In the footsteps of Overbeck: the context for Giuseppe Hyzler's altarpiece of *St Ignatius of Loyola* – aesthetics, spirituality and piety in Romantic Malta

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If in his *Self-Portrait*, painted during his Roman sojourn[1], the thirty-four year old Maltese painter Giuseppe Hyzler (1787-1858), represents himself in full Nazarene garb: beret, cloak, long hair, and immersed in the religious ethos of the Eternal City (Fig. 1) – proudly announcing his full adherence and commitment to the ideals of the Brotherhood of St Luke – his true artistic testament is enshrined in the huge altarpiece representing *The Virgin of Manresa appearing to St Ignatius of Loyola* (Fig. 2). This work still hangs *in situ* as the titular altarpiece for the church adjoining the *Casa degli Esercizi Spirituali*[2] of St Calcedonius or Santa Domenica on the outskirts of Victoria, Gozo[3] (Fig. 3). The main aim of this short study is to highlight the strong artistic merits of a work which deserves to be much better known, arguing for its rightful place in the development of Romanticism in Malta, but also positioning it within its larger international context. It is indeed its international flavour which makes it one of the most representative works of this epoch, but also one of the highlights in the entire development of art in Malta.

This paper puts forward the following considerations: (i) it posits the work within an intimate stylistic and ideological proximity to the works of the leader of the Nazarene movement, the great German painter Johann Friedrich Overbeck (1789-1969) and his circle; (ii) it places the work in pivotal position not only within Hyzler's own oeuvre, but especially within the development of art in Malta in the first half of the nineteenth century; (iii) it examines the mechanics of the commission on the basis of extant documentation and circumstantial evidence; and (iv) finally it considers the work within the context

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1 A. Espinosa Rodriguez, *The Nazarene Movement and its Impact on Maltese Nineteenth Century Art*, unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Malta 1997, pp. 90-91. The work is inscribed at the back: *Autoritratto di Giuseppe Hyzler Pittore a Roma 1821*.

2 A. Ferres, *Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, Malta 1866, p. 571.

3 The retreat-house and its church are known under different names, including St Calcedonius, Santa Domenica (or Dminka among the local population), and Manresa. On the same site, a small church dedicated to St Martin of Tours, also known as Santa Marija tal-Ħerba, survived until the early nineteenth century, when it made way for the retreat-house.

of Ignatian Spirituality and the Jesuit mission, and discusses parallels between the Santa Casa of St Calcedonius and *Casa Manresa* in Floriana which was clearly intended to emulate the mid-eighteenth century Jesuit project in Malta in early nineteenth-century Gozo.

The Nazarenes, Overbeck and Hyzler

The *Lukasbrüder* or the Brotherhood of St Luke was formed in Vienna on 10 July 1809 as «a breakaway group to challenge official teaching methods and standards»[4] at the city's academy which was at the time led by the academic painter Heinrich Füger (1751-1818)[5]. The group, led by the sickly Franz Pforr (1788-1812) and Friedrich

Fig. 1. Giuseppe Hyzler, 1821, *Self-Portrait*, oil on canvas, Valletta, MUŻA. Photo Credit: Courtesy of Heritage Malta.

Fig. 2. Giuseppe Hyzler, c. 1833, *The Virgin of Manresa appearing to St Ignatius of Loyola*, Victoria, Gozo, Church of the Virgin of Manresa, Manresa Retreat House. Photo Credit: Daniel Cilia.

[4] W. Vaughan, *Romantic Art*, London 1978, p. 111.
[5] K. Andrews, *The Nazarenes: A Brotherhood of German Painters in Rome*, Oxford 1964, p. 5.

Overbeck, «looked to the Middle Ages as an age of faith which they sought to revive in their own lives, while taking German and Italian art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as the basis of their own».[6] Indeed, the Medieval Revival was one of the fundamental components of the multi-faceted Romantic movement, which many times was imbued with a sense of nostalgia for a lost past. In formulating their aesthetic concepts and artistic choices, Overbeck and his friends were stimulated by the writings of the great German Romantic writers and philosophers such as Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853) and Wilhelm Wackenroder (1773-98). Their yearning for the Christian spirit of the past and their desire to revive German art, pushed them to travel to Rome, to 'Holy Rome' as they called it. For two years they established themselves in the disused monastery of San Isidoro a Capo le Case on the Pincio. From the start, the Nazarenes, as they came to be derisively nicknamed in Rome, also developed a deep admiration for the great Raphael (1483-1520), and their regular visits to the Vatican brought them ever closer to his work[7].

