

## **The *Collegium Melitense*: A Frontier Mission in the Interface Between the Christian and Muslim Worlds**

*Collegium Melitense*: Una misión fronteriza en  
la confluencia entre el mundo cristiano y el musulmán

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In 1554 Ignatius Loyola realized Malta's great potential as a stepping-stone for building contacts with the Muslim Maghreb. The close association of the Maltese language to Arabic further convinced the Jesuit Curia, and the Holy See, to 'privilege' Malta as an ideal base for the evangelization of North Africa and the Levant. However, with time, the College became more concerned with preaching and missionary activities within Malta itself. The present study, largely based on research at the Jesuit Curia archives in Rome, looks at Jesuit activities in Malta from the end of the sixteenth century to 1768, when the Jesuits were expelled. During the span of almost two centuries, the role played by Malta had much to do with Malta's geographical proximity to North Africa, coupled with the ability of the Maltese to speak a native Semitic language which was believed to be very close to Arabic, while at the same time being a place inhabited by a fervently Catholic population. The Jesuit Curia appears to have used Malta as a base for missionary activities to, or, from the Levant.

*Key words:* Jesuit Curia; *Collegium Melitense*; North Africa; The Levant; Propaganda Fide; Maltese language; School of Arabic; Missionary activities.

En 1554 Ignacio de Loyola se dio cuenta del gran potencial que constituía la isla de Malta como punto de partida desde el que construir puentes con el Magreb musulmán. La asociación de la lengua maltesa con el árabe convenció todavía más a la Curia Jesuita y a la Santa Sede, para "privilegiar" a Malta como una base ideal para la evangelización del norte de África. Sin embargo, con el tiempo, el *Collegium* se vio mucho más abocado a predicar y a llevar a cabo actividades misioneras en la propia Malta. El presente estudio, basado en investigación realizada en la Curia Jesuita en Roma, analiza la actividad jesuita en Malta desde finales del siglo XVI hasta 1768, cuando los jesuitas fueron expulsados. Durante este periodo de casi dos siglos, el papel jugado por Malta tuvo que ver con su proximidad con el norte de África, así como el hecho de que los malteses eran hablantes nativos de una lengua semítica, que se creía cercana al árabe, pero a la vez fervientes católicos. La Curia Jesuita parece haber usado a Malta como base de su actividad misionera a y desde Levante.

*Palabras clave:* Curia Jesuita; *Collegium Melitense*; Norte de África; Levante; Propaganda Fide; Lengua maltésa; Escuela de árabe; misiones.

In an early eighteenth-century compilation of Jesuit achievements at the *Collegium Melitense*, one finds a note written by a Jesuit priest, which is worthy of attention. It recalls the solemn baptism, at the Jesuit Church in Valletta, of Mohammed Attesi, the 25-year-old son of the King of Fez. Mohammed was given the Christian name of Baldassarre Loyola de Mandes. This baptism was prepared and performed with great solemnity. The date had been chosen to coincide with the feast day of St Ignatius Loyola, and the first centenary of his death (31 July 1656). The celebrant was Fra Gerolamo Mamo, the Maltese Vice-Prior of the Conventual Church of the Order of St John.<sup>1</sup>

The meticulously planned baptism of Baldassarre, alias Mohammed Attesi, comes as no surprise as Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), had wished to convert Muslims to Catholicism and to spread Catholicism to North Africa and the Levant. This evangelizing verve was in line with the Spanish zest for the *riconquista* which had over-spilled onto the Mediterranean shores of North Africa. Loyola himself witnessed the final triumph of the Spaniards over the Moors in Spain and in parts of North Africa. In the early phase of his vocation, during the 1520s and 1530s, Ignatius Loyola was convinced that his true mission was to go to the Holy Lands and spend the rest of his life in devotion and penance in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

The present study is mainly based on the seventeenth and eighteenth century correspondence that passed between the Jesuit General in Rome, the Provincial of Sicily, the Rector of Malta, and several members of the Company of Jesus based in Malta. Other sources used are documents related to the foundation of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide.<sup>3</sup> This study attempts to explain Malta's role in the Jesuits' evangelizing process for the Levant and North Africa -a process that spanned nearly two hundred years. It also shows how Malta's role changed in tune with the changing needs of the times.

<sup>1</sup> Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu [ARSI] Vitae 104, folio 236. The conversion and activities of Baldassarre Loyola have been recently discussed in detail by Colombo in "Baldassarre Loyola de Mandes (1631-1667), prince de Fez et jésuite," pp.159-192.

<sup>2</sup> O'Reilly, "Ignatius of Loyola and the Counter-Reformation: the hagiographic tradition," pp.445-446.

<sup>3</sup> The Congregation of Propaganda Fide was formally set up thanks to the Papal Bull *Inscrutabili Divinae* on 22 June 1622.

