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Historical Sketch of the Oratory of Don Bosco in Malta

Paul Formosa, SDB

The Salesian Oratory in Sliema, in Malta, is an intriguing reality: a mixture of different personalities, different age groups, different social and political backgrounds. It is a center for contrasting activities, distinct views, personal choices. It is a focal point at which all these divergencies meet. A place and lifestyle which to varying degrees of success and failure, tries to absorb the tension that can be created, and generate a flow of energy that leads to maturity. The unifying factor which binds the pieces together is a Charism.

The Salesians of St. John Bosco are the people whose aim is to relive the charism of their founder in the service of the young people of today. They share his vision, and try to encourage the young to join them in their journey. The Salesian Oratory, is a place where this shared vision took root almost a hundred years ago, and developed according to the needs and the limitations of time. Yet, the charism remains the same and the vision is identical to the one which Don Bosco lived towards the end of the nineteenth century.

In this article, I will attempt to trace how Don Bosco's original experience was translated in such a way that his work could be established in Malta — an island country in the Mediterranean with a distinct tradition and culture from that in which the Salesian story first began and developed in Turin, Italy. I will place special emphasis on the Salesian Oratory, Sliema. The life span of the Oratory could be seen as the struggling of a charism to discern its role and be effective in catering for the needs of the young. The main emphasis here will be to explore how the Oratory managed to bring together both educators and young people in sharing the vision. How effective were the Salesians in creating the family spirit which is indispensable to the charism? Has the Oratory in Sliema effectively offered young people a Christian education?

1. The Oratory of Don Bosco in Malta: Ground Work

1.1. The Men Who Made It Happen.

Alfons Maria Galea was by far the most predominant figure involved in establishing the work of Don Bosco in Malta. Although he is remembered as a great philanthropist by many institutions, on the island, his most renowned work is the setting up of Salesian work in Sliema.

Born in 1861, "Fonso" Galea first learned about the priest from Turin from his father. During his boyhood years, Don Bosco's work was beginning to attract attention and the youth worker from Turin was making a name for himself even among the Maltese people. With the publication of the *Bollettino Salesiano* in the late 1870s, admiration for the Salesian style of youth work and spirituality grew stronger.¹ Don Bosco was the topic of discussion in the Galea household as well, for while he was still very young, Fonso's father had written to the saint, asking him to send his Salesians to work in Malta.²

In 1878, Galea was studying at the De La Salle College in Marseilles, where he met Bro. Joseph Emiliani who knew Don Bosco well.³ During this time Bro. Joseph even took Galea and his brother Francis to visit the Salesian House in Marseilles.

A year later, on September 17, Galea went with all his family to visit Don Bosco in Turin. Unfortunately they never met. Don Bosco was away. But his dream to see Salesian work in Malta did not fail. In fact, in 1891, three years after Don Bosco died he went back to Turin, where he met Don Rua who had succeeded Don Bosco.⁴

His first written request to Don Rua, asking him to send his Salesians to Malta was written on January 23, 1893. Referring to himself in veiled terms, he told the Salesian superior that "an admirer of Don Bosco's achievements who seeks the spiritual good of this island, would like to establish within easy reach of Valletta a festive oratory."⁵

After describing how he envisaged it all, he went on to emphasize,

¹The "Salesian Bulletin," or *Bollettino Salesiano*, was first published in 1877 by Don Bosco as a means of information for the Salesian Cooperators.

²The fact is recorded in: Alfons M. Galea, "A Brief Historical Sketch of Foundation of St. Patrick's School Sliema Malta." This "sketch" now forms part of the house chronicles of St. Patrick's School Sliema.

³Liza Galea. "An Intimate Outline Sketch of Fonso," 1942, typed manuscript [photocopy], 32, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Eugenio Ceria, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, vol. 3: Il Rettorato di Don Michele Rua, 1899-1910 (Torino: SEI, 1945), 422 [translation mine].

This Oratory is so necessary! So many souls would be saved especially in such a newly established township to which so many are flocking, souls that would otherwise be corrupted by the nearness of the big city. May the Lord be your inspiration in your reply.⁶

In the meantime, Alfons Maria Galea asked Don Rua for all the relevant details and for a draft sketch that would give him some indication of the area and the site required to build a Festive Oratory which on completion would be handed over to the Salesians. Don Durando⁷ sent him all the details from Turin.

Alfons Maria Galea kept up a correspondence on this matter for the next three years and used to sign himself as 'your son' when writing to Don Rua. In a letter dated August 19, 1896, he wrote:

In the Lord's name: a friend of these poor little ones very much wants, as I myself have wanted for many years, to see a Salesian Oratory in our little island. The above mentioned charitable person will probably have a thousand pounds which he would like to use for this purpose leaving the whole business entirely in my hands. Oh! How I wish that this could come about. The Lord knows how much I want it from the bottom of my heart. It would be of the greatest benefit for this village which really could be regarded as a town in which this institute could be set up. And since this Sliema village with its 8,000 inhabitants is so near Valletta, this idea would be of benefit to the entire island. So do see what the Lord would inspire you with, as well as our Father Don Bosco and you in your own good time let me know.⁸

The "generous friend of the little ones" was in fact Galea himself who wished to remain anonymous.