Fig. 3. Church of the Virgin of Manresa, Victoria, Gozo, interior view. Photo Credit: Daniel Cilia.

By the time Giuseppe Hyzler reached Rome in 1814[8], Pforr had died and the group had moved out of San Isidoro with Overbeck becoming the movement's leader. The Brotherhood in its original sense had virtually disbanded, and Overbeck had converted to Roman Catholicism. Unfortunately, Hyzler's precise movements during his long Roman sojourn are hardly documented: it is not known, for example, how he was introduced to Overbeck and his circle, and what level of collaborative relationship he had with them while in Rome. His German lineage might have possibly attracted him to the German painters. This notwithstanding, he came to establish a lifelong friendship with the German master which is well documented through correspondence.[9] Although Hyzler's name is never mentioned in any of the international literature on the Nazarenes, he must have been around at the time Overbeck collaborated with Peter von Cornelius (1783-1867), Philipp Veit (1793-1877)

6 D. Blaney Brown, *Romanticism*, London 2001, p. 224.
7 K. Andrews, *The Nazarenes...*, 1964, p. 24.
8 A. Espinosa Rodriguez, *The Nazarene Movement…*, 1997, p. 98; E. Fiorentino, *Il-Pittura f'Malta fis-Seklu Dsatax*, Malta 2006, pp. 33-34.
9 A. Espinosa Rodriguez, *The Nazarene Movement…*, 1997, pp. 98-99.

Fig. 4. Johann Friedrich Overbeck, 1840, *The Triumph of Religion in the Arts*, oil on canvas, Frankfurt, Städel Museum.

and others on the fresco decoration of Casa Bartholdy (1816-17) and Villa Massimo (1817-29). During Hyzler's Roman stay, the German artists also put up an exhibition at Palazzo Caffarelli on the Campidoglio in 1819, which was met with mixed reactions[10]. In a posthumous article published in 1863, *L'Arte* talks about Hyzler's friendship with Veit, Cornelius, Overbeck, Antonio Canova (1757-1822), Pietro Tenerani (1789-1869) and Tommaso Minardi (1787-1871)[11].

The splendid extent to which Hyzler came to absorb the manner of his German friends in Rome, and particularly that of Overbeck, can be fully grasped in the Gozo altarpiece of the Virgin of Manresa. Hyzler's oeuvre fluctuates in quality and invention, but occasionally he could reach consummate heights and manifest his abilities in all their potential. This is one of those moments when Maltese art breaks through its general insularity and connects itself with the international milieu. In its proximity to Nazarene essence, it is joined by some of the works of his younger brother Vincenzo (1813-49), possibly more gifted than his elder brother. Vincenzo's works include the altarpiece of the *Crucifixion with St Charles Borromeo*, produced for the Istituto della Carità at Stresa on Lake Maggiore (c.1843), and the *St Andrew* at Żejtun parish church (1846)[12].

It is, nonetheless, in the Gozo altarpiece that Overbeck's character is fully emulated, evoking «a mood of chaste purity reflected in the limpid quality of the light and in the subdued autumnal tonality of the gently modulated colours»[13]. The subject of St Ignatius writing his Spiritual Exercises under the guidance of the Virgin Mary in a cave outside the town of Manresa, on the banks of the Cardoner River, where the founder of the Jesuit Order is known to have undergone an ascetic experience living in a cave for ten months,[14] is rendered in simple and straightforward terms. It is yet dressed in a noticeable aura of silence which induces the spectator into a meditative ambience: the viewer comes to

[10] S.A. Meyer, *"Servo di due padroni": la mostra dei Nazareni nel 1819 nelle lettere degli artisti*, in *Lettere d'Artista: per una storia transnazionale dell'arte*, eds. G. Capitelli et al., Milan 2022, pp. 50-61.

[11] "L'Arte", a. 1, no. 7, 22 February 1863.

[12] A. Espinosa Rodriguez, *The Nazarene Movement…*, 1997, pp. 123-130.

[13] M. Buhagiar, *Paintings in Gozo – A concise analytical history*, in *Gozo: The Roots of an Island*, ed. C. Cini, Rome 1990, p. 111.

[14] D. Velandia Onofre, *Word and image in Saint Ignatius of Loyola: the shaping of visual culture in Spain after the Council of Trent*, in "Word & Image", 34:4, 2018, p. 333.

share Ignatius' spiritual transformation, visually assisted by the delicate linear rendition of all the painting's components. This sensitive linearity is reminiscent of important works across Overbeck's long career, including the *Miracle of the Roses* at S. Maria degli Angeli, Assisi (1819), the *Triumph of Religion in the Arts* in Frankfurt (1840) (Fig. 4) and *Christ Persecuted by the Jews* at the Vatican (1857). Chromatic clarity, compositional lucidity, modulation of surfaces, delicacy of touch, articulation of drapery folds, interpretation of landscape: all speak of Hyzler's absorption of Overbeck's language. Passages in the Gozo altarpiece can be compared, for example, to the *Portrait of Vittoria Caldoni* (1821) at the Neue Pinakothek, Munich. As in the foreground of Hyzler's work, it includes natural forms rendered with a botanical precision of touch. Hyzler's long exposure to the Nazarenes' ideas in Rome permitted him to fully immerse himself in their mission, to follow their method and intimately engage with their aesthetic preferences.

«Overbeck was known as the Raphael of the Brotherhood»[15]. Hyzler's altarpiece pays tribute to the impact of Raphael's oeuvre on the Nazarenes. The Virgin and Child enthroned on a bank of clouds and flanked by two pairs of little winged cherubs are a reminder of Raphael's centrality to the credo of the Nazarenes. Raphael was also adopted by the Purists under Minardi. It is then perhaps not a coincidence, that the mannered cartouche-carrying angel bears witness to the art of Pietro Vannucci (Il Perugino) (1446-1523) which strongly influenced Minardi's artistic language during his Perugia sojourn (1819-21)[16].

A leading Romantic spirit in Malta

The Gozo Manresa altarpiece celebrates the stylistic shift in sacred art in Malta in the first half of the nineteenth century: symptomatic of Romantic reaction against the exuberance of earlier artistic expression, echoing the Nazarenes' «resolve to break with the artistic tradition of the baroque and the rococo»[17]. With its nostalgic and revivalist roots, the art and artistic climate created by Giuseppe Hyzler in Malta is one of the most important manifestations of Romanticism on the island. Back in Malta in 1822, Hyzler sought to establish Nazarene ideals with an almost missionary zeal, gradually purging the islands to a significiant extent from the outmoded theatricality of Baroque commissions. Hyzler was largely responsible for the change in Maltese artistic taste in religious painting from Baroque to Renaissance Revival between the 1830s and the 1860s. This was especially possible through his students who after their return from Rome in the 1830s – where they consolidated their Nazarene and Purist inclinations through personal contact with Overbeck

[15] D. Blayney Brown, *Romanticism*, London 2001, p. 225.
[16] Details in S. Susinno, *Disegni di Tommaso Minardi*, Rome 1982, pp. 78-80.
[17] L. Gossman, *Unwilling Moderns: the Nazarene Painters of the Nineteenth Century*, in "Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide", vol. 2, no. 3, 2003.

Fig. 5a. Giuseppe Hyzler, c. 1822, *The Virgin of the Rosary*, pencil and watercolour on paper, Valletta, MUŻA. Photo Credit: Courtesy of Heritage Malta.

Fig. 5b. Giuseppe Hyzler, c.1822, *The Virgin of the Rosary*, pencil on paper, Malta, Private Collection. Photo Credit: Abner Cassar.

and Tommaso Minardi[18] – continued to spread these aesthetic preferences. By mid-century, Overbeck and Minardi in Malta were presented as the two luminaries to be followed by Maltese artists[19]. In fact, their manner can be experienced in the work of a whole group of artists who included Salvatore Busuttil (1798-1854) and Pietro Paolo Caruana (1793-1852), both important exponents of a Romantic art based on Roman currents.

By the 1830s and the 1840s, Hyzler rose to prominence and was widely consulted by both Church and the colonial government. Other important works include the large *Virgin of the Rosary* at the Valletta Dominican church – the work which actually announced his new style at the very heart of the capital – for which three known pencil drawings, including two at MUŻA (Inv. No.1463/C10, 41.2 x 27.8cm, Fig. 5a) and one in a private collection (54 x 39.5cm (incl. frame), Fig. 5b) survive. In the absence of any known drawings for the Gozo altarpiece, these

[18] G. Capitelli, *Mecenatismo pontificio e borbonico alla vigilia dell'Unità*, Rome 2011, pp. 181-184.