The great missionary potential of the Jesuits must have impressed the Catalan Bishop of Malta, Domenico Cubelles for as early as 1553 he wrote to Ignatius Loyola and specifically asked him to set up, in Malta, a College where Arabic could be taught.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Cubelles's wishes took long to materialize. At the time, Loyola could ill-afford to spare any Jesuits for this task, and furthermore, he lacked the necessary funds.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, Loyola remained interested in Malta, as he was quite keen to organise a mission in North Africa to convert the Moors to Christianity, as a prelude to the re-catholization of the Holy Lands.<sup>6</sup>

As luck would have it, 1554 brought about a turn of events. The sheikh of Tagiora (near Tripoli) in Libya, requested Jesuit missionaries to go over to Tagiora, in order to preach, in Arabic, the teachings of the Catholic Church. Loyola soon realized that Malta was ideal as a channel through which contacts with the Muslim Maghreb could be established. He thus agreed with the request of Grand Master La Sengle and Bishop Cubelles to jointly found a college in Malta.<sup>7</sup>

Originally, it was envisaged that Malta would be suited for the missionary activities in the Levant largely because the Maltese spoke a language, which was thought to be very close to Arabic. This fact alone made Malta seem to have such great potential for missionary activities that Loyola even planned to transfer Father Bobadilla - a founding member of the Company - to Malta.

However, a dispute between the Grand Master and the Bishop of Malta induced the Jesuit authorities in Rome to shelve the project tem-

<sup>4</sup> Polanco, *Vita Ignatii Loiolae et Rerum Societatis Iesu Historia, Chronicon*, tome iii, p. 228 no.503. Letter addressed to Father Hieronymus Domenech. *Dominicus Cubelles Episcopus Melitensis Romae instanter agebat cum P. Ignatio ut aliquos illi de Societate daret, ut Collegium in illa insula, quae arabica utitur lingua, inchoare posset*. See also: Fiorini, "The Collegium Melitense and the Universitas Studiorum to 1798," p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Pecchiai, "Il collegio dei Gesuiti a Malta," p.130.

<sup>6</sup> O'Reilly, "Ignatius of Loyola," p.448; O'Malley, *The First Jesuits*, p.16. This interest in the teaching of Arabic may be associated with the original idea of Loyola himself to organize missions in the Holy Lands. *Sacra Congregazione per la chiesa orientale, Oriente Cattolico – Cenni storici e statistiche*, pp.484-485.

<sup>7</sup> In January 1554, Ignatius Loyola informed Father Paschasio (Broëtio) in Paris that he had promised Grand Master Claude de La Sengle (1553-1557) and the Bishop to send some members of the Company to Malta and in Africa among the Moors to teach the Gospel of Christ. *Monumenta Ignatiana. Epistolae Ignatii*. Tome 7. Letter 4121: 30 January, 1554.

porarily, as Loyola and his fellow brethren could not afford to wait for the bickering between these two power-holders to stop.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it was decided to establish a college of Arabic in Rome and which opened its doors in December 1549.<sup>9</sup>

The setting up of a college for the teaching of Arabic in Malta was shelved for thirty-eight years. The Jesuits were, by then, busy running the newly founded Maronite College in Rome, established by Pope Gregory XIII, in 1584. It seems that, at this time, the Jesuits had their sights set on the Maronites of Lebanon as potential missionaries to the Levant - instead of the Maltese. Ironically, though, in 1583 when Pope Gregory XIII needed to send someone as his emissary to the Levant, with the aim of reforming the Julian calendar,<sup>10</sup> he enlisted the help of Leonardo Abel, a Maltese who was fluent in Arabic!

In March 1592 - some thirty-six years after Loyola's death - at the insistence of Pope Clement VIII, the Jesuit General directed the Provincial of the Jesuits in Sicily to send some members of the Society to Malta.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Jesuit College in Malta was finally established! The deed for the erection of the College was drawn up on 12 November 1592, and the Pope confirmed it in July 1593.<sup>12</sup>

Successive Jesuit Superior Generals held the Knights of the Order in high esteem and frequently the Grand Master of Malta was described as a,

*...supreme commander of the most glorious military order, which defends with blood and life the honour of Christ, and that of the Church.*<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Monumenta Ignatiana. Epistolae Ignatii*. Tome 7. Letter 4697: 4 August, 1554, p.379. See amongst other: Borg, "Gerolamo Manduca: His life and works," pp.237-257. A detailed account of the plans to set up a Jesuit College in Malta based on correspondence can be found in Borg, *Melita Sacra. The Maltese Diocese during the Sixteenth Century*, vol. 2, pp.57-62.

<sup>9</sup> *Monumenta Ignatiana. Epistolae Ignatii* tome 7. Letter 5012.

<sup>10</sup> Abel, or Abela, was consecrated titular bishop of Sidon before he began his four year journey which started in Syria and ended in Egypt. Abel, *Une mission religieuse en Orient au XVIe siècle.*; Frazee, *Catholics & Sultans. The Church and the Ottoman Empire 1453-1923*, pp.74-77.

<sup>11</sup> ARSI [Sicula] Sic., vol. 5, f.59: 14 March, 1592.

<sup>12</sup> Batllori, "Del Collegi dels Jesuïtes a la Universitat de Malta," pp.189-200, esp. p.189; Fiorini, "The *Collegium Melitense*," p.34.

<sup>13</sup> The image of the Order of St John as a defender of Christianity was still very strong many decades later. See for example ARSI Sic., vol. 23 ii, folio 294-v: 16 June, 1680.

Such an assertion, made by Father General Giovanni Paolo Oliva in a letter, written in 1680, to Giacomo Cantelmo the Inquisitor of Malta, explains why successive Generals of the Society of Jesus kept on urging Father Provincials of Sicily to take special care of the College of Malta and to ensure that it was properly staffed. Letters addressed to Visiting Fathers, who were despatched to check on the everyday running of the College, carried the same sentiment.