This request put forward by Galea, was not the first formal one sent from Malta. Ten years earlier, on January 31, 1883, a famous Maltese writer and publisher Annibale Preca, wrote to Don Bosco. In the *Annali della Società Salesiana* we find a reference to his letter, in which he assured the Salesian founder that the land which had been "the beloved daughter of Saint Paul and which had never betrayed the apostle's teaching, a land both generous and hospitable," would welcome and support the Salesians if only they would come to open a house for boys needing to learn a trade.⁹

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Celestino Durando (1840-1907) had been a member of the Salesian general council since 1865; his particular responsibilities included exploring the practical considerations involved in opening new foundations; cf. Eugenio Ceria, "Durando sac. Celestino, consigliere generale," in *Dizionario Biografico dei Salesiani*, edited by Eugenio Valentini, and Amedeo Rodinò (Torino: Ufficio Stampa Salesiana, 1969), 113-114.

⁸Ceria, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, 3:423 [translation mine].

⁹Cf. Ceria, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, 3:421.

On June 30 of the same year, a priest who later became the Director of the Salesian Cooperators, Canon Luigi Farrugia, visited the Oratory in Valdocco and met Don Bosco. A year later he sent to Don Durando, a hard and fast proposal for the Salesians to come to Malta. He requested a list of things that were needed to facilitate their arrival, and asked him to convey his greetings "to that immortal and holy man Don Bosco."¹⁰ Don Bosco sent him the *Breve Notizie*, which he himself had compiled, so that it could give a brief summary of the ideals of the Salesian Society.¹¹

Another request was sent in 1889, by Don Franco Manch , the first parish priest of Stella Maris Church in Sliema. In his letter, he asked Don Rua who had succeeded Don Bosco, to set out the right and proper conditions for such an event. Don Rua sent him the life of Don Bosco written by Du Boy and the *Bollettino Salesiano*.¹²

In the build up to the arrival of the Salesians in Malta, Alfons Maria Galea was the one who finally made it happen. Through his efforts and those of the other people mentioned here, the Salesians in Turin were made aware of the great desire for their presence in Malta. The request differed in the type of work they envisaged the Salesians doing. What they had in common, however, was the fact that they saw in the Salesian educative method, a concrete proposal for the Maltese youth. A proposal that could respond effectively to the needs of the Maltese young people at the turn of the century.

1.2. A Society in Need

Poverty

Poverty was a major problem facing Maltese society at the turn of the century. Numerous beggars, male and female roamed the streets of Valletta and the harbor towns. The British authorities made several attempts to control them but they were mostly unsuccessful. The problem of poverty was rooted in the instability of the country's economy and in its rapid demographic growth.

The dockyard was the only industry that was employing workers even until after the first World War. In 1918 there were approximately 13,000 shipyard workers.¹³ According to the 1911 census, a good number of Maltese were leaving the Islands to seek residence and work in other Mediterranean countries like Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, where they formed rather large communities till after the Second World War.

¹⁰Cf. *Ibid.*, 3:421.

¹¹Eugenio Ceria, *Memorie Biografiche del Beato Giovanni Bosco* (S. Benigno Canavese/Torino: SEI, 1934), 15:703.

¹²Cf. Ceria, *Annali della Societ  Salesiana*, 3:422.

¹³Cf. Victor Mallia Milanes *The British Colonial Experience 1800-1964* (Malta: Minerva Publications, 1988), 96.

In spite of the emigration of workers and an extremely high mortality rate as a result of the lack of hygiene on the islands, the Maltese population continued to grow.¹⁴ From the figure of 114,000 in 1842, the population rose to 124,000 in 1851. By 1871, it rose to 140,000 and by the end of the century it reached 185,000 with an annual increase of 3,000. The increase continued so that by the first World War it surpassed the quarter of a million mark.¹⁵

At the same time there was a shift from the rural areas to the cities, where work could be found. As a result the population of the newer suburbs and settlements such as Sliema was growing steadily. This urbanization was simultaneously accompanied by the problems which were being experienced even by other European countries.

And it was here that people, concerned with the welfare of society, felt that the Salesians of Don Bosco could be helpful. Seeing how Don Bosco's system had managed to achieve results in the Turin society—which was in even greater need—these people felt that the same system could help to alleviate the problems of Maltese society.

Education

Up till the end of the nineteenth century, government investment in education for the local population was rather low. The colonial government did not approve of local education which, according to a report by a Royal Commission in 1838, was: "small in quantity and bad in quality."¹⁶ Furthermore, elementary schools only taught children folk-tales, nursery rhymes and prayers, but hardly anything else.

Another report in 1861 showed that out of a population of 134,055 people only 8,000 males could read Italian and less than 4,000 males could read English. From these figures, it is evident that only very few males, and even fewer females, were literate. This situation was somewhat similar to that in other European countries including Britain.¹⁷ What pushed the Government to invest in local education was the desire to promote the study of the English language, rather than the Italian language, which was the official and more widely known language in Malta.¹⁸

In 1901 the British government invested the considerable sum of 46,000 pounds to local education. Schools were built, and the number of students, especially in elementary schools, started to increase. In 1911 there were 21,000 students attending elementary school. Although this was an improvement, it was still less than half the population of children.