[19] M. Sagona, *From Center to Periphery: International Collaboration in Mid-Nineteenth Century Rome and the Artistic Milieu for a Silver Commission for Malta*, in "Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide", vol. 23, no. 1, 2024.

assist in understanding Hyzler's process of preparation.

This serious, attentive preparation and articulate feeling to line is also manifested in another striking drawing for the altarpiece of the Virgin of Mount Carmel at Lija parish church, also at MUŻA (Inv. No.1547/C10, 45.8 x 33cm, Fig. 6). A growing maturity is noticeable, anticipating the Gozo altarpiece. Additionally, Hyzler's impact can be gauged through a growing linear and motionless character in the works of Maltese sculptors, particularly in those of Antonio Chircop (1798-1869), Pietro Paolo Azzopardi (1791-1875) – who occasionally also worked from Hyzler's designs, and Salvatore Dimech (1804-1886)[20].

Fig. 6. Giuseppe Hyzler, c. 1830, *The Virgin of Mount Carmel*, Valletta, MUŻA. Photo Credit: Courtesy of Heritage Malta.

Hyzler was also a catalyst in the development of the decorative arts, being pivotal in the introduction of Renaissance Revival design currents on the island[21], thus helping in the metamorphosis of artistic taste in Malta. Among his most significant contributions to the field are the two remarkable parcel-gilt antependia for the high altars for Mdina Cathedral and St Helen's, Birkirkara, both executed by the noteworthy silversmith Saverio Cannataci (1783-after 1857), who belonged to Hyzler's own generation. In the context of the Gozo altarpiece, that for Birkirkara, produced in 1844, as attested by the silvermarks punched on the artefact, is particularly relevant. Here, the antependium is conceived as an altarpiece of the *Adoration of the Holy Lamb*. Full-figure angels kneel in adoration on a bank of clouds and the repeated winged cherub-heads which run across on a semi-circular band, bring to mind the little heads which animate the backdrop of the Virgin and Child in the Gozo altarpiece. The superb scaled-down drawing for this extraordinary work (24 x 42cm (incl. frame) Fig. 7), yet again emphasises Hyzler's

[20] See F. Attard, *International Artistic Influences in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Sculpture in Malta (1830-1870): Stylistic Change and Resistance*, unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Malta 2024, pp.113-123; M. Sagona, *The artistic context for Salvatore Dimech's* Annunciation of the Virgin *at* Ħal *Balzan parish church: a critical and analytical study*, in *Il-Vara Titulari ta' Ħal Balzan 1869-2019*, ed. C. Bezzina, Malta 2019, pp. 53-91.

[21] M. Sagona, *Malta and the Renaissance Revival: Ecclesiastical decorative arts at the crossroads of Britian and Italy*, in "The Decorative Arts Society 1850 to the Present, Journal 39", London 2015, pp. 11-39.

Fig. 7. Giuseppe Hyzler, c. 1844, *Drawing for silver antependium*, Malta, Private Collection.

proximity to the Nazarene ideology. At the hands of Hyzler and Cannataci, the spirit of Overbeck, is almost miraculously, transformed to silver and gold.

Considerations on the mechanics of a partly-documented painting

The mechanics of the full story of the Gozo Manresa commission are unfortunately not entirely known and are filled with many lacunae. There is no doubt that the painting was commissioned to serve as the main altarpiece of the newly-completed church of the "*Santa Casa di San Calcedonio del Gozo*" as mentioned in the acts of Notary Cristoforo Frendo[22]. The nineteeenth-century chronicler Achille Ferres narrates that the retreat-house, intended for the spiritual growth of the faithful, was completed by 1813[23]. This is not entirely correct: a marble inscription on the facade establishes 1824 as the year of the house's official opening[24], possibly denoting the second phase of completion. Ferres also notes the church's consecration on 20 July 1833 and «*Il quadro di sant'Ignazio, nell'altare maggiore, è opera del nostro compianto artista G. Hyzler*»[25]. The agreement between Hyzler and Leopoldo Giappone, representative of Francesco Frendo from the village of Għarb, Gozo, was signed in Valletta on the 15 July 1833, exactly five days before the consecration of the church. Frendo bound himself to pay the artist the sum of 100 scudi in annual instalments[26]. All payments between Francesco Frendo and Hyzler were settled by

[22] Notarial Registers Archives (NRA), R595, *Notary Cristoforo Frendo Sr*, f. 823v. The contract was first published by J. Debono, *A short note on the artist Giuseppe Hyzler (1787-1858)*, in" Melita Historica", vol.XV, no.1, Malta 2008, pp. 61-62.

[23] A. Ferres, *Descrizione Storica*..., 1866, p. 571.

[24] J. Azzopardi, *Manresa: House of Recollection*, in *Gozo Year Book 1984*, ed. A. Cauchi, vol. 6, Malta 1984, p. 40.

[25] A. Ferres, *Descrizione Storica*..., 1866, p. 571.

[26] NRA, R595..., f. 823r. The payments were of 12 *scudi* and 6 *tarì* each, until the extinction of the total sum.

1842: this is documented in the acts of notary Vincenzo Paolo Frendo, son of Cristoforo, who had in the meantime passed away.[27] No other document relating to this commission has so far emerged, leaving many questions unanswered.

The work's completion date remains unknown. One might surmise that the newly-built church would have not been consecrated without its altarpiece. The instructions in the contract, however, speak about the delivery of the work to a representative of the director of the *Santa Casa*, Can. Giambattista Ellul, born in Valletta[28], and appoint notary Frendo himself as guarantor for its delivery in the eventuality of Can. Ellul's absence. This seems to indicate that the completion and consignment of the work was still a long way off, and given the proximity of the date of the contract to the date of consecration, one can deduce that the painting was not actually ready in July 1833. This notwithstanding, the work's maturity of concept and masterly execution, would make a date in the mid-1830s very plausible: Hyzler at that time would have been in his late forties. Ellul was possibly the same priest who is mentioned in a published leaflet issued by the Sodality of Priests erected at St Paul's Shipwreck church, Valletta, where he is identified as a member of the collegiate chapter at the Gozo Matrice[29].

One of Can. Ellul's colleagues in the collegiate chapter at the Gozo Matrice was Can. Salvatore Bondì (1790-1859), architect, painter and designer, who was responsible for the architectural invention of a good number of ecclesiastical projects on the sister island in the first half of the nineteenth century. Bondì's works include the very fabric which surrounds Hyzler's St Ignatius painting: the church and the facade were built to his designs in around 1830[30]. The already-proposed hypothetical connection between Hyzler and Bondì,[31] in fact, should be given much more weight within the context of the Gozo Manresa commission. The fact that Ellul and Bondì, director of the retreat-house and architect of the same edifice respectively, were members of the same body of priests, is telling and could offer the key to Hyzler's commission. Furthermore, both had clear links with the capital Valletta, where Hyzler's studio was situated, and both would have known Hyzler's most recent work, which was possibly still in the studio in 1833[32]: the altarpiece of the Virgin of the Rosary for the Valletta Dominican church.

In Valletta, Bondì had studied painting and architecture under Michele Busuttil (1762-1831) and Giorgio Pullicino (1779-1851) at the University's *Scuola del Disegno*.

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27 NRA, R516, *Notary Vincenzo Paolo Frendo*, ff. 385v.-387r.

28 This is stated both by D. Glavina, *Id-Dar tal-Irtiri ta' Sidtna ta' Manresa, Għawdex, f'għeluq il-150 sena tal-ftuħ tagħha*, in "Lil Ħbiebna – Leħen il-Ġiżwiti Maltin", June 1975, p. 95 and J. Azzopardi, *Manresa…*, 1984, p. 36.

29 This publication lists a "*Don Giambattista Ellul Can. della Matrice, Gozo*", who died on August 6, 1846, and who is listed among the buried priests of the Sodality of Priests of Valletta: *Serie dei Moderatori e Segretari e dei Consodali più anziani che presiedettero nelle Consulte in difetto de' Rettori della Veneranda Sodalità de' Rev. Sacerdoti della Città Valletta,* Malta 1862, p. 11.

30 C. Cassar, *Ecclesiastical Architecture in Gozo (1810-1910): The Works of Can. Salvatore Bondì (1790-1859) and Don Giuseppe Diacono (1847-1924)*, unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Malta 2015, pp. 68-71.

31 C. Cassar, *Ecclesiastical Architecture...*, 2015, p. 50.

32 J. Debono*, A short note…*, 2008, pp.57-61. Originally commissioned in 1822, this turned into a very long-drawn saga which ended up in court and which took over ten years to be entirely settled.