### The School of Arabic

The Jesuits are often associated with the propagation of the Council of Trent and leading Jesuits of the time were directly involved in the running of the Council. This may possibly explain why, the Jesuits supported the Council boldly. However, the Jesuits had their own agenda and their own distinctive way of proselytizing.<sup>14</sup> Thus, while they closely adhered to the general rules of the Holy See, they tended to follow their own path.<sup>15</sup>

One hot issue of the early seventeenth century was the teaching of Arabic to Maltese candidates with the aim of sending them to preach in the Levant and especially in North Africa. Even the Congregation of Propaganda Fide - established in 1622 - showed an interest in Malta as a base for the teaching of Arabic. By March 1624, the Congregation of Propaganda Fide expressed, to the Inquisitor of Malta, Carlo Bovio of Bagnarea, its wish to set up a school of Arabic. Inquisitor Bovio approved and agreed that Maltese-speaking missionaries could be sent from Malta to the Muslim lands to preach the gospel [*in partibus infidelium*].

In reality, their arguments were not much different from those of the Jesuits. In essence, both Bovio and the Congregation believed that the mother tongue of the Maltese was Arabic, albeit a corrupt form of Arabic, that was not understood in North Africa. The Congregation lamented that, despite the fact that the Maltese language was *arabico*,

<sup>14</sup> O'Malley, *First Jesuits*, p.17.

<sup>15</sup> The Jesuits were never formally connected to Propaganda Fide. However, some opine that the chapter 'De erigenda congregatione pro fide propaganda', published by the Spanish Carmelite Thomas de Jesús in Antwerp (1613), was inspired by Jean de Venderville who based his contribution on the writings of the Jesuit Antonio Possevino (1533-1611). Donnelly, "Antonio Possevino's Plan for World Evangelization," *The Catholic Historical Review*, vol. lxxiv no.2, p.181.

the native Maltese could neither write nor read proper Arabic. As a result, it was very difficult to find someone who could teach Arabic grammar in Malta.

Furthermore, the Maltese clergy were not inclined to study Arabic. Bovio concluded that the solution might be to invite either a Maronite priest from Lebanon, or one stationed in Rome, to do this task. In his view, the Maltese clergy, once equipped with knowledge of Arabic, could be well suited to go to preach in Africa and the Levant, as they would be understood even if they spoke broken Arabic. [...*i quali sarebbero buoni d'andare a predicare in Affrica, et in Levante, che sarebbero intesi se bene la lingua e' corotta...*].<sup>16</sup>

The belief that the Maltese were better suited as missionaries among Arabic speakers, was shared by many prelates of the Catholic Church in Malta - amongst them the Jesuit-trained Inquisitor and Apostolic Visitor Fabio Chigi, who in May 1637, wrote to Cardinal Barberini saying that:

*... Only in the Island and diocese of Malta, among all the Catholic Christians, is the Arabic language preserved up to this day... ..this language is of great benefit to Christianity...<sup>17</sup> nor is there a better place than this Island to plan events since the locals can understand most of that language [Arabic]...*

It appears that the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide was convinced by Chigi's letter and believed that the time was ripe to establish a school of Arabic in Malta. On 30 September 1637, the Sacred Congregation informed Chigi that they had appointed Don Francesco Azzupardo as Lecturer of Arabic - a post assigned as one of the benefices of Don Giovanni Habela, thus securing a modest annual income to Don Azzupardo.<sup>18</sup>

In the meantime there were several attempts, by both Franciscans and Carmelites, to organize classes of Arabic, for missionary purposes. The Franciscans, however, claimed that they were better suited for teaching Arabic due to their traditional ties with the Holy Lands – ties that dated back to the times of their founder, Francis of Assisi. Despite

<sup>16</sup> Archivio Storico di Propaganda Fide [ASPF] Scritture Originali riferite nelle Congregazioni generali [SOCG] vol. 358, folio 54: 25 March, 1624.

<sup>17</sup> Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana [BAV] Chigi vol. A.I.4 folios 214v-15. Chigi to Barberini: 15 May, 1637. Cf. Gambin, "Fabio Chigi: Inquisitor-Missionary and Tridentine Reformer," pp.199-200.

<sup>18</sup> ASPF SOCG vol. 24, folio 316: 11 January, 1638.

this assertion by 1644, the Discalced Carmelites managed to develop a centre for the teaching of Arabic at Cospicua in the Malta harbour area. Moreover, in the space of three years, they had sent no less than fourteen friars as missionaries to the Levant.<sup>19</sup>

### Jesuit Missionary Activities in the Levant

For most of the seventeenth century, the Jesuits followed a policy which was quite similar to that of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide although they may have tended to be more flexible to changing circumstances. In 1625 Father General Mutio Vitelleschi (1615-1645) advised the Provincial of Sicily to be more lenient when receiving Maltese youths within the ranks of the Society, once they produced the necessary qualifications. Vitelleschi demanded one specific requisite from the Maltese candidates - that they learn to read and write in Arabic before joining the Company so that they could, in due course, be channelled to do pastoral work among Arabic speakers.<sup>20</sup>