¹⁴Cf. Herbert Ganado, *Rait Malta Tinbidel* (Malta: II-Haija, 1974), 1:7.

¹⁵Cf. Mallia Milanes, *The British Colonial Experience 1800 - 1964*, 93.

¹⁶Henry Frendo, "Dimechianism," (B.A. thesis, University of Malta, 1970), 39.

¹⁷Cf. Mallia Milanes, *The British Colonial Experience 1800 - 1964*, 106.

¹⁸Cf. *Ibid.*

Elementary education was free of charge and books could also be obtained free, by those who could not afford them. Still, many parents preferred to see their youngsters start working at an early age. Many helped their parents in agriculture or else worked in the city with a tradesman or in an office—the children's help and income was often necessary for the maintenance of their poor and large families.

In a report to a Royal Commission in 1911, the then Rector of the Royal University of Malta, Prof. E. Magro said, that in the same year over six hundred children left school at an early age of six or seven years. In the suburban parts of the island, there was hardly any child beyond the age of ten attending school. In the higher elementary classes for students at the age of fourteen years, there were only between four to five thousand students.

Prof. Magro continued that after elementary school only a mere one percent of the students continued their studies at the Lyceum, where there was a maximum number of 350 boys. The number of students who made it to the Royal University of Malta situated in Valletta, was no more than 150.¹⁹

The Location

The choice of Sliema for the setting up of the Salesian work was very natural. It was based not only on the needs of the society, but also on the fact that Alfons Maria Galea was working to see it through.

Alfons Maria Galea very much wanted university students to find a Salesian Oratory, where they could meet other young people of their own social status. In a society where class distinction was widely accepted, he saw the need of a healthy place of recreation and intellectual and cultural stimulus, away from the negative influence, which was present in other more worldly entertainment circles.²⁰ Furthermore, he believed that a Salesian Festive Oratory would also cater for the needs of the lower class children, who were becoming ever more numerous in his town.

Sliema began to develop as a residential area in the mid-nineteenth century. Only six and a half kilometers away from the capital city, Valletta, and surrounded by rocky beaches, it was at first known as a summer resort for the higher class, mostly residing in Valletta. In fact, it was only towards the end of the century, when the population was increasing, that the government started work on water, drainage and electricity services.²¹

In 1871, there were 1600 people living permanently in Sliema and in the next ten years the population doubled to 3685. In a report on Malta written in 1887 we find a description of Sliema which states that "houses are being con-

¹⁹Garnado, *Rajt Malta Tinbidel*, 1:286.

²⁰Cf. Louis Grasso, *Alfons Maria Galea* (Malta: Marsa Press, 1992), 76.

²¹Cf. Winston L. Zammit, *Tas-Sliema Fl-Imghoddi* (Malta: Lux, 1981), 46ff.

tinually built, the demand for them being great. This increasing accommodation serves materially to relieve Valletta which is too densely populated."²²

The population of Sliema continued to grow very rapidly so that by 1901 it had reached 12,015.²³ Of these a large number were children, many of whom came from poor families, children who needed a place to meet, where they could play and learn catechism.

In an issue of *Moghdija taz-Zmien* Alfons Maria Galea quotes the speech delivered by Fr. Joseph Busietta at the opening of the Salesian Oratory in Sliema. In his speech, Fr. Busietta refers to a "mission" organized for children in the new parish of Stella Maris, in 1896. He refers to the uncontrolled number of children who for two whole weeks met at the Church every day. They were thrilled to be there together listening to the charismatic talks delivered by a certain Fr. Louis Galea. The preacher concluded his talks by encouraging the children to "pray God, that he may provide you with an oratory."²⁴

This prayer was not only the preacher's desire. The parish priest himself, in 1889, had already asked Don Rua to bring the Salesian work in Malta. But now the need for this to happen became more evident; and the means for its actualization made more available. Alfons Maria Galea belonged to the same parish and he had the land, the money, and above all, the vision, to see a dream, which inspired so many people, become a reality.

2. The Unfolding

2.1. The Early Developments

In the beginning of the twentieth century Malta was at the crossroads. The political situation in Malta was increasingly overshadowed by the economic gloom that hung over the islands. The state of affairs had been steadily deteriorating for a long time. Despite significant improvements in the harbor and dockside areas, which included the building of the breakwater in the Grand Harbor, Malta was facing increasing competition from other well equipped ports in the Mediterranean.

Government revenue from the diminished activity in Malta's port fell steeply. Despite increased defense expenditure, unemployment soared. Already it was clear that Malta's dependence on Britain's military spending, was a se-

²²Quoted in Zammit, *Tas-Sliema Fl-Imghoddi*, 46.

²³Cf. Alf Guillaumier, *Bliet u Rhula Maltin* (Malta: Klabb tat-Tisjir, 1987), 447.

²⁴Alfons Maria Galea. "Ulled Don Bosco f'Malta," *Moghdija taz-Zmien*, no. 80 (December 1908): 11.

vere handicap. The fact, that Malta had no proper system of taxation, further contributed to the Government's inability to balance its accounts.²⁵

In such a difficult economic situation, Alfons Maria Galea hoped to convince the Government to dedicate funds for the setting up of Salesian work in Malta. He knew very well that without the Government support this could never happen, especially since the Salesians were an Italian congregation and Malta under British Rule.

Galea's first step was to approach the Governor Sir Arthur Freemantle. It was a delicate matter which had to be submitted in such a way that it would receive immediate attention. Taking advantage of the fact that the British were preparing to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, Galea suggested to the Governor that he should establish a lasting foundation as an act of homage to the sovereign, in her Jubilee year. He presented his ideas in a letter to the Governor, dated April 21, 1897.

For some time I have been turning over in my mind an idea which if realized will be a great benefit to the poorer classes of these islands especially if the Government should deem it fit to join forces with me and bring it all about. So I propose to offer one thousand pounds and the land necessary for the buildings and the playgrounds for establishing in Sliema an industrial and charitable institution which should be entrusted to the Salesian Fathers. The idea of this Institute would not be just to teach children of the poorer classes a trade so that they could have the means latter on to earn an honest living; but also to provide an education for the delinquent youth by simply keeping them away from being contaminated. Otherwise, by keeping them in close contact with hardened delinquents, they could only become worse as so often happens. Keeping these two types of youngsters apart would be carried out by the Salesian Fathers to whom this Institute would be entrusted to run in the way they should think fit and proper.²⁶

The proposal of establishing an institute for the "education for delinquent youth" seems to be far removed from Galea original idea of a festive Oratory. Analyzing his letter one could follow line of thought which explains why this shift had necessarily to take place. Alfons Maria Galea knew that introducing an Italian congregation to Malta was politically risky. The situation was not immediately favorable to such an initiative. Therefore the idea of a festive Oratory had to undergo a change, not in its ideal, but in its implementation. Bringing Don Bosco's charism to Malta was for Alfons Maria Galea of paramount importance. The way this had to happen had nothing absolute about it. Alfons Maria Galea knew for his proposal to materialize it had to gain the Government's favor and facilitate his involvement. An oratory was not the ideal proposal; but an institution involving both Government and the Salesians was more likely to give the desired results.

²⁵Ganado, *Rait Malta Tinbidel*, 1:68.

²⁶Quoted in Ceria, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, 3:423 [translation mine].

His own contribution gave the whole project a sense of determination; but what finally convinced the Government to approve and support this project was the linking of the establishment of the industrial school with the Jubilee. This wise political move, avoided linking the arrival of the Salesians with the political current of the time.

All in all, as is evident in Alfons Galea's letter to Governor Freemantle, this shift safeguarded both the scope of education of the poor, and the arrival of the Salesians to do this. It also widened the spectrum of the Salesian charism itself, because for the first time in the history of the Salesian Congregation, an institute for the delinquents was taken over to be run on the basis of the Preventive System. Thus, without knowing it, Alfons Maria Galea was also instrumental on the level of the Salesian Congregation. By bringing the Salesians to Malta he helped the Salesian charism to find those root elements which Don Bosco held as a young priest visiting the prisons.²⁷

The Government first Secretary, Count Charles Strickland, replied favorably to Mr. Galea, while the Government Gazette of May 16, 1897 carried the news that the principal way of commemorating the Jubilee would be the institution of a hostel and home for the protection of boys. Prior even to this, on May 13, 1897, knowing the Governor's personal good dispositions towards him, Mr. Galea had written to Don Rua:

Pray our Lord that things will turn out all right and that this place may really be blessed. An important person has convinced me that the hand of God is in the venture.²⁸

In June of the following year 1898 the Government asked Don Rua to send an official delegate to confer with him on terms of an agreement by which the institute would be set up in the care of the Congregation. Don Rua sent Don Guiseppe Bertello, the provincial superior in Sicily, to perform this task.²⁹ Negotiations were intensive, with the Governor General himself taking part. In the end, he reached an agreement with the Salesians and Mr. Galea regarding the nature of the institute and the site for it. Furthermore, the agreement established that the Rector and some of the Salesians who run the institute had to be British subjects.³⁰

On November 25, 1898, the Council of Government unanimously voted the 1,800 pounds proposed by Mr. Galea in his original letter to the Government for the commencement of the building. Sir Arthur Freemantle due to leave Malta at the turn of the year wished to be present at the laying of foundation stone. So on December 17, 1898, Canon Farrugia, delegated by Arch-

²⁷Cf. Ceria, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, 3:429-430.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 3:425.

²⁹Cf. *Ibid.*, 3:425.

³⁰Cf. *Ibid.*, 3:431-432.

bishop Peter Pace, blessed the foundation stone which was then laid by the Governor himself.

On July 8, 1898, the Government notary recorded the handing over of 1000 pounds and the land for the purpose of building an Institute in memory of Queen Victoria. To make up the sum Mrs. Lisa Galea, wife of Alfons Maria Galea, sold her jewelry in London raising 700 pounds and her husband gave 300 pounds from his own private resources.

In the same year 1898, Miss Giovanna Pullicino offered the Government 1000 pounds for the raising of a Church on the site, provided that it should be accessible to the public and be constructed within two years. The aid was accepted and the government also added its contribution. It was about this time that Mr. Galea obtained a decree from the Governor naming two of the streets that formed the boundaries of the institute Don Bosco Street and Don Rua Street.

The negotiations for the drawing up of the first contract between the congregation and the Government were long and thorny but ended "pro tempore" on October 9, 1902. Mr. Galea and Mr. Paul Sammut signed for Don Rua. By the end of 1903, a good part of the construction of the institute was nearing completion and the chapel had been commenced; the first five Salesians arrived on November 12, 1903.³¹

So that things could be better organized and the building more complete, the inauguration ceremony was postponed to the following May 16, when the Governor General and his wife, and the Archbishop were present. The latter blessed the foundation stone of the chapel on the same occasion and the church was opened to the public just one year later. On the same occasion, the theater, below the chapel was also inaugurated. On St. Stephen's Day of the same year the football pitch was used for the first time.³²

There was still much to be done to make the building habitable and functional. It was not until the following March 4 that the first boy, Peter Abela, was admitted to the "Salesian Industrial School," very soon to become St. Patrick's Salesian School, the name being adopted in honor of its first rector, Fr. Patrick O'Grady.

Therefore, in these first contacts and realization of the arrival of the Salesians in Malta, the originating idea was the oratory, as an experience of educating the poor and creating for them a festive and healthy atmosphere. This idea, through situations, both political and social, underwent a metamorphosis which enlarged both the vision of the Salesian charism and the work of the Salesians in Malta. This, however, did not in any way change the original vision of Alfons Maria Galea: that of the festive oratory.

³¹Cf. *Ibid.*, 3:432-433.

³²Cf. *Ibid.*, 3:433.

2.2. The Oratory At Last.

May 7, 1908, the "Juventutis Domus" was officially inaugurated. The Rev. Msgr. S. Grech, representing the Bishop of Malta, blessed the Domus. The Governor of Malta, H. E. Sir Henry Kane Grant made the official opening and handed the keys to Don Rua. Without doubt this was an occasion of great celebration.³³

The Domus was not a festive Oratory. But it was the fulfillment of a part of Alfons Maria Galea's dream. It was a center of cultural, intellectual and religious refinement for the elite among Maltese youth. In it, the young elite, among whom there were Galea's sons, found a healthy environment where they could be better prepared to be the leaders of Maltese society.³⁴

Two years earlier, the Salesians from St. Patrick's School had already started to extend their educational activities to the university students who come from the upper class.³⁵ With the encouragement of Alfons Maria Galea, the Salesians understood the need to participate in the intellectual development of the Maltese society. They believed that their system of education based on reason, religion and loving kindness, was a very valid contribution to the growth of a society which was still at the early stages of intellectual development.

This new aspect of Salesian work, gained momentum with the arrival of a new Salesian, Don Antonino Urso. This dynamic and open minded priest came from Tunis, where he had already been a director of a Salesian House and before that, in charge of a seminary, even though he was still "around thirty".³⁶

One week after the arrival of Don Urso, on November 7, 1906, Alfons Maria Galea invited Fr. O'Grady, Don Urso and the Salesian Provincial of Malta and Tunis, to his house for dinner. The main topic of conversation centered around the need for a Club for the intellectual and professional young workers on the island. The provincial, Fr. Angelo Lovisolo, agreed with the idea and promised to pass on this proposal to the Rector Major, Fr. Michael Rua.³⁷

Work on the site, just opposite St. Patrick's School, started four months later. The land and the money for the work were donated by Alfons Maria Galea. The complete building, known as the "Juventutis Domus," consisted of a good sized theater, one of the best on the island, a well equipped library and a

³³Cf. Galea, "Ulled Don Bosco f' Malta," 9.

³⁴Cf. Grasso, *Alfons Maria Galea*, 76.

³⁵"House Chronicle of St. Patrick's School," entry for 25 February 1906, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta [afterwards cited as "St. Patrick Chronicle"].

³⁶Cf. Galea, "Ulled Don Bosco f' Malta," 7.

³⁷Cf. *Ibid.*

games room.³⁸ Don Urso, the Salesian in charge, gave the Domus a powerful impetus.

It might seem that this work with the well-to-do, upper class youth, was a diversion from the original charism of the Salesians, to work with "poor and abandoned" youth. And yet it was approved of from the early days of Salesian work in Malta. Taking the example of Don Bosco himself, the Salesians understood the need of establishing a healthy and formative relationship with the intellectual and future political leaders of society. Only in this way could the needs of the whole of society, including the working class be seen to.

Furthermore, the work with the upper class youth did not hinder the work with the poor working class population. Only one month later, on June 7, 1908, the much needed Festive oratory was opened just across the road from the Domus. It consisted of a large playground, room for administration, rooms for religious instruction and a games room.³⁹ The chapel was built in 1909 as a monument for Don Urso, who had left Malta only a few months after the opening of the Oratory and who died tragically in an earthquake in Messina in December 1908.

2.3. The Lifestyle

From the very beginning, the Salesians tried to run the Oratory and the Domus in a family atmosphere, which was at the heart of their Preventive System. The two sections catered to children and young people coming from different social classes, which would not easily integrate in daily life. Yet, as early as on August 2, 1910, we find reference of a combined theatrical performance in honor of Alfons Maria Galea. During this festive evening, members of the Domus, the Oratory and even St. Patrick's participated.⁴⁰ Although class distinction continued to exist between the two sections, the theater helped to start bridging the gap. Don Vincenzo Allegra, who succeeded Don Urso, set up the philodramatic society of the Oratory, which gave its first performance in Italian, on January 16, 1910.⁴¹ Gradually the theater which was originally used only by the Domus, was taken over by the ever increasing activity of the Oratory drama society under the patronage of Saint Genesius.

During these early years of development, the Salesians aimed to set the work on the same footing as that of Don Bosco in Turin. Together with theatrical activities, catechism classes were immediately given priority. They were entrusted to catechists chosen from among the older and more sensible boys. The classes were organized four times a week, from Monday to Thursday,

³⁸Cf. Ceria, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, 3:770.

³⁹Cf. *Ibid.*

⁴⁰"House Chronicle of the Salesian Oratory of Sliema", August 2, 1910, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta [afterwards cited as "Oratory Chronicle"].

⁴¹Cf. *Ibid.*, January 16, 1910.

while on Friday all the groups came together for catechism explanations. Saturday was reserved for confessions and the recitation of the rosary and on Sunday, Mass was celebrated at 7.30 a.m.

Another feature of Don Bosco's system which was effectively used even in Malta, was the organization of small groups. The *compagnie* or sodalities were formed among the boys so that they became their own guides and animators.⁴²

An important activity which started to flourish almost from the very start of the Oratory was the Salesian Boys' Brigade (S.B.B.). This organization which included band marches, military style drill, camping and other group activities, grew very rapidly. It gave the Oratory scope for moving beyond its four walls.

The first official manifestation of the S.B.B. was held on October 23, 1910. The members gave an impressive display of drill and semaphore signing in the presence of the General Commanding Officer, A. Pentor C.V.O., C.B. together with many naval officers.⁴³

The S.B.B. continued to develop and included practically all members of the Oratory. It also gained national recognition. In 1913, the S.B.B. played a ceremonial part for the Eucharistic Congress held in Malta. For this occasion the Archbishop of Westminster, H. E. Cardinal Bourne inspected the S.B.B. gathered in St. Patrick's and posed for an official photograph with them.⁴⁴

Through the S.B.B. and other activities, the Oratory and its system became widely known. In its growth, several Maltese priests were very keen to help with their priestly ministry and with assisting the youngsters. There were also some cooperators and friends who lent a hand.⁴⁵ This way, the Italian Salesians found the necessary help to communicate effectively with the local boys and vice-versa.

The life and enthusiasm which accompanied the lifestyle of the newly established Salesian work, did not, however, represent an ideal paradise on earth. Throughout the development of the Oratory, the gray clouds which often gathered over Maltese society, always created turbulence within. Coupled with this external influence, the journey towards an adequate response to the needs of Maltese society, was also sometimes delayed by internal difficulties.

Yet, it was during these tough and sometimes painful moments, that the Salesians and the Oratory could adjust their response, in order to achieve more effectiveness as educators. This, they tried to do by better understanding and applying the preventive system and the family spirit on which it was built.

⁴²Cf. *Ibid.*, March 9, 1909.

⁴³Cf. *Ibid.*, October 23, 1910.

⁴⁴Cf. *Ibid.*, April 26, 1913.

⁴⁵Cf. Ceria, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, 3:770.

3. Times of Crisis

3.1. Right from the Start.

Fr. Patrick O'Grady, as rector of St. Patrick's, was also ultimately responsible for the Oratory and the Domus. He was the one, therefore, who on June 19, 1908, wrote to the local bishop asking him very strongly to revise most of the conditions which the Maltese Curia had established for the running of the Oratory.⁴⁶

Among his requests Fr. O'Grady demanded that the bishop remove four of the six restrictions. The first one had prohibited any form of discussion concerning religious themes. Another condition was that no lay person could give talks without the Curia's "preventive censorship." Two others explicitly prohibited women and non-Catholics from using the premises.⁴⁷ Fr. O'Grady went so far as to ask the archbishop to change these conditions or else "declare publicly that he doesn't want the Sons of Don Bosco to take charge in his Diocese, of one of the main works they have dedicated themselves to, according to their constitutions, as approved by the Holy See."⁴⁸

Archbishop Pace agreed to alter the restrictions as requested.⁴⁹ However, the firm stand which Fr. O'Grady initially took may well have created an excuse for the archbishop to watch the work very closely and come down heavily on any diversion from the Curia's real expectations. In fact on August 5, only two months after the opening of the Domus, the bishop once again wrote to Fr. O'Grady, this time complaining about the activities of the Domus and the Salesian who was running it.

The archbishop denounced Don Urso, for turning the Domus into a "stimulus of modernist ideas". In his letter he refers to conversations in which Don Urso himself had expressed ideas which favored the "modernist movement". This same priest, the archbishop goes on to complain, had filled the Oratory library with books and periodicals that were not approved by the Church.⁵⁰

As a result, Don Urso had to leave Malta on August 24, 1908. This move caused great pain and sacrifice to the Salesians and the members of the

⁴⁶Cf. Fr. Patrick O'Grady, to the Archbishop Pietro Pace, autograph letter, May 29, 1908, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta.

⁴⁷Cf. Archbishop Pietro Pace to Fr. Patrick O'Grady, autograph letter, June 5, 1908, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta.

⁴⁸Fr. Patrick O'Grady, to the Archbishop Pietro Pace, autograph letter, May 29, 1908, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta.

⁴⁹Cf. Archbishop Pietro Pace, to Fr. Patrick O'Grady, autograph letter, June 19, 1908, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta.

⁵⁰Cf. Archbishop Pietro Pace, to Fr. Patrick O'Grady, autograph letter, August 5, 1908, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta.

Domus in Malta, as well as to Don Rua in Turin. In a letter to an eminent member of the Domus, Don Rua explained that the removal of Don Urso from Malta was difficult. He promised to send a substitute who could adequately replace Don Urso and continue the work which he had started.⁵¹

Don Urso had envisioned creating a center for intellectual, academic and cultural achievement—an educative environment for the children of the working class. His abrupt removal from the scene threatened the project, not only for the young people but for all who shared the same vision. Alfons Maria Galea, who had dedicated so much money, time and energy to see the Domus and Oratory grow alongside St. Patrick's, certainly shared the disappointment.

But what is more worthwhile considering is the true family spirit which Don Urso, with the support of other Salesians, had managed to build in the Domus. The letter which was sent to Don Rua, asking for the return of Don Urso was signed by 427 members.⁵²

On December 28, 1908, two days after Don Rua wrote his reply, Don Urso died tragically in an earthquake in Messina.⁵³ The abrupt death of this much loved, young priest, re-kindled the warmth that he had left behind in Malta. In a letter published in the *Gazette di Malta* of February 1, 1909, he is described as a man who, was "austere in his own life but youthfully enthusiastic on behalf of others, who with ardent and active charity, with the eloquence and simplicity of his inspired words knew how to attract people to himself so that, through him, they might be attracted to the Good God."⁵⁴

In memory of Don Urso, a chapel was built on the first floor of the Oratory building.

In this initial disagreement with the local church authorities, the Salesians must have felt on familiar grounds. Their founder Don Bosco, had been in a somewhat similar situation with his archbishop in Turin.⁵⁵ Now, thirty years later, even the local Ordinary in Malta felt that the Salesians were working with a model of Church too different from the times. Through their family

⁵¹Cf. Don Michele Rua, Torino, to Marchese Testaferrera Olivieri, Sliema, autograph letter, December 26, 1908, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta.

⁵²Cf. *Ibid.*

⁵³Don Antonino Urso, 32 years old, had barely served for two months as Oratory director in Messina, when he was one of nine Salesians and 39 pupils who died under the rubble of Istituto S. Luigi Gonzaga. The 1908 Messina earthquake measured 7.5 on the Richter scale, and claimed 83,000 victims. See: "Echi del Disastro," *Bollettino Salesiano* 33.3 (March 1909): 71.

⁵⁴*Gazette di Malta* (Malta), 1 February 1909: "colla sue vita austere per se giovanile per gli altri, colla sue carita ardente ed operose coll'eloquenza e semplicità della sue ispirata parole seppe trarre a se e, per suo mezzo, al Buon Dio."

⁵⁵For a comprehensive study of Don Bosco's conflict with Archbishop Lorenzo Gastaldi, lasting from 1872 to 1882, see: Arthur Lenti, "The Bosco-Gastaldi Conflict," in *Journal of Salesian Studies* 4.2 (Fall 1993): 1-83; 5.1 (Spring 1994): 35-131.

spirit, which the young people really appreciated, the Salesians allowed themselves to draw close to the people—too close, perhaps, in the view of the local authorities who may have felt left out. In fact in his letter to Don Rua written on August 7, 1908, Fr. O'Grady very openly questions the genuineness of their claims:

The reports that church people and lay people alike make to the curia concerning [D. Urso] can only be the result of jealousy and maliciousness for the main, I perhaps should say.⁵⁶

Replacing a man of Don Urso's caliber must have been difficult. In fact before coming to Malta, his friend and successor Don Vincenzo Allegra spent some time with him in Messina, where they had some very fruitful conversations.⁵⁷ When he arrived in Malta, Don Allegra worked hard to resume the work started by Don Urso even in accordance to Don Urso's instruction.⁵⁸

Yet, the Domus was never to be the same again.

The boys at the Oratory were coming in ever increasing numbers. They also demanded more and more time and energy. Don Allegra tried to cater to the needs of both sections, but he gradually found himself dedicating much of his time to the Oratory rather than to the Domus.

The resulting situation is clearly described in a letter, by three of the lay leaders of the Domus, sent to Don Rua on August 19, 1909.⁵⁹ In their strong appeal, the signatories explain how in spite of his good will and excellent work, Don Allegra could not give the necessary time for the care of the Domus. They go on to suggest that two more Salesians were needed to work in the Domus in order to give it the dignity it deserved.

The two Salesians never arrived. Don Rua had none available. As a result, the Oratory which continued to grow tremendously, eventually took over all activities which had earlier belonged to the Domus.

The resulting predominance of the Oratory, could be attributed to the personal charism of Don Allegra. Immediately upon his arrival, he dedicated great energy to organize within the Oratory groups like the S.B.B., the Sodalities, the philodramatic society and the altar boys. These activities created great enthusiasm and attracted more members. For an outing organized as a reward only

⁵⁶Fr. Patrick O'Grady, Sliema, to Don Michele Rua, Torino, autograph letter, August 7, 1908, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta [translation mine].

⁵⁷Cf. Eddie Skee, "Don Urso Portrait Mystery," *Haija Salesjana* (Aug-Oct 1994): 24.

⁵⁸Cf. Alfons Maria Galea, "It-Thezziza ta' Messina" *Moghdiia taz-Zmien*, no. 86 (January 1909): 12.

⁵⁹Cf. Marchese Testaferrata Olivieri, Notary M.L. Casolani and A.F. Scortino, Malta, to Don Michele Rua, Torino, autograph letter, August 20, 1909, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta.

for the best members of the various groups on July 10, 1910, there were over 300 boys present.⁶⁰

There was no other center for these boys anywhere near; so all the boys of the area gathered at the Oratory. Don Allegra felt that helping them in the preventive system was a priority and dedicated most of his energy to them.

Whether desired or not, the effect of this choice was that the Salesians eventually lost a valid dimension of their apostolic work. Efforts at keeping the Domus alive were certainly made. In November 1913 the new director Don Filippo Pappalardo held his first meeting with Alfons Maria Galea, where they talked of reform in the Domus.⁶¹

A set of "Rules" were drawn up. These rules clearly defined the essential role of the lay people in the running of the Domus. There was to be a committee responsible for its daily running. This group was made up of not less than seven lay members, who were accountable to a council made up of three other lay members. The council was also responsible for overseeing the use of the premises by the Oratory and St. Patrick's.

The almost total handing over of responsibility to lay people, could have been partly a necessary result of a lack of Salesian personnel. But it was more than that. It was also an effort at creating family atmosphere where people were at ease and could feel respected. Rule One, as established in the reform agreement sets the desired tone:

A Salesian Father shall be the spiritual director of the Domus. He will be the friend and councilor of the members, giving tone by his presence to their social intercourse and offering them intellectual stimulus by occasional conferences.⁶²

The activities of the Domus eventually faded out. First through external restrictions, and then the result of internal choices, the Salesians were unable to cater for the needs of this section of society, and have not been able to do so till this present day.

The loss cannot be underestimated, yet, it was the price that had to be paid for another perhaps more urgent response. The Domus never regained the dynamism which Don Urso had so enthusiastically injected in it. Yet the Oratory did grow and develop to face new times and new challenges. It continued to respond sometimes with success and sometimes with failure, as it moved from one critical situation to another.

⁶⁰Cf. "Oratory Chronicle," entry for July 10, 1910.

⁶¹Salesian Fr. Filippo Pappalardo, a native of Siracusa, Sicily, and recently returned from the missions in Brazil, arrived in Malta on October 22, 1913. On November 29 of the same year he met Alfons Maria Galea in his home; cf. "Oratory Chronicle," entries for the respective dates.

⁶²From the "Rules" for *Juventutis Domus*, Sliema, signed by Fr. Patrick O'Grady, Fr. Filippo Pappalardo, A. Sciortino, S. Bellanti, T. Asphar, January 3, 1914 (Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta).

3.2. Giving Stability

The changes taking place in Europe in the build up to World War I, left a mark on the political, social and geographic definitions in the continent. New countries were being formed and new alliances set up. The nationalist feeling spreading throughout the continent was perhaps too powerful to keep in check. When the war exploded, it was a tremendous repressed tension breaking free.

At first Maltese society was hardly effected by the war events. Italy, the next door neighbor, had remained neutral, and the fighting was taking place far away. Life went on as usual and as writer Herbert Ganado recalls as children "we continued to play, as usual, in the mall as if the war had never started."⁶³ However, Malta was an English colony, and therefore the island could not remain completely detached. England's alliance with France resulted in French warships coming to use the harbor facilities in Valletta. Moreover, being a safe distance, it was used by the allies as an island hospital. War casualties were brought in great numbers and this earned Malta the name of "nurse of the Mediterranean."⁶⁴

The two factors just mentioned were economically helpful to the Island. More people found employment, especially in the dockyard. But along side these benefits, also came the increase in cost of living, which brought about great unrest among the people. In fact in 1917, the rise in prices led to the first major strike by Maltese workers which was organized in the dockyard.⁶⁵

The instability inherