who ultimately relied on the Pope, but also a pivotal moment in ecclesiastical strategy on the frontier of Christendom. Rome had long deemed that Malta, poised between a divided Europe and the Muslim world, required a new religious force capable of both defending and renewing the Catholic faith. The Society of Jesus emerged as that force. Therefore, the foundation of the *Collegium Melitense* must be read within the broader currents of Tridentine reform and the fragile consolidation of Catholic life in early modern Malta. Thus, Pope Clement VIII, through Apostolic Letters dated 28 March 1592, addressed

[1] P. Pecchiai, *Il Collegio dei Gesuiti a Malta (1592–1768)*, in "Archivio Storico di Malta", IX (1938), p. 143. The Rector of the College, P. Giuseppe Castelnuovo, expressed this in his letter to the Procurator General of the Society, P. Lorenzo Pauli (or de Paulis), 29 November 1622, Appendice II, 2.

Fig. 1. Valletta, *The Collegium Melitense* (University Campus).

to Grand Master Hugues Loubenx de Verdalle (1581-95) (Fig. 3) and Bishop Gargallo, formally decreed the establishment of this College in the newly built city of Valletta[2]. Such was not an isolated event, but rather the culmination of protracted negotiations. Gargollo himself had long favoured, or so he made it seem, the arrival of the Jesuits in Malta. Pietro Dusina, in his *Pastoral Visitation* of 1575, and the Diocesan Synod held by Gargallo in 1591, decreed the establishment of a seminary for the formation of future priests, a step considered necessary for implementing the reform desired by the Council of Trent. The determinative effort for the establishment of a College was ultimately spearheaded above all by Fra Catalino Casati, a reform-minded member of the Order of Saint John, who, together with like-minded knights, could not lose the opportunity of having a College set up in Valletta, under Hospitaller auspices, rather than a seminary in Mdina, controlled by the Cathedral Chapter. The advocacy of influential cardinals reinforced his petitions to Father General Claudio Acquaviva – prelates such as Borromeo, Cusano, and Plata – and ultimately secured papal approval through the mediation of Cardinal Bellarmine. Although Pope Innocent IX (1591) had already

[2] Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI), Fondo Gesuitico, *Instrumentorum*, vol. 78, f. 1248, in P. Pecchiai, *Il Collegio…*,1938, p. 171. That we may provide for the spiritual needs of your Maltese Church, as much as we are able with the Lord, we have decided to establish in the city of Malta a College of Priests of the Society of Jesus, by whose example and work the faithful of Christ have been accustomed to frequently devote themselves to spiritual exercises, for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. To your fraternity, through these presents, we commit and command that you ensure this College be erected and established as soon as possible by our authority, in which at least twelve religious of the said Society may be adequately supported according to their regular institutes.

Fig. 2. Bishop Tomás Gargallo, O.S.Io. Hieros (r. 1578-1614).

Fig. 3. Grand Master Fra' Hugues Loubenx de Verdalle (r. 1582-95).

accepted Casati's proposal, his early death prevented its execution; Clement VIII then carried it forward[3]. The legal foundation of the College and its adjoining church was solemnly enacted on 12 November 1592 in a deed drawn up by Notary Giacomo Sillato, in the presence of Verdalle, Gargallo, the Inquisitor Giovanni Ludovico dell'Armi (1592-95), and Padre Pietro Casati SJ[4]. The new *Collegium* stood not only as Malta's first higher educational institution – apart from Notabile's municipal school – but also as a visible manifestation of the island's integration into the programme of Catholic reform and as the cornerstone of the Jesuits' enduring mission in Malta[5].

This essay asks how the Jesuits in Hospitaller Malta confronted the intertwined spiritual, financial, and political challenges of a Mediterranean frontier society, and what enduring legacy their mission left despite persistent opposition and eventual suppression. To address this question, the essay is divided into three interrelated parts. The first examines the spiritual challenges of Malta's religious fabric in the wake of the Council of Trent – poorly formed clergy, laity vulnerable to superstition and het-

[3] S. Fiorini, *The Collegium Melitense and the Universitas Studiorum to 1798*, in *Yesterday's Schools: Readings in Maltese Educational History*, ed. R.G. Sultana, Malta 2017, pp. 31-58.

[4] ARSI, Fondo Gesuitico, *Instrumentorum…*, f. 1229ss: *Instrumentum fundationis Collegii et unionis beneficiorum etc. Factae a Reverendissimo Episcopo Melitensi*, 12 November 1592.

[5] Archivum Cathedralis Melitensis (ACM), *Misc. 247*, Acta Collegii Melitensis, Historia Erectionis Collegii Melitensis; V. Borg, *Melita Sacra: The Maltese Diocese during the Sixteenth Century*, II, Malta 2009, pp. 57-71; C. Cassar, *The Collegium Melitense: A Frontier Mission in the Interface Between the Christian and Muslim Worlds*, in "Al-Qantara", 36, 2 (2015), pp. 443-462; G.F. Abela, *Malta Illustrata*, I, Malta 1772, pp. 47-50; A. Ferris, *Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, Malta 1866.

erodoxy, and a cosmopolitan society marked by religious diversity and typical moral tension – and analyses how the Jesuits responded through preaching, missions, confessions, Marian congregations[6], and other pastoral initiatives according to the custom of the Society. The second section turns to the financial dimension, focusing on the endowments, benefices, and the controversial *media decima* that sustained the *Collegium Melitense*, while also fueling decades of litigation and bitter contestation with the secular clergy. The third considers the political challenges, situating the Jesuits within the shifting allegiances of the Hospitaller Order, their uneasy relations with specific groups of knights, and the broader pressures of Enlightenment hostility, culminating in their temporary expulsion in 1639, and the more definitive one of 1768.

This study, therefore, argues that the Jesuit mission in Malta must be understood as a process of continual negotiation, in which spiritual reform, financial stability, and political authority were inseparably intertwined. By analysing their pastoral strategies, their protracted struggles over benefices and the *media decima*, and their contested relations with the Hospitaller Order, the essay situates the *Collegium Melitense* within the broader framework of the Catholic Reformation. What emerges is not simply the history of a religious College, but a case study in how the Society of Jesus adapted its universal mission to the particular conditions of a Mediterranean frontier, leaving behind a legacy that endured long after its expulsion in 1768.

Malta – A Frontier Church

Malta in the Hospitaller period was a liminal space – a Catholic stronghold under the Hospitaller Order, yet dangerously open to feared Protestant ideas, and more certainly to the Ottoman threat. The Jesuits were deemed necessary missionaries in a cosmopolitan context: not only to preach against and counteract any emerging heretical opinions, but more importantly, to form consciences, renew priestly education, and solidify Catholic identity. In this context, "liminal" refers to a threshold or border zone – a place of transition, ambiguity, or mediation between different realms. "*Ad intra*", both the Grand Master and the bishop answered directly to the pope. The two authorities were often at odds over issues of contested jurisdiction, such as immunity, with the Church seeking to defend its privileges, including personal, real, and local immunities[7].

In contrast, the secular authorities under the Grand Master attempted to consolidate power, following broader European trends toward absolutism. Tension was heightened by the application of the decrees of the Council of Trent, which sought to bolster the Church's position within the confessional State. These reforms, promulgated across

[6] N.J. Doublet, *A Brief Introduction to the Foundation of the Onorati Oratory in Valletta*, in *Scientiae et Patriae: Festschrift in Honour of Maroma Camilleri*, eds. G. Farrugia-T. Vella, Malta 2024, pp. 259-268.

[7] N.J. Doublet, *Jurisdictional Struggles Between Bishop and Grand Master in Malta in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century*, in "Religions", 16 (2025), p. 484.

Catholic Europe, aimed to strengthen the Church's spiritual and administrative control, often coming into direct conflict with secular authorities.

"*Ad extra*", Malta's geographic location, and legal status, as a Hospitaller state in formation, belonging utimately to the Spanish crown, at the very centre of the Mediterranean highway, made it a very particular melting pot of different peoples, from the Hospitaller nobility, to mariners seeking fortune in corsairing, a significant presence of enslaved Muslims, several Jews, emerging Protestant sympathizers, a melting pot of peoples that placed the Church in Malta in a very particular situation. Moreover, the ever-present threat of a renewed Ottoman assault – seeking once again to besiege the islands and expel the Hospitallers, as they had done in Rhodes in 1523 but failed to achieve in Malta in 1565 – positioned the island as one of the most exposed outposts of Catholic Europe, invested with a political significance far exceeding its modest geographical size. This was the Malta into which the Jesuits entered. No mission unfolded in isolation; instead, the Jesuits were both shaped by and active contributors to what Emmanuel Buttigieg and others have termed the attempt at forming an "island order state"[8] – a fluid constellation of power relations that framed religious, educational, and political life in Hospitaller Malta.

The *Collegium Melitense* – Education as Strategy

The *Collegium Melitense* was not merely a school – it was a crucible of Catholic formation. It represented a strategy of elite education and moral formation in a society where prior attempts at schooling had floundered or fallen into heresy. This Jesuit institution became a central part of Malta's ecclesiastical reform[9]. It formed priests, preachers, and educated lay elites who would carry Tridentine values into every corner of the island. It embodied what John O'Malley described as "christianitas" – a reform rooted in interior conversion, sacramental life, and moral virtue[10].

In his annual letter for 1592, the Sicilian Provincial thus summarily reported the Maltese mission when documenting the Jesuit presence in each foundation under his care: «*Nella Missione di Malta 3. Si sono accettati due Collegii, l'uno in Malta Isola lontana da Sicilia 60 miglia per ordine di Papa Clemente VIII con mandar breve per questo efetto al Cardinal Gran Maestro, et al Vescovodi quella, e con dispensar che i 600 scudi d'entrate che si doveano applicar per il Seminario de' Chierici per la fondazione del collegio, per il che andarano in quel Isola 3 dei nostri, e tanto dal Cardinal Gran Maestro, quanto*

[8] E. Buttigieg, *Negotiating Encounters, Controlling Spaces: Official Meetings Between Grand Masters and Inquisitors in Valletta and Vittoriosa*, in *The Roman Inquisition in Malta and Elsewhere*, eds. M. Abdilla Cunningham-K. Cassar-G. Vella, Kalkara 2017, pp. 110-119; A. Luttrell, *The Island Order State on Rhodes*, in *Islands and Military Orders*, eds. E. Buttigieg-S. Phillips, Farnham 2013, pp. 19-28; S. Phillips, *The Hospitallers and Concepts of Island Existence*, in *Islands…,* 2013, pp. 11-18.

[9] V. Borg, *Melita…*, 2009, pp. 57-71.

[10] J.W. O'Malley, *Was Ignatius Loyola a Church Reformer? How to Look at Early Modern Catholicism*, in "The Catholic Historical Review," 77, 2 (1991), pp. 177-193.

dal Vescovo, et quie signori Cavalieri fumo ricevuti con estraordinarii segni di amorevolezza, et cortesi, l'altro in Marsala, al qual quanto prima col favor divino si dara principio. Sono entrati quell'anno nella Compagnia 41, morirono 15»[11].

The curriculum of the *Collegium Melitense*, which was to develop and expand over the next two centuries, was firmly rooted in the broader demands of the Tridentine vision of education and the Society's *ratio studiorum* (1599)[12]. Yet, it was also carefully adapted to Malta's frontier realities, providing its students with the intellectual formation and spiritual discipline needed to defend and advance Catholic identity in the face of both heretical currents and the proximity of Islam. Alongside this, the Jesuits promoted Marian devotion and the practice of the Spiritual Exercises, instruments that fostered interior renewal and communal reform. In this way, the Maltese mission must be understood not as an isolated undertaking, but as the concrete application of the Society's universal programme of reform – an expression of its capacity to adapt to local contexts while remaining faithful to its global mission of shaping Christian society in the Early Modern world.