Father Vitelleschi's insistence in encouraging Maltese novices to join the Company is clearly evinced in the case of a young Maltese man by the name of Tonna.<sup>21</sup> In 1630, the young Tonna applied to join the Society of Jesus but the Rector of Malta was hesitant to accept him since Tonna was weak, *fiacco*, in grammar. Yet the General urged him to accept Tonna because he knew Arabic and that made him a good enough candidate.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, despite everyone's interest in Malta, attempts to introduce the teaching of Arabic in Italy, pre-dated Chigi's appeal, mentioned above, by nearly 27 years. In December 1610, the General of the Society of Jesus, Father Claudio Acquaviva, ordered the Provincial of Sicily to comply with the order of Pope Paul V, who had recently published a

<sup>19</sup> The list of friars sent to the Levant included three Sicilians, two Frenchmen, two Lombards, two Genoese, two Neapolitans, and one Flemish. Those still studying were even more mixed. Two were from Siena, and there were one each from Rome, Naples, Sicily, France, Portugal, and Ireland. ASPF SOCG vol. 175 (1647), folio 12.

<sup>20</sup> ARSI Sic. vol. 9i, folio 92v.: December, 1625. See also: Borg, "Girolamo Manduca," p. 251, n. 40.

<sup>21</sup> *...il Signore accresca loro lo spirito della Compagnia per poter servirlo con molto frutto...* ARSI Sic., vol. 8i, folio 71v.: 30 July, 1620.

<sup>22</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 10i, folio 53v.: 4 April, 1630.

bull ordering the teaching of Arabic in all Sicilian seminaries. Acquaviva singled out the Maronite-born Jesuit, Father Pietro Metoscita, and ordered his immediate transfer from Messina to the recently established academy of Arabic in Rome. It was the General's wish that the Academy become the focal point of Arabic teaching for obvious missionary purposes. It was to be done 'with fervour' [*farla rendere con fervore*].<sup>23</sup>

So great was the General's wish to comply with the Pope's order, that Acquaviva contacted Sicily's Father Provincial<sup>24</sup> and aired his concern over Metoscita's seemingly unnecessary delay to reach Rome.

Finally, the Maronite-born Metoscita complied with the General's wishes. By autumn 1614, Metoscita had completed his studies and had reached Malta on his way to the Levant accompanied by Father Marietti.<sup>25</sup> In September 1615, the General informed the Rector in Malta that the two priests were preaching at Aleppo.<sup>26</sup> By the end of 1616 they had "paid a visit" to Babylon (in modern Iraq).<sup>27</sup> Soon afterwards, they returned to Malta, where Father Marietti left some liturgical vestments, as charity, for the missions in the Levant.<sup>28</sup>

The decision to set up a college in Malta was due to two main factors. The first was Malta's geographical proximity to North Africa and the Levant. The second was the general belief that Maltese Jesuits had great potential for learning Arabic because of their native Maltese tongue (which was often referred to as *arabico*), as borne out by the case of the Maltese Jesuit Onorato Pace who after completing his studies in Rome, by February 1629, was giving lessons in Arabic in Malta.<sup>29</sup>

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that in June 1628 the General asked the Rector of Malta to select a Maltese candidate to serve as

<sup>23</sup> Father Pietro Metoscita (al-Matushi), a Maronite from Cyprus, was one of the first pupils of the Maronite College in Rome and joined the Society of Jesus in 1597. In 1610 Father Metoscita formed part of a group of experts in Oriental Studies at the time congregated at Messina. ARSI Sic., vol. 6, folio 257.

<sup>24</sup> On that occasion the General wrote to the Father Provincial that Father Metoscita was still waiting for his order to be transferred to Rome. ARSI Sic., vol. 6, folio 263v: 5 February 1611.

<sup>25</sup> Father Metoscita, and his companion Father Marietti, were to reach Malta and continue to the Levant but due to rough weather conditions they left Rome a month later. ARSI Sic., vol. 7, folio 18: 12 October, 1614, and ARSI Sic., vol. 7, folio 25v: 22 November, 1614.

<sup>26</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 7, folio 68: 12 September, 1615.

<sup>27</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 7, folio 166v: 19 November 1616.

<sup>28</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 7, folio 205: 4 March, 1617.

<sup>29</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 9ii, folio 445: 15 March, 1629.

*Prefetto di Camera* at the Maronite College. It was because the Maltese language was likened to Arabic that it was believed that a Maltese candidate was best suited to serve as *Prefetto di Camera* with the Arabic-speaking Maronites!

According to the letter, the ideal candidate was to be a young Maltese Jesuit aged 22 or 23, who knew the language and customs of the Maronites.<sup>30</sup> It seems though that the Rector of Malta was slow to reply. His letter, dated 18 July, arrived when the Maronite College had already chosen someone for the post. The Maronite College had opted for an older candidate.<sup>31</sup> But the fact remains that, initially, it was thought that a Maltese Jesuit would be the ideal candidate for the task.

### The Maltese Jesuits and the Levant

At this point in time, the Maltese Jesuits were closely associated with the Maronite College in Rome. This is best seen in the travelogue of the Maltese Jesuit Domenico Magri, *Breve racconto del viaggio al monte Libano di Domenico Magri maltese...* which was published in Rome in 1655.