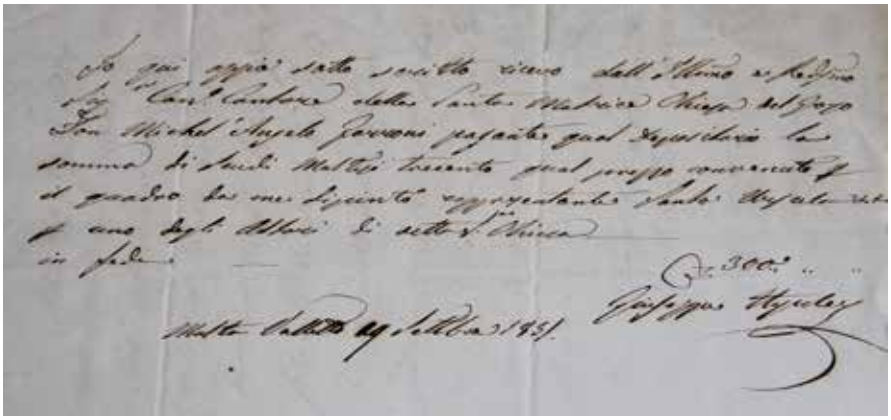

Fig. 8. *Autograph receipt by Giuseppe Hyzler for St Ursula altarpiece*, 1851, Gozo Cathedral Archives.

He was additionally ordained to the priesthood at St John's Co-cathedral and continued with his studies at the Dominican college[33]. Bondì would not have been against a painting by Malta's leading artist of the period, and as a member of the collegiate chapter, would have campaigned for such a commission. It is perhaps not coincidental that in 1847, Salvatore Bondì's brother Gaetano (1808-76), also a canon of the Gozo collegiate chapter, would commission from Hyzler the altarpiece of St Ursula for one of the side altars of the Gozo Matrice[34].

Another problem which complicates the understanding of the painting's mechanics is the amount of 100 *scudi*. Compared to other known payments made to the artist for other works, this is a very small sum, and is clearly not the total amount for the entire execution of the painting. In 1822, for example, Hyzler asked for 1,000 *scudi* as payment for his Virgin of the Rosary, and the same amount in 1848 for the Virgin of Consolation at Lija parish church.[35] This indicates that the remaining sum would have been paid by another source, possibly by the Gozo Matrice. Incidentally, the St Ursula altarpiece mentioned above, completed in 1851, cost 300 *scudi*, as documented in a surviving receipt in the artist's own handwriting (Fig. 8)[36].

Emulating *Casa Manresa*: Jesuit connections and the *Santa Casa di San Calcedonio*

[33] C. Cassar, *Ecclesiastical Architecture in Gozo...*, 2015, p. 48.
[34] P. Muscat, *A catalogue of works of art in the Cathedral of Gozo and its Museum*, unpublished B.A.(Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta 2005, p. 73. The Bondì coat of arms, accompanied by the inscription: *EX. DEVOT. CAN. D. CAETANI BONDÌ* is painted in the lower left-hand corner.
[35] J. Debono, *A short note…*, 2008, pp. 59, 65.
[36] Archivum Cathedralis Gaudisiensis, *Ricevi dal mese di Luglio 1850 a tutto Giugno 1852 (MS fala3)*, f. 146r.

Although it was only on the 23 October 1953 that the Bishop of Gozo, Mgr Joseph Pace (1890-1972) passed on the use of the *Santa Casa di San Calcedonio* to the Jesuit Fathers of the Maltese Province in virtue of a contract signed on that day[37], there are clear indications that the Gozo retreat-house was conceived and built in emulation of the Casa Manresa in Floriana. This house of spiritual formation was completed by the Italian Jesuit priest Pier Francesco Rosignoli (1690-1775) in 1751.[38] The Gozo *Casa dei Retiri* can be visualised as an extension of the Jesuit spirit at a time when the Jesuits were no longer on the islands. It is also testimony to the strong Jesuit legacy in Malta, which was continued despite their absence, and anticipated in a way, their return in 1839. The strong Jesuit connection in Gozo anticipates the period when the *Chiesa e Casa della Beata Vergine di Manresa* was actually passed on to the care of the Jesuits. It is perhaps ironic that at the time of writing, the Jesuits are in the process of returning the care of this church to the Gozo diocese[39].

The late Jesuit priest Daniel Glavina (1902-94), who resided at the retreat-house in Gozo for a number of years, maintains that the Gozo project was conceived in the wake of the extensive spiritual benefit which was created by Casa Manresa in Malta, and came out of the desire to extend the experiences of spiritual enrichment to the sister island[40]. Before the creation of the Gozo diocese in 1864, several priests from Malta would be stationed in Gozo, and vice-versa. The already-mentioned Can. Giambattista Ellul was one of these priests, and it was thanks to his initiative that land was purchased and works were initiated in 1810. Additionally, the building was funded through generous donations of several Maltese people who sought refuge in Gozo during the outbreak of the plague in 1813, as commemorated in a latin inscription in the corridor leading to the church[41]. Piety and devotion were indeed prime motors in the conception and realisation of the Gozo retreat-house project, the genesis of which can be traced to the seed which was sown by the Jesuits in the mid-eighteenth century.

Despite the suppression of the Society of Jesus in Malta in 1768, it is abundantly clear that the Diocesan priests who took over the direction of the house remained loyal to the Jesuit ideal and mission and sought to extend it to the sister island. In fact, one of the main promoters of the Gozo project was the Director of Casa Manresa, Rev. Emanuele Speranza (1784-1870)[42]. The connections are evident on many levels: firstly, the location. Like Casa Manresa, the site in Gozo was, to quote Rosignoli's 1753

[37] Details in J. Azzopardi, *Manresa…*, 1984, p. 36.
[38] *Casa Manresa in Floriana: A House of Formation*, ed. N.J. Doublet, Malta 2025, p. 51.
[39] *Jesuits to hand over Gozo's Manresa House after 70 years of service*, in "Times of Malta", 17 July 2025 (accessed on 17 October 2025): the Jesuits will return the church to the Gozo Diocese on 15 November 2025.
[40] D. Glavina, *Id-Dar tal-Irtiri…*, 1975, pp. 94-95.
[41] D. Glavina, *Id-Dar tal-Irtiri…*, 1975, pp. 95-96.
[42] J. Azzopardi, *Manresa…*, 1984, p. 36.

Fig. 9. Michele Busuttil, c. 1820, *Martyrdom of St Calcedonius*, oil on canvas, Victoria, Gozo, Church of the Virgin of Manresa, Manresa Retreat House.

statement «*...totalmente fuori dall'abitato*»[43], perhaps even more than the one in Malta. Indeed, in the early nineteenth century, the location was entirely immersed in the Gozitan countryside, commanding distant views of Rabat and its Citadel, and the sea down Xlendi valley. This immersion provided the ideal setting for the mystic experience of Ignatian spirituality, contemplation and prayer, and for the retreatants to undergo their desired spiritual transformation. Secondly, both churches are dedicated to the Virgin of Manresa and St Ignatius of Loyola, and both altarpieces represent the same moment in St Ignatius' life. Additionally, there are similarities in the church plans: although the Floriana church follows an elliptical plan, and that in Gozo is essentially a circular building, both are crowned by a dome, even though the one in Gozo was never built, and both have a sanctuary extension for the main altarpiece and its altar.

Furthermore, the project's promoters also wanted to implant in Gozo the cult and devotion towards St Calcedonius, to who is dedicated a small chapel behind the main altar at Casa Manresa. This little chapel houses the saint's skeletal remains which arrived in Maltain 1753 through the endeavour of the Jesuits from the Catacombs of Praetextatus in Rome as a gift from Pope Benedict XIV[44], at a time when there was considerable devotion to *corpi santi* and the cult of the saints, especially martyrs. As in Malta, the main altar of the Gozo retreat house is also abutted at the back by a small cubic chapel, crowned by a dome, dedicated to St Calcedonius. A small altarpiece, which has never been hitherto noted, depicts the *Martyrdom of St Calcedonius* (Fig. 9). Stylistic elements point to the brush of Michele Busuttil (1762-1831), Malta's leading painter of the turn of the nineteenth century who was appointed first Professor of Drawing at the newly-constituted Scuola del Disegno at the University of Malta, and one of Salvatore Bondì's teachers. This might continue to emphasise Bondì's role which possibly went beyond his role as an architect. Busuttil had established a strong connection with Gozo

[43] N.J. Doublet, *Casa Manresa: Its History and Art Collection*, in *Floriana & il-Furjaniżi: a tri-centenary commemoration*, eds. J. Abela-G. Privitelli, Malta 2024, p. 225.
[44] N.J. Doublet, *Casa Manresa*..., 2025, p. 129.

when he married Maria Antonia Buhagiar from Rabat at the Gozo Matrice in 1794[45], initiating a significant dynasty of artists. The artist might have looked at the same gruesome episode of St Calcedonius' martyrdom represented in one of two side paintings in the Casa Manresa chapel, produced by Francesco Zahra (1710-73). Although the artistic approach is altogether different, the work reflects iconographic parallels.

A reflection of Ignatian Spirituality

The 1748 altarpiece by the French artist Antoine Favray (1706-98) in the church of Casa Manresa, surely provided an important prototype for Giuseppe Hyzler's commission, and the artist might have also been directed to look at this work, given that there was a concerted effort to emulate the Malta scheme on many levels. As expected, Hyzler discards Favray's Late Baroque interpretation and reinvents it completely through the Nazarene ideology. This accentuates the work's contemplative realm. Favray's energetic composition is transformed into a rigorous stillness which permeats Overbeck's production and which the Nazarenes employed in their quest to cleanse and purify the theatricality of that art which had followed the Renaissance. The Baroque elements which characterise Favray's work are converted into the manner of the Early Renaissance and the classicising forms which permeat the art of Raphael.

In its engagement with the theme of St Ignatius writing his *Spiritual Exercises* in 1522, the painting becomes a reflection of Ignatian Spirituality while at the same time it aligns itself with the core values of the art of the Nazarenes. Standing in front of the painting, the viewer is drawn into meditation and prayer, and is reminded of the period when the German artists «colonised the disused monastery of San Isidoro and adopted a monkish regime of prayer, seclusion and self-denial»[46]. Steeped in a Christian, Catholic ethos with an emphasis on the mystical experience, Hyzler's altarpiece thus becomes an instrument of meditation and contemplation and is converted into an extension of the Nazarenes' credo. Indeed, the painting can be read as a reflection of St Ignatius' «understanding of the image as a spiritual instrument»[47]. The placard-holding angel with the words: *BEATI QUI AUDIUNT VERBUM DEI ET CUSTODIUNT ILLUM* continues to underscore the role of the image and the word of God in the spiritual experience of conversion. This veritably supports the bond between the painting and its function within the context of a retreat-house where the word of God is at the very heart of the spiritual exercises that are practised within its walls.

[45] J. Attard Tabone, *The Busuttil Family – A Dynasty of Artists*, in *The Busuttil Family: A Legacy of Three Generations*, eds. S. Debono-B. Scicluna, Malta 2010, p. 4.
[46] D. Blaney Brown, *Romanticism*..., 2001, p. 224.
[47] D. Velandia Onofre, *Word and image*..., 2018, p. 332.

This can also be connected to Overbeck's resolve to seek inspiration from the Biblical narrative and religious themes: «I will abide by the Bible; I elect it as my standing point[48]. The artist's outlook is clearly reflected in his *Self-Portrait with the Bible* of 1809, at the Museum Behnhaus Drägerhaus in Lübeck, where he depicts himself in meditation in front of the blank canvas while the drawing-chalk awaits, holding an open Bible in hand and seeking direct inspiration from it. Furthermore, the strong aura of silence which the work transmits can be linked to the meditation and contemplation advocated by St Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises*. The vision of the Virgin Mary and Child in the top tier with a breathtaking *tour de force* of rows of monochromatic cherub heads which fade in the strong rays of divine light at the very top of the painting, adds to the mystic dimension, and serves as a reminder of the special devotion that Ignatius had towards the Virgin.

Epilogue

The spiritual tenets of Overbeck and the Nazarenes as interpreted by Hyzler respond perfectly to the reflective spirit of St Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuit mission in Malta. This analysis considers aesthetics, spirituality and piety as the prime movers of the work. By examining the context from which Hyzler's most artistically important work resulted, these criteria emerge as necessary to provide a complete contextual analysis of the work. As has been shown, the painting was commissioned to serve a very specific function in mind, which ultimately celebrates the legacy of Rosignoli's eighteenth-century project. The work's importance does not only result from its artistic quality and international artistic connections, but also from the fascinating social and religious context which instigated it.

[48] J. Beavington Atkinson, *Overbeck*, London 1882, p. 18.

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