Spiritual Challenges and Jesuit Responses: Reforming Conscience and Community

As argued, the Jesuits' pastoral outreach in Malta must be read against the backdrop of profound spiritual challenges that marked the island in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. As Dusina's 1575 apostolic visitation[13] revealed, the clergy often lacked proper formation. Similar to the ecclesial situation on the continent, many could not even recite the basic formulas of the sacraments. Meanwhile, absenteeism, benefice-hunting, and moral laxity weakened pastoral care. Among the laity, superstition frequently overshadowed doctrinal clarity[14], and both clergy and people alike were at risk (limited as it could be) of being affected by the infiltration of new Protestant ide-

[11] ARSI, Sicula Historia (Sic.), v. *183*, f. 94r: In the Mission of Malta 3. Two Colleges have been accepted: one in Malta, an island 60 miles distant from Sicily, by order of Pope Clement VIII, who sent a brief to this effect to the Cardinal Grand Master and the Bishop of that place, and dispensed that the 600 scudi of income, which were to be applied to the Seminary of Clerics, be used for the foundation of the College. For this reason, three of ours [Jesuits] went to that island, and they were received with extraordinary signs of affection and courtesy both by the Cardinal Grand Master and the Bishop, as well as by the Lords Knights. The other is in Marsala, which, with divine favour, will soon be established. That year, 41 entered the Society, and 15 died.

[12] C.N. Pavur S.J. (trans. and annot.), *The Ratio Studiorum: The Official Plan for Jesuit Education*, St. Louis (MO) 2005.

[13] *Documents at the Vatican (No. 1, Archivio Segreto Vaticano: Congregazione vescovi e regolari Malta: visita apostolica n. 51, Mgr Petrus Dusina, 1575)*, in *Documentary Sources of Maltese History*, eds. G. Aquilina-S. Fiorini, Malta 2005.

[14] C. Cassar, *Sex, Magic, and the Periwinkle: A Trial at the Malta Inquisition Tribunal in 1617*, Malta 2000; Idem, *Magic, Heresy, and the Broom-Riding Midwife Witch: The Inquisition Trial of Isabetta Caruana*, in *Proceedings of History Week 2003*, Malta 2003, pp. 25-41.

as circulating among the knights and literati[15]. Added to this were the unique pressures of Malta's cosmopolitan environment: a harbour melting pot of merchants, corsairs, Muslims, and Jews, all living in close contact under the eyes of the Hospitaller regime.

In this context, the Jesuits sought to promote the aims of the Tridentine reform by implementing a structured pastoral programme grounded in their *consueta ministeria*[16]. Their urban and rural missions in Valletta, the Borgo, Rabat, Gozo, and even Pantelleria followed a carefully structured rhythm of sermons, general confessions, catechesis, and acts of public reconciliation. The *Litterae annuae* record striking fruits: heretics abjuring their errors, courtesans abandoning lives of shame, and reconciliations between long-feuding families[17]. By way of example, the annual letter of 1612 vividly illustrates the scope and fruit of such an apostolate. That year, the *Collegium* consisted of only fourteen members – six Fathers, two teachers, and several coadjutors – yet its ministry extended far beyond its walls. The schools were so full that the masters could scarcely manage the numbers, and even lectures on cases of conscience attracted large audiences of knights and clergy. Preaching extended into different languages: sermons in Maltese and Italian were complemented by preaching in Arabic three times a week in the Jesuit church, yielding remarkable results in the form of general confessions and striking conversions, including women who abandoned illicit relationships, some of whom entered convents, while others regularised their unions in Christian marriage. Two Maltese Jesuits were also sent on a mission to Pantelleria, at the request of Bishop Marco La Cava (1605-26) of Mazara[18], where the absence of clergy for many years had left the population spiritually neglected; their ministry there produced «a grave result»[19], that is, a remarkable result. In Gozo in 1615, nearly the entire population reportedly confessed and received communion, turning the mission into what the Jesuits described as a general exorcism of communal life[20]. They simultaneously targeted the laity through Marian congregations – established for knights, artisans, students, and notables – which instilled a disciplined rhythm of prayer, catechesis, and works of mercy.

Meanwhile, in Valletta, the Fathers devoted themselves to catechising enslaved people, with several baptisms recorded – events often celebrated with extraordinary solemnity, music, and public festivity in the Jesuit church. Among these celebrated converts, one particularly stands out, Mohammed Attesi, son of the king of Fez, baptised as Balthazar Mendez de Loyola (Fig. 4), at the Jesuit church in 1656[21]. Their zeal also

---

15 C. Cassar, *The Enemy Within: The Roman Inquisition and the Control of Protestant Practices in Malta: 1561–1575*, in *Ecclesiastical Archives in Malta: Crossroads of Cultures and Religion, 1968–2018*, eds. S. Fiorini-W. Zammit, Mdina 2018, pp. 171-195.

16 N.J. Doublet, *Forging Faith at the Frontier: The Jesuit Mission in Hospitaller Malta (1592–1768)*, in *Casa Manresa in Floriana: A House of Formation*, ed. N.J. Doublet, Malta 2025, pp. 19-50.

17 ARSI, Sic., *v.183-186*; Sic. 196.

18 *Catholic-Hierarchy.org*, "Bishop Marco La Cava" (accessed on 2 October 2025): https://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/blacava.html.

19 ARSI, Sic. 1611–1625, *vol. 183*, n. II., ff.335-336.

20 ARSI, Sic.1611…, f. 339.

21 ARSI, Sic., 1670–1737, *vol. 185*, no. I, f. 247; cfr. C. Cassar, *The Collegium…*, 2015, pp. 443-462; G. Colombo, *Baldassare Loyola de Mandes (1631–1667), Prince de Fez et Jésuite*, Parigi 2014, pp. 159-192.

Fig. 4. Balthazar de Loyola, born Muhammed El Attaz (1631-67).

extended to the prisons, where, through preaching and confession, they moved even hardened criminals – a typical example being one who had not confessed in twenty years – to tears of repentance and general confession. Out of this ministry grew a small congregation of prisoners, "*come una congregazione*"[22], similar to their Marian ones, who began to recite the litanies together and to abstain from games, oaths, and dishonest speech.

From the outset, the Jesuits naturally gained the confidence of the resident Roman Inquisitor in Malta, serving as his regular consultors, while also becoming highly sought-after confessors. They ministered not only to the highest authorities of government, including the Grand Master himself, but also acted as spiritual directors for those entrusted to them by the Inquisition – convicts, or rather penitents, in need of guidance and reform. Among their number were eminent figures such as Fr. Anastasio Kircher[22] (1601-80), the German confessor of Prince Frederick, Landgrave of Hesse, renowned as a mathematician and physicist and remembered in Malta for his invention of the *specchio maltese* (*specula melitensis encyclica*), and Fr. Sebastiano Salelles of Oliva[23] (1574-1666), a Spaniard who had long served the Collegium and, after the disturbances of 1639, succeeded Giorgio Tagliavia as Rector. These examples illustrate how the Jesuits combined intellectual distinction with pastoral authority, reinforcing their role as trusted confessors and counsellors at every level of Maltese society[24].

In these Roman inquisitors, the Jesuits often found not only their principal defenders in Rome. A striking testimony to the esteem in which the Jesuits were held in early seventeenth-century Malta is found in the report of Inquisitor Evangelista Carbonese (1608-14) to the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars (17 July 1612)[25], prepared in response to Acquaviva's petition for the confirmation of revenues to the

[22] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Athanasius Kircher," last modified 13 July 2025 (accessed on 2 October 2025): https://www.britannica.com/biography/Athanasius-Kircher.

[23] F. Dallasta, *Un censore censurato: padre Sebastiano Salelles a Malta (1604–1666). L'avventurosa edizione della monumentale opera* De materiis tribunalium Sanctae Inquisitionis *(Roma, 1651–1656)*, in *The Roman Inquisition in Malta and Elsewhere*, conference proceedings, Malta 2017, pp. 30–42.

[24] P. Pecchiai, *Il Collegio…*, 1938, p. 165.

[25] P. Pecchiai, *Il Collegio…*, 1938, pp. 194-196. He reproduces in full the letter of Inquisitor Evangelista Carbonese in the appendix: *Relazione dell'Inquisitore di Malta Evangelista Carbonese a favor del Collegio dei Gesuit*i, 17 July 1612.

Collegium Melitense. Carbonese described the College as an «immense spiritual benefit» (*opportunum et omnimodum vitae spiritualis subsidium*) for the Maltese, who were «extremely needy of spiritual assistance, together with the foreign population continually flocking to the island». He praised in particular their works of preaching, catechesis in the vernacular, the establishment of pious houses for penitent women and endangered virgins, their missions in towns and villages, their lectures in cases of conscience, and their constant assistance to the Holy Office. Such merits, he argued, fully justified the financial provisions already granted to them by the Apostolic See. The five per cent diocesan levy (*media decima*), originally destined for a diocesan seminary under the Tridentine model, had been lawfully diverted to the Jesuit College by Clement VIII, who had erected it *in loco Seminarii*. Carbonese therefore judged that this union of benefices should be confirmed, since it allowed the Society to maintain its indispensable ministries. At the same time, he noted the inadequacy of their revenues – barely 900 scudi annually, out of which some 300 were absorbed by church expenses, lawsuits, and salaries – arguing that the Cathedral, with an income of over 2,000 scudi of which only a quarter was spent on worship, could well contribute an additional sum to relieve the Jesuits of constant debt and legal wrangling. Carbonese observed that among the Fathers there was one Frenchman to serve the knights of that *langue* and one Spaniard for those of the Spanish *langue*. Still, both groups were so numerous that he considered it necessary to add another Jesuit for each of them. He further noted that it would also be indispensable to provide one German and one Polish Jesuit, «*qui maximopere desiderantur*»[26], as these were notably lacking. For Carbonese, securing the College's stability was tantamount to ensuring the very conditions for Catholic reform in Malta[27].

Finally, in the closing section of his report – indeed, in a kind of peroration – Inquisitor Carbonese once more, and with even greater emphasis, drew the attention of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars to the immense spiritual benefits brought by the Jesuits in Malta. These, he wrote, were evident in their preaching, "especially in the Maltese tongue" (*praecipue melitensi lingua*), in the conferences held for the Knights, in their missions to towns and villages (more than fifty *oppida* to be evangelised), in their schools, in their lectures on cases of conscience – «in which the disciples of St Ignatius were always masters» – in their confessions and exhortations, in their services (*obsequia*) rendered to the Holy Office of the Inquisition itself, and in all their other spiritual ministries. Such merits, he concluded, surely justified the favour which both ecclesiastical and civil authorities had shown to the Jesuit College on the island.

These missions, as described, also made effective use of indulgences, jubilees, relics, and miraculous healings associated with Saint Ignatius, which channelled popular religiosity away from superstition and towards Catholic orthodoxy. Thus, what reform-mind-

[26] P. Pecchiai, *Il Collegio*…,1938, p. 155.
[27] P. Pecchiai, *Il Collegio*…,1938, pp. 153-155.

ed priests like Don Antonio Bartolo[28] and Don Filippo Borg (1566-1649)[29] had begun locally, was amplified by the Jesuits' presence: a comprehensive programme of Tridentine renewal, aimed not only at individual conversion but also at the moral reform of society, the reconciliation of its divisions, and the embedding of Catholic identity on a Mediterranean frontier that was at once culturally diverse and spiritually fragile.

Financial Strains and Political Fractures: Further Challenges Faced by the Jesuit Mission

From their very foundation in 1592, the Jesuits in Malta faced significant financial challenges. Although backed by papal authority and an initial endowment, the income they were promised – drawn from benefices and the episcopal mensa – often remained inaccessible due to existing incumbents, delays, or clerical resistance. In the early 1600s, the Jesuits even threatened to withdraw unless funds were restored, prompting papal intervention and a revised agreement in 1603[30].

Their arrival in Malta was supported by high-ranking ecclesiastics, including the Bishop, Gargallo himself, the Vicar general Don Antonio Bartolo (1533–1608)[31], high-ranking hospitallers, and even several influential local families, who would become their great benefactors, through the establishhment of chapels at *Il Gesù* (Figg. 5-6), significant property endownments, and mass legacies, all animated, at least'prima facie' by the spirit of reform driven by Tridentine ideals. However, not everyone favoured their establishment in Malta. As Padre Leanza observed in recounting the history of the College's foundation, the fierce resistance the Jesuits encountered from the local clergy – particularly in securing the financial endowments granted to them by the Roman Pontiff, which significant elements among the diocesan hierarchy perceived as detrimental to their own interests – could, in part, be explained by reference to a contemporary sixteenth-century description of the Maltese temperament: "genus hominum salubri corpore, victu tenui, industriosum, patiens laboris et bellicosum"[32]. While this characterisation may appear more chivalric than analytic, it nonetheless underscores the cultural and institutional obstinacy that shaped the clerical opposition to the Jesuit presence on the island. The clergy accused the Jesuits of subverting the

[28] V. Borg, *Melita…*, 2009, pp. 158-164; ACM, *Prebende* 1, f. 61v; ACM, *Misc.* 247, ff. 67r sgg. As Vincent Borg notes, the complete list of the contents of his library has been transcribed in this manuscript.

[29] V. Borg, *Melita…,* 2009, pp. 200-208.

[30] N.J. Doublet, *Negotiating Faith: The Jesuit Struggle for Revenues and Influence in Hospitaller Malta (1592–1768),* in *Jesuit Conflicts: Power, Encounter, and the Outer World*, eds. R. A. Maryks-R. Ehalt-E. Frei, II, Leiden (forthcoming).

[31] V. Borg, *Melita…*, 2009, pp. 158–164; ACM, *Misc.* 247, ff. 67r and following. As Vincent Borg notes, the complete list of the contents of his library has been transcribed in this manuscript.

[32] A. Leanza, *I Gesuiti in Malta al tempo dei Cavalieri Gerosolimitani. Conferenza tenuta nell'Aula Magna dell'Università di Malta il 2 Maggio 1934*, Malta 1934, p. 6; G. Juvencio, *Historia Societatis Jesu*, pars V, tomus posterior, Roma 1710, p. 279. As Pecchiai notes, the most accurate concise account of the foundation of the Maltese College remains that found in G. Juvencio, *Historia…*, 1710, p. 279.

Fig. 5. Valletta, The Church of the Circumcision of the Lord - Jesuits' Church, Main façade.

Fig. 6. Valletta, The Church of the Circumcision of the Lord - Jesuits' Church, Aisle with pulpit and confessionals.

original intent of the 1591 synodal decree, contending that the benefices and revenues had been unjustly diverted from diocesan control to a Roman-approved institution outside episcopal governance. They maintained that these resources should rightfully have supported a seminary under the direct oversight of the bishop and cathedral chapter, as envisaged by the Tridentine model. Compounding their resentment was the belief that the Jesuits had obtained papal approval for these grants through *surreptitious* means (*per viam surreptionis*)[33], allegedly concealing from Rome the actual ecclesiastical context and the viability of a diocesan seminary. Such accusations became a recurring theme in the clergy's legal arguments, fueling a long series of disputes. Litigation was the principal weapon in this campaign. As each benefice assigned to the Jesuits became vacant, the clergy launched appeals to Roman congregations in an effort to reclaim them, often invoking the principle of *necessitas ecclesiae* to argue for the greater good of the local Church. Thus, the very sources of the Jesuits' apparent institutional strength – endowments, benefices, and jurisdictional privileges – immediately became flashpoints for conflict, particularly with the secular clergy. The most controversial issue was their appropriation of the *media decima*, a diocesan tax intended to fund seminaries. Despite

[33] The expression "per viam surreptionis" refers to a canonical legal concept denoting a petition or rescript obtained through omission, concealment, or misrepresentation of essential facts, thereby rendering the act invalid or at least contestable. In the Maltese context, the secular clergy frequently accused the Jesuits of securing papal briefs and endowments per viam surreptionis, alleging that the Society had withheld information about the 1591 diocesan synod's decree establishing a seminary, thus misleading the Holy See into believing no such provision had yet been made. See P. Pecchiai, *Il Collegio…*, 1938, p. 145.

a decisive *motu proprio* from Pope Paul V in 1612 confirming the Jesuits' rights, financial tensions persisted, draining the College's energy and resources for decades (Fig. 7).

Politically, the Jesuits also found themselves caught in a delicate balance between support from the Grand Masters and pressure from certain elements within the Order of St. John. The 1639 Carnival riot, instigated by knights angered by Jesuit interventions in moral reforms, led to a temporary expulsion and underscored their fragile position. Following their expulsion, Grand Master Giovanni Paolo Lascaris (1636-57) (Fig. 8), supported by Inquisitor Fabio Chigi, hastened to justify himself to Cardinal Barberini, the Order's ambassador Estampes Valansé, and the Jesuit General Muzio Vitelleschi, S.J. (1563–1645)[34]. In his letters, Lascaris not only expressed regret but also made proposals that revealed both inconsistency and opportunism: he suggested that the *Collegium Melitense* be placed under the direct authority of the Jesuit General rather than the Province, and even pressed for the suppression of its schools, arguing that Malta required soldiers and sailors rather than men of letters. Among Lascaris's proposals, therefore, two stand out for their far-reaching implications: first, he recommended that the Jesuit College be internationalised, reflecting the linguistic and national diversity of the Order of St John, whose structure was defined by its various *Langues*. By calling for Jesuit personnel to be drawn from a broader international pool, rather than remaining predominantly Sicilian or Italian, he sought to diminish suspicions of partiality and to embed the College more firmly within the socio-political fabric of the Order. Second, he suggested dismantling the academic function of the *Collegium Melitense*, reducing it to a narrowly spiritual or pastoral institution. Such a reform would have severely undermined one of the Society's principal missions in Malta – education and the formation of clergy – thereby striking at the very foundation of the Jesuit enterprise on the island.

These proposals, however, were firmly rejected by the Jesuit Superior General in Rome, who considered them a threat to the Society's autonomy, its pedagogical model, and its universalist identity. While some minor personnel adjustments were conceded as a gesture of goodwill, the fundamental structure and academic purpose of the College remained intact, thanks to the backing of Rome and the continuing political capital of the Jesuits. Ultimately, the matter was resolved with leniency: a papal brief lifted the censures incurred by the Knights, requiring only the symbolic offering of a silver lamp – an act that the Jesuits declined to efface, thereby preserving the memory of the affront. Relations were soon restored, and the Jesuits returned to their work, carefully cautioned by their superiors against political interference. This episode illustrates how deeply the Jesuit mission in Malta was embedded within broader ecclesiastical and political dynamics. Even powerful local authorities, such as the Grand Master, could not unilaterally reshape the mission of a papally protected institution. In the aftermath, relations between Jesuits and Knights reportedly improved.

[34] P. Pecchiai, *Il Collegio…*,1938, pp. 166-168.

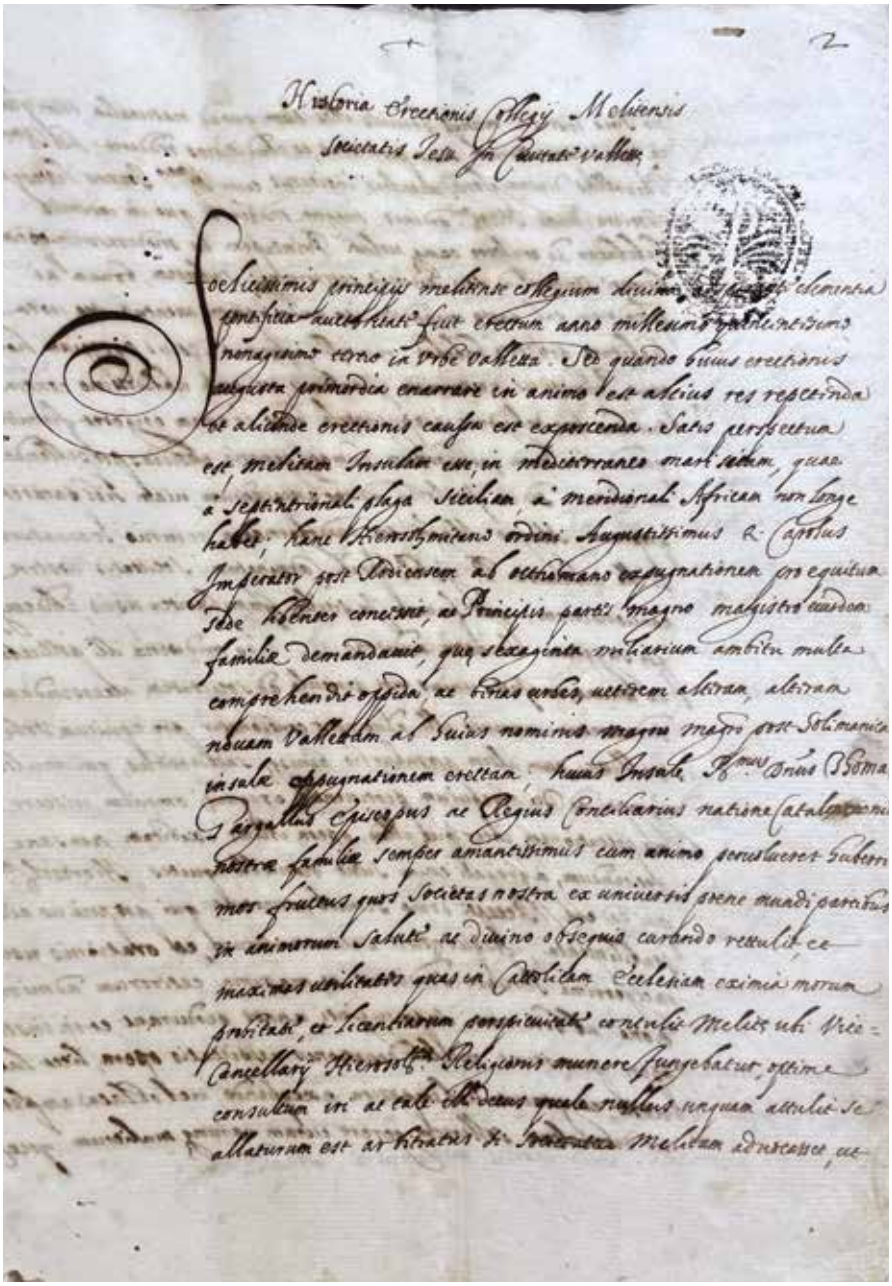

Fig. 7. ACM, *Acta Collegii Soc Iesu*, Ms. 247: an account of the foundation and early years of the College.

Fig. 8. Grand Master Giovanni Paolo Lascaris di Ventimiglia e Castellar (r. 1636-57).

While Jesuit historiography – most notably P. Leanza[35] – sought to downplay the significance of the rupture by portraying it as nothing more than a disorderly outburst of youthful excess, akin to student riots elsewhere, recent scholarship has emphasised its deeper roots. D. F. Allen interprets the incident as the climax of mounting tensions between the Society of Jesus and the Order of St. John, underscoring the Jesuits' perceived encroachment upon the Knights' cultural and moral autonomy, exemplified in this case by their opposition to carnival festivities and insistence on papal jurisdiction. He highlights how the Society's perceived elitism and interference in civic life generated hostility not only among the Knights but also within Maltese clerical circles. Building on this, Emmanuel Buttigieg situates the expulsion within the broader social and political dynamics of seventeenth-century Malta, stressing that the Jesuits' close association with Grand Master Lascaris, their collaboration with the Inquisition, and their influential role as confessors and censors fostered resentment and suspicion. For Buttigieg, the episode must also be understood against the backdrop of European anxieties about Jesuit political influence, reflecting broader tensions over class, authority, and resistance to centralisation. Both scholars thus challenge the traditional minimisation of the affair, instead framing 1639 as a significant episode in the contested evolution of Counter-Reformation power structures and the uneasy coexistence of the competing demands of a militant aristocracy and the Jesuits' missionary zeal[36].

Renewed Political Challenges and Expulsion

By the mid-eighteenth century, the Jesuits' position in Malta had become increasingly precarious. The same institutional resilience that had enabled them to withstand decades of litigation over benefices, the *media decima*, and the Seminary now collided

[35] A. Leanza, *I Gesuiti…* 1934, p. 6; Cfr also G. Juvencio, *Historia…*, 1710, p. 279; A. Mifsud, *L'Espulsione dei Gesuiti da Malta nel 1768 e le loro Temporalità*, in "Archivum Melitense", II (1913), pp. 113-166, 273-325; P. Pecchiai, *Il Collegio…*, 1938, pp. 129-202, 273-325.

[36] E. Buttigieg, *Knights, Jesuits, Carnival, and the Inquisition in Seventeenth-Century Malta*, in "The Historical Journal", LV/3 (2012), pp. 571-596; D.F. Allen, *Anti-Jesuit Rioting by Knights of St John during the Malta Carnival of 1639*, in "Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu", LXV/129 (1996), pp. 3-30.

with a new climate of political hostility shaped by Enlightenment currents and Bourbon anti-Jesuit policies. Though they had consolidated an impressive educational programme – by the 1720s conferring doctorates in philosophy and theology and expanding their curriculum in line with the *Ratio studiorum* – their influence increasingly provoked unease among both the secular clergy and segments of the Hospitaller Order. Tensions with other religious orders, particularly the Dominicans, and suspicions about foreign influence added to this atmosphere of distrust.

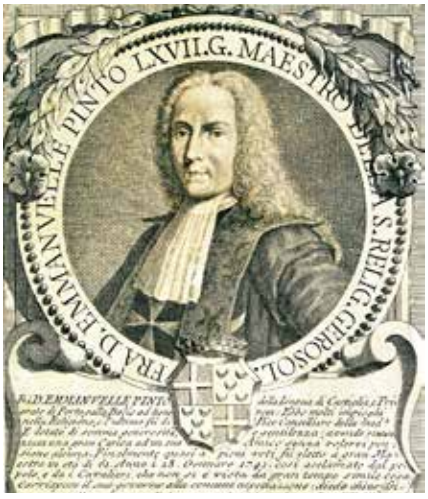

Fig. 9. Grand Master Manuel Pinto da Fonseca (r. 1741-73).

In 1768, under Grand Master Manuel Pinto da Fonseca (1741-73) (Fig. 9), the Jesuits were finally expelled from Malta, their suppression hastened by pressure from the Neapolitan minister Bernardo Tanucci, whose anti-Jesuit campaign across Bourbon territories left the Grand Master little room for manoeuvre[37]. The decisive blow came on 23 April 1768, when the Jesuits were formally summoned at their College in Valletta and, listed one by one, informed of their impending expulsion. Their names, ages, provinces, and offices were recorded, while two members were noted as absent on a mission outside the College. The fiscal advocate of the Gran Corte Castellania, Giovanni Battista Prevost, acting on the orders of Grand Master Pinto, publicly read the edict which echoed the broader Bourbon suppressions: «*siamo venuti, secondando le dette massime sin ora sempre praticate, alla determinazione di comandare, siccome con le presenti comandiamo, l'espulsione da questo nostro Dominio di tutti gl'individui di detta Società, proibendo loro ed agli altri che professano lo stesso Istituto il ritorno per tutti i tempi avvenire*»[38].

The edict justified the measure by reference to the expulsions already carried out in the Kingdom of Naples, citing in reference to the said Kingdom, «*delitti gravissimi di Stato*», and explicitly ordered that all members of the Society of Jesus be expelled from Malta and prohibited from ever returning. At the same time, it directed that the confiscated properties of the *Collegium Melitense* be entrusted to the *Procuratori al Comun Tesoro*, who were charged with administering pious foundations and ensuring that each Jesuit would receive a pension of eighty Roman scudi. The tone was one of severity, yet it was tempered with instructions to treat the Fathers «*con ogni atto di umanità, carità cristiana*

[37] R. Ellul-Micallef, *Roberto Ranieri Costaguti: From Pulpit to Chair to Bishop's See*, Malta 2018, pp. 31-133.
[38] National Library Malta, *AOM 1993*, ff. 5–14, 112–115.

ed attenzione sino al loro imbarco» for Civitavecchia, underscoring both the gravity of their removal and the recognition of their long presence on the island.

Yet this expulsion, dramatic though it was, did not erase their imprint on Maltese religious and cultural life. The College had for nearly two centuries been the crucible of clerical formation, lay education, and moral reform. The devotions they fostered, ranging from Marian and Eucharistic devotions to popular missions, and the institutions they established, from schools to sodalities, had become deeply ingrained in the island's Catholic fabric. Even stripped of their presence, the values and structures they had instilled endured, shaping the trajectory of Maltese Catholicism well beyond the eighteenth century and eventually setting the groundwork for the re-established Society's return in the nineteenth century. The suppression of 1768 thus marked not an erasure but a transformation: the closing of one chapter of Jesuit influence in Malta, and the persistence of their legacy through the very ecclesiastical culture they had helped to mould.

Conclusion – Jesuits as Reformers in a Cosmopolitan Frontier

The history of the Jesuits in Hospitaller Malta reveals a mission defined as much by negotiation as by zeal. Their presence was forged at the intersection of Tridentine ideals, papal patronage, and local resistance. Throughout their nearly two centuries on the island, the '*antica Compagnia*' constantly confronted the realities of limited resources, contested benefices, and the political volatility of a Mediterranean stronghold. Spiritually, they brought renewal to both clergy and laity, countering ignorance, superstition, and heterodoxy with catechesis, missions, and pastoral care. Financially, they endured relentless challenges to their revenues, transforming litigation and deficit into opportunities for institutional resilience. Politically, they were at once courted and opposed by different elements of the Hospitaller Order, and ultimately fell victim to Enlightenment-era pressures that no papal brief could withstand.

Yet the expulsion of 1768 did not erase their work. The *Collegium Melitense* had shaped generations of clergy and laity; their missions, congregations, and devotions had left indelible marks on Malta's Catholic life; and their intellectual and archival legacy persisted long after their suppression. The Jesuit mission in Malta thus stands as a microcosm of the wider Catholic Reformation: a story of conflict and reform, of endurance amid opposition, and of faith painstakingly negotiated in the crucible of a frontier society.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Archivum Cathedralis Melitensis (ACM), *Misc. 247*.

ACM, *Prebende* 1.

Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI), Fondo Gesuitico, *Instrumentorum*, vol. 78.

ARSI, Sicula Historia (Sic.) 1611-1625.

ARSI, Sic., 1670–1737.

National Library Malta, *AOM 1993*.

Secondary Sources

G.F. Abela, *Malta Illustrata*, I, Malta 1772.

D.F. Allen, *Anti-Jesuit Rioting by Knights of St John during the Malta Carnival of 1639*, in "Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu", LXV/129 (1996).

V. Borg, *Melita Sacra: The Maltese Diocese during the Sixteenth Century*, II, Malta 2009.

E. Buttigieg, *Knights, Jesuits, Carnival, and the Inquisition in Seventeenth-Century Malta*, in "The Historical Journal", LV/3 (2012).

E. Buttigieg, *Negotiating Encounters, Controlling Spaces: Official Meetings Between Grand Masters and Inquisitors in Valletta and Vittoriosa*, in *The Roman Inquisition in Malta and Elsewhere*, eds. M. Abdilla Cunningham-K. Cassar-G. Vella, Kalkara 2017.

C. Cassar, *Sex, Magic, and the Periwinkle: A Trial at the Malta Inquisition Tribunal in 1617*, Malta 2000.

C. Cassar, *Magic, Heresy, and the Broom-Riding Midwife Witch: The Inquisition Trial of Isabetta Caruana*, in *Proceedings of History Week 2003*, Malta 2003.

C. Cassar, *The Collegium Melitense: A Frontier Mission in the Interface Between the Christian and Muslim Worlds*, in "Al-Qantara", 36, 2 (2015).

C. Cassar, *The Enemy Within: The Roman Inquisition and the Control of Protestant Practices in Malta: 1561–1575*, in *Ecclesiastical Archives in Malta: Crossroads of Cultures and Religion, 1968–2018*, eds. S. Fiorini-W. Zammit, Mdina 2018.

G. Colombo, *Baldassare Loyola de Mandes (1631–1667), Prince de Fez et Jésuite*, Parigi 2014.

F. Dallasta, *Un censore censurato: padre Sebastiano Salelles a Malta (1604–1666). L'avventurosa edizione della monumentale opera* De materiis tribunalium Sanctae

Inquisitionis *(Roma, 1651–1656)*, in *The Roman Inquisition in Malta and Elsewhere*, conference proceedings, Malta 2017.

Documentary Sources of Maltese History, eds. G. Aquilina-S. Fiorini, Malta 2005.

N.J. Doublet, *A Brief Introduction to the Foundation of the Onorati Oratory in Valletta*, in *Scientiae et Patriae: Festschrift in Honour of Maroma Camilleri*, eds. G. Farrugia-T. Vella, Malta 2024.

N.J. Doublet, *Forging Faith at the Frontier: The Jesuit Mission in Hospitaller Malta (1592–1768)*, in *Casa Manresa in Floriana: A House of Formation*, ed. N.J. Doublet, Malta 2025.

N.J. Doublet, *Jurisdictional Struggles Between Bishop and Grand Master in Malta in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century*, in "Religions", 16 (2025).

N.J. Doublet, *Negotiating Faith: The Jesuit Struggle for Revenues and Influence in Hospitaller Malta (1592–1768)*, in *Jesuit Conflicts: Power, Encounter, and the Outer World*, eds. R. A. Maryks-R. Ehalt-E. Frei, II, Leiden (forthcoming).

R. Ellul-Micallef, *Roberto Ranieri Costaguti: From Pulpit to Chair to Bishop's See*, Malta 2018.

A. Ferris, *Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, Malta 1866.

S. Fiorini, *The Collegium Melitense and the Universitas Studiorum to 1798*, in *Yesterday's Schools: Readings in Maltese Educational History*, ed. R.G. Sultana, Malta 2017.

G. Juvencio, *Historia Societatis Jesu*, pars V, tomus posterior, Roma 1710.

A. Leanza, *I Gesuiti in Malta al tempo dei Cavalieri Gerosolimitani. Conferenza tenuta nell'Aula Magna dell'Università di Malta il 2 Maggio 1934*, Malta 1934.

A. Luttrell, *The Island Order State on Rhodes*, in *Islands and Military Orders*, eds. E. Buttigieg-S. Phillips, Farnham 2013.

J.W. O'Malley, *Was Ignatius Loyola a Church Reformer? How to Look at Early Modern Catholicism*, in "The Catholic Historical Review," 77, 2 (1991).

A. Mifsud, *L'Espulsione dei Gesuiti da Malta nel 1768 e le loro Temporalità*, in "Archivum Melitense", II (1913).

C.N. Pavur S.J. (trans. and annot.), *The Ratio Studiorum: The Official Plan for Jesuit Education*, St. Louis (MO) 2005.

P. Pecchiai, *Il Collegio dei Gesuiti a Malta (1592–1768)*, in "Archivio Storico di Malta", IX (1938).

S. Phillips, *The Hospitallers and Concepts of Island Existence*, in *Islands and Military Orders*, eds. E. Buttigieg-S. Phillips, Farnham 2013.