In 1623 Magri, a 19 year-old Maltese novice, was enlisted to form part of the retinue accompanying Cardinal Orsini who, in December of that year, embarked on a trip to the Levant. During his trip, Orsini had in mind to recruit students for the Jesuit-run Maronite College in Rome. Evidently, Magri was chosen because of his knowledge of Maltese.<sup>32</sup> Whatever the case, Magri's travels to the Levant must have made a lasting impression on him as he wrote about this trip in a letter addressed to the Congregation of Propaganda Fide in 1647.<sup>33</sup>

The Jesuit Curia often preferred to choose men of Maltese extraction in their dealings with the Arab world. On one occasion, when Father Giacomo Marcellaia, the Jesuit missionary in Cairo, needed a

<sup>30</sup> ...si desidera haverlo da Malta, che sappia la lingua, ed i costumi... ARSI Sic., vol.9ii, folio 393v: 8 June, 1628.

<sup>31</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 9ii, folio 407: 17 August, 1628.

<sup>32</sup> Magri, *Breve racconto del viaggio al monte Libano di Domenico Magri maltese nell'età sua d'anni 19* was published in Rome in 1655 and dedicated to Cardinal Carlo Barberini. A second edition was published in Viterbo in 1664. Domenico Magri was, at the time of publication, professor of Theology and Linguistics in Rome.

<sup>33</sup> ASPF SOCG vol. 175, folio 17.

dragoman interpreter, he engaged the Maltese surgeon Giacomo Chidoni. Chidoni was willing to accompany the Jesuit Fathers all the way to Ethiopia, much to their great relief!<sup>34</sup>

The general belief in the ability of the Maltese to communicate with Arabs was so great that many Maltese Jesuits came to believe that they were in a unique position to carry out missionary work in the Levant and to convert non-Catholic Christians - as far afield as Ethiopia - to Roman Catholicism. For example in 1621 the Maltese Jesuit, Father Giacomo Cassia, when asking to be sent to Ethiopia, explained that he had the full backing of Bishop Cagliares of Malta.<sup>35</sup>

So great was the interest of the Maltese in the Ethiopian mission that, in 1650, when two German priests passed through Malta, on their way back from their mission in Ethiopia, the Grand Master himself received and hosted them.<sup>36</sup>

### Life in the Missions

At the same time, it was not rare for Jesuit missionaries in the Levant, and in the Maghreb, to be reduced to slavery.<sup>37</sup> Christian missionaries in the Levant had since the sixteenth century received the protection of the French Consuls at Aleppo and Cairo, as well as the French ambassador of Constantinople.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, the possibility of falling into slavery while carrying out missionary duties in the Levant, remained relatively high even in the late seventeenth century and beyond.

Matters were possibly worse in the Maghreb where, by the mid-seventeenth century, and it was not rare for missionaries to fall into

<sup>34</sup> According to Father Marcellaia, Chidoni was willing to accompany them, possibly hoping to make his fortune there, since he was very fluent in Turkish, Moorish and Greek. ARSI Sic., vol. 184i, folios 14, 18: 3 April, 1628.

<sup>35</sup> Father General Vitelleschi explained to the Bishop that the mission is destined to few although many dream of going. ARSI Sic., vol. 8i, folio 208: 16 September, 1621.

<sup>36</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 15ii, folio 369v: 9 February, 1651.

<sup>37</sup> An indirect reference is found in a letter sent to the Provincial of Sicily in 1617 when the General thanked the Bishop of Malta ... *for the noble gesture of giving alms to ransom our [Jesuit] captives...* ARSI Sic., vol. 7, folio 229v.

<sup>38</sup> The missionaries therefore directed their attention to the Greek and Armenian Christians. Charles Schefer (ed), *Memoire Historique sur l'Ambassade de France de Constantinople*.

slavery while fulfilling their duties.<sup>39</sup> Successive appeals to liberate Jesuit Fathers from slavery were made by Father General Vitelleschi in 1644;<sup>40</sup> Father General Goschwin Nickel in 1657;<sup>41</sup> and by Father General Oliva in 1680.<sup>42</sup>

## A Change in Policy

Gradually, the Jesuit superiors became less and less inclined to send Maltese Jesuits to the missions abroad and to appear to have other plans for the Maltese “subjects.” Jesuit superiors became more set on encouraging Maltese Jesuits to remain in Malta and serve the Maltese community.

Therefore, when, in the summer of 1625, the Maltese Jesuit, Father Bonnici asked the General that he be sent to Ethiopia, he was told that missionaries were not being sent there at that time.<sup>43</sup> In addition, one Father Giovanni Luca Bezzina, sent several letters requesting a placement in the Indies and specifically in Ethiopia who after several polite refusals from Rome, addressed a letter to the General in Arabic. The General tactfully praised Father Bezzina for his sound Arabic knowledge and promised to consider his application if the opportunity presented itself.<sup>44</sup> These episodes confirm that, by then, the Society of Jesus had other plans for the Maltese Jesuits. Similar refusals to be sent to the missions were given to the Maltese Jesuits Girolamo Manduca<sup>45</sup> and Father Girolamo Cassia.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>39</sup> In 1645, the General warned the rector of Malta about the great difficulties that existed should anyone decide to go to help the Christian slaves in Tunisia and he urged him to consider the issue with great care. ARSI Sic., vol. 14i, folio 251v.

<sup>40</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 14i, folio 169.

<sup>41</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 17, folio 90: 4 October, 1657. The recently elected Grand Master Martino de Redin (1657-1660) lent a helping hand in the matter. ARSI Sic., vol. 17, folio 141v.

<sup>42</sup> In 1680 a French brother fell in the hands of the corsairs of Tripoli. As on other occasions, the rector of Malta, Father Carlo di Gregorio, ensured not only the brother’s freedom but even his safe conduct to Marseilles. ARSI Sic., vol. 23ii, folio 348: 2 November, 1680.

<sup>43</sup> This time Vitelleschi addressed the rector. ARSI Sic. 9i, folio 59: 17 August, 1625.

<sup>44</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 10i, folio 68: 13 June, 1630.

<sup>45</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 6, folio 219v: 21 November, 1609.

<sup>46</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 7, folio 129v: 20 August, 1616.

Why were the Maltese being refused permission to go to the missions? It may be that the Maltese priests were seen to be needed much more in the Maltese parishes, where they could preach, teach, and hear confessions of the Maltese faithful in their mother tongue. Moreover, by remaining in Malta the Maltese Jesuits also had a better chance of spreading Tridentine values and of extirpating popular forms of religious beliefs among the Maltese. Besides, they could also work with the slave community in Malta, which was, in the main, Muslim.<sup>47</sup> As a result, the missions in Malta and the Levant were seen as parallel efforts, forming part of the same religious, cultural and social reform.

This change in policy, however, did not apply to Jesuits of foreign extract, residing in Malta. When these requested placement in the Indies, they were often allowed to venture beyond the borders of Europe. Thus, for example, we read that in March 1620, Father Girolamo Quiritio [Jerome Queyrot ?] a French Jesuit stationed in Malta, asked permission to serve in Constantinople. Father Quiritio was promised a placing as soon as a vacancy arose.<sup>48</sup> He did not have to wait long for by the end of July of the following year (1621) he gained approval to go to Constantinople.<sup>49</sup>

Sometimes individual non-Maltese Jesuits were even requested to seek permission from the provincial to go to the Levant - as in the case of the Italian Father Antonio Bocastrelli, then stationed in Malta. In 1680 Bocastrelli asked to go to the missions in the Archipelago (the Cyclades in Greece).<sup>50</sup> He was given permission to go.

But there were others, like Antonino David, who received a somewhat different answer. The 36-year old Brother David, originally hailing from Palermo, expressed his wish to go to the Indies in order to serve “many different nations.”<sup>51</sup> However, although not Maltese, Brother David’s request was not accepted. Interestingly Father General de Noyelle reminded the Brother that he was already working with “different nations” by serving at the College of Malta.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 45, folio 49v: 19 September, 1712.

<sup>48</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 8i, folio 31v: 19 March, 1620.

<sup>49</sup> Quiritio, [Queyrot?] was duly informed of the decision some two months later by the General himself. ARSI Sic., vol. 8i, folio 213v: 25 September, 1621. Jerome Queyrot was stationed at Aleppo in 1627. Frazee, *Catholics & Sultans*, p.133.

<sup>50</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 23ii, folio 288: 10 June, 1680.

<sup>51</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 80, (1685), p.136.

<sup>52</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 27, folio 89v: 28 May, 1685.

It is not very clear why Brother David was refused permission. It may well be that the men at the helm in Rome were more concerned with the need to rid Valletta – the seat of the College and the Convent of the Knights of Malta – of the “immoral behaviour, widespread violence, and irreligious behaviour” rampant there, than to convert the people of the Indies.<sup>53</sup>

The change of policy towards Maltese Jesuits appears to have been founded upon a valid realization. By the early eighteenth century, the Jesuits may have come to realize that the Maltese spoke a language, which although akin to Arabic, was of little use in their plan to establish contact with Arabic-speaking populations. As a result, in later years, the Jesuit Curia appears to have changed its plans for Maltese who wished to join the Society.

The original policy that had remained unchanged for nearly half a century, was given a new twist. In 1684, General Charles de Noyelle pointed out,

*The Maltese Jesuits in Malta could speak the language of the locals and it would be much more useful to let them serve as missionaries among the locals than to keep them employed as confessors [who could understand the Maltese language] in the Jesuit church.*<sup>54</sup>

In essence, the Jesuit Curia had, by the early seventeenth century, already identified the Malta College as a means of inculcating the principles of the Council of Trent among the Maltese. This activity was further strengthened in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as it could be carried out with the help of Maltese Jesuits.

### **Shortage of Maltese Vocations**

Yet, as the seventeenth century wore on, there appeared to have been a shortage of Maltese vocations. In a letter dated 1642, addressed to Father Urso, the Rector of Malta, the General Mutio Vitelleschi ex-

<sup>53</sup> In a 1624 report addressed to Father Fioravanti, then the Jesuit confessor of Pope Urban VIII, the behaviour of most knights in Malta is described as “scandalous.” Archivio di Stato, Roma [ASR] Archivio Camerale [AC] III Busta 1274, p. 10. Report dated 25 August 1624. See also Cassar, “Monks of Honour: The Knights of Malta and criminal behaviour in early modern Rome,” pp.77-92.

<sup>54</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 26, folio 73-v: 3 July, 1684.

pressed his dismay at the shortage of Maltese vocations.<sup>55</sup> An appeal was repeated to the Provincial at Messina because, as the General rightly explained, ‘there is a shortage of subjects [members] who could serve that College in the Maltese language, for the missions...’<sup>56</sup>

In 1685, Father General de Noyelle once more complained that Jesuit missions in Malta were completely lacking (*del tutto mancate...*) despite the fact that the College had specific ecclesiastical benefices meant to keep missions going. The Sicilian Provincial was even urged to encourage young Maltese to join the Society. Furthermore, he was ‘ordered’ to send back to Malta any Maltese Jesuit, based in Sicily, who was capable of performing missionary work diligently.<sup>57</sup>

It seems that the General’s pleas to the provincial left the desired effect as preparations for the missions in Malta were soon under way.<sup>58</sup> By 1688, Father General González (1687-1705) advised the rector, Father Giuseppe Scalmato, to allow the Maltese Father Andrea Agius to carry out the missions intended to improve the religious knowledge of the Maltese based on the principles of the Council of Trent.<sup>59</sup>

By the eighteenth century, missionary work among the Maltese had become a top priority. Yet, the dire shortage of Maltese Jesuits continued to preoccupy successive Father Generals. In June 1735, Father General Retz complained that the Provincial of Sicily did not seem to be conscious of the dire need of Maltese Jesuits to work in Malta.<sup>60</sup> Indeed the shortage of Maltese Jesuits at the Malta College remained a constant topic in the letters of the Father Generals until the Jesuit expulsion in 1768.

By the early 18th century then, the Jesuit Curia in Rome had changed its policy on the role of the *Collegium Melitense*. Rome had ceased to view Maltese speakers as potential missionaries to the Levant and North Africa. The new policy appears to have irritated and deeply annoyed the Maltese-born Jesuits who may have continued to expect preferential treatment within the Society of Jesus on matters relating to the Levant.

<sup>55</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 13i, folio 150v: 16 January, 1642.

<sup>56</sup> ARSI Sic., vol.13i, folio171v: 20 February, 1642.

<sup>57</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 27, folio 61: 26 March, 1685.

<sup>58</sup> ARSI Sic., vol.27, folio 100v: 9 July, 1685.

<sup>59</sup> ARSI Sic., vol.30i, folio 3.

<sup>60</sup> ARSI Sic., vol.56, folio 137-v: 6 June, 1735.

## Problems at the Malta College

By the early eighteenth century, it became evident that it was best to involve well-trained non-Maltese Jesuits, knowledgeable in Oriental languages, to take care of catechumen slaves in Malta. In September 1712, Grand Master Perellos (1697-1720), and the Prior of the Conventual Church [St John's] Canaves, asked, Father General Michelangelo Tamburini (1706-1730) that a Jesuit be transferred to Malta specifically to work with baptized slaves at the College of Malta.<sup>61</sup> Tamburini singled out Father Ernesto Melchiorri for the task due to his great domesticity with the 'Turkish idiom' and his great religious zeal.<sup>62</sup> Based in Tuscany, Melchiorri left for Malta immediately<sup>63</sup> and Grand Master Perellos was soon able to inform the General of his arrival.<sup>64</sup> However, Melchiorri's arrival did not seem to go well with the inmates of the Malta College - particularly with the Maltese born Vice Rector Father Fabrizio Sagnani.

Melchiorri's presence was considered a rebuff to the Malta College who felt that Melchiorri's presence meant that the island lacked a real expert in Oriental languages. As a result, despite the insistence of the General, Father Melchiorri was treated like a visiting guest rather than as a normal inmate of the College. On his part, Melchiorri felt unaccepted and complained with the General about the difficulties he was facing. More correspondence between Rome and the Vice Rector followed in the hope that Melchiorri would finally be treated like any other member of the *Collegium Melitense*.<sup>65</sup>

The General's final instructions must have taken some time to reach Malta as we learn that Father Sagnani had decided, without consultation, to send Melchiorri away from Malta. When Father General learned of the way Sagnani had handled the matter, he sought the opinion of the highly-respected French confessor Father Francesco de la Motte. The General claimed that, by hastily sending Melchiorri away

<sup>61</sup> ARSI Sic., ARSI Sic vol.45, folio 52v: 23 September, 1712.

<sup>62</sup> ARSI Sic., vol.45, folio 56: 19 December, 1712.

<sup>63</sup> ARSI Sic., vol.45, folio 54v: 28 November, 1712.

<sup>64</sup> Reply by the General. ARSI Sic., vol.45, folio 55v: 28 November, 1712.

<sup>65</sup> ARSI Sic., vol.45, f.60: 9 January, 1713 and folio 68: 13 February, 1713.

from Malta, Sagnani had exercised rights that he did not have, as only the General had the right to remove a member of the Society if the latter was a guest.<sup>66</sup> However, Melchiorri was assigned to Malta as a member of the college!

### **The Malta College and the Jesuits in the Levant**

The Jesuit *Collegium Melitense* may have served as a potential link between the Jesuits missionaries from mainland Europe and their activities in North Africa and parts of the Levant. The Superior General's correspondence, with Jesuit fathers and others, provides a unique source for the proper understanding of the role of Malta in this missionary traffic.

The Malta College seems to have also served as an ideal place for safeguarding goods intended for the Levant - a widely held practice among Jesuit missionaries. This is evident from the fact that, in 1617, Father General Vitelleschi expressed great disappointment when a liturgical vestment and a chalice, transferred from Rome to Malta, and intended as a gift to a Maronite priest in Babylon (Iraq), had remained in Malta.<sup>67</sup>

In 1625 the General informed the Rector of Malta that two French Jesuit fathers had arrived at Messina on their way to Constantinople. Now why should this fact concern the Rector of Malta? It may imply that the two missionaries were passing through the island on their way to Turkey.<sup>68</sup> This was not a one-off incident. That same year (1625) another French Jesuit, Father Aurillac, passed through Malta on his way from Smyrna to Rome.<sup>69</sup> The following year, two more French Jesuit missionaries from Aleppo - Gaspard Maniglier and Jean Stella - were

<sup>66</sup> De la Motte was given the task to inform the community of Malta notify all the others of his grief at the taking of the decision. ARSI Sic vol.45 folio 74v: 27 February, 1713. Father General's resentment with the Father Provincial of Sicily, Father Giuseppe Filiberto Barbieri, at the way the Vice Rector Sagnani had despatched Father Melchiorri on a Venetian vessel. He duly ordered Father Barbieri to impose a penance to all the Jesuits at the College of Malta. ARSI Sic., vol.45 folio 75: 27 February, 1713.

<sup>67</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 7, folio 205: 4 March, 1617.

<sup>68</sup> ARSI Sic., vol.9i, folio 30: 3 April, 1625.

<sup>69</sup> ARSI Sic., vol.9i, folio 61v: 14 August, 1625.

reported to have reached Malta<sup>70</sup> and were meant to return to Constantinople at the first opportunity.<sup>71</sup>

This practice - whereby missionaries would pass through Malta on their way to or from the Levant - remained standard during the decades that followed. In 1679, we find that the General, Father Oliva, formally thanked Father Carlo di Gregorio, Rector of Malta, for showing great charity and zeal towards the fathers who had stopped at Malta on their way to Rome from the Levant.<sup>72</sup> A couple of years later one finds mention of another French missionary from the Levant who was lodged at the Malta College.<sup>73</sup>

The College was probably thought to be the nearest and safest forwarding centre for the safe-keeping of goods and money intended for the Levant and this activity persisted into the eighteenth century. In 1709 a Jesuit Father, attached to the house in Constantinople, deposited several goods belonging to that mission with Father Fabrizio Sagnani, then serving as Vice Rector of the local College. Sagnani was asked to keep them in his custody until further notice.<sup>74</sup> The goods were eventually returned in 1711 with the French Jesuit De la Motte who stopped in Malta on his way to Constantinople.<sup>75</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

In these early years, the Society of Jesus viewed Malta as an ideal base for its missionary activities in the Levant and the Maghreb. However, as time wore on, there appears to have been a re-thinking of this policy, as Superior Generals became convinced that Maltese Jesuits would do better in Malta where they could preach to the locals in their native language and convert Muslim slaves, living on the island, rather than travelling to the Levant.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>70</sup> ARSI Sic., vol.9ii, folio 257: 2 May, 1626.

<sup>71</sup> ARSI Sic., vol.9ii, folio 270v: 23 July, 1626. See also Frazee, *Catholics & Sultans*. pp.132-33.

<sup>72</sup> ARSI Sic., 23i, folio 207: 27 November 1679.

<sup>73</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 23ii, folio 384v: 24 February, 1681.

<sup>74</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 43, folio 291: 16 September, 1709.

<sup>75</sup> ARSI Sic., vol.44, folio 198v: 30 March, 1711.

<sup>76</sup> ARSI Sic., vol. 48, folio 106: 22 April, 1719.

In its early years, the *Collegium Melitense* was seen to be very much in line with the original intentions of Ignatius Loyola. Loyola's affection for the Levant was so great that in 1546 he was even prepared to resign as General of the Society in order to organize a mission to Ethiopia. This interest did not abate in later years. On the contrary, he exercised great pressure to found Jesuit colleges in the Levant and specifically in Cyprus, Constantinople and Jerusalem. He was even keen to join a mission in North Africa in order to convert the Moors to Christianity - proof of his deep concern for re-Christianizing of Levant.<sup>77</sup>

Entrusted with the evangelization of people whose languages and behaviours were new to them, the Jesuits struggled to carry out missionary work in a land to which, their founder, Loyola had felt intimately attached. The re-Christianization of the Levant remained central to the Jesuit creed, from the sixteenth century to their suppression in the eighteenth century.<sup>78</sup>

Malta gained value in the eyes of the early Jesuits thanks to the presence of the Order of St John and its perpetual crusade against Islam. In principle both the Jesuits and the Order sought to Christianize and thus regain lost territory from the Muslim Turk.

The archival documentation presented above shows clearly that Malta's peripheral position in Europe, together with the Semitic structure of Maltese, a language that was akin to Arabic, induced the Jesuit authorities in Rome to 'privilege' Malta as the ideal base for the evangelization of the Levant.

However, Jesuit policy changed over the decades. From the conversion of the Levant (as proposed by Loyola), the focus shifted towards the conversion of the Christians of the Levant. Yet, despite this change in policy, Malta continued to be regarded as a useful outpost for Jesuit missionary activities in the Mediterranean lands of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, the Malta College - which was initially set up to play a significant role in the Jesuit evangelization strategy on the border between the European Christian world and the North African

<sup>77</sup> O'Reilly, "Ignatius of Loyola," pp. 439-70.; O'Malley, *First Jesuits*, p.16.

<sup>78</sup> O'Malley, "To travel to any part of the world: Jerónimo Nadal and the Jesuit vocation," pp.6-12.

Muslim world - was able to continue fulfilling its role. In essence, the *Collegium Melitense* was seen as having all the qualities needed to fulfil the original aims of the founder - Ignatius of Loyola.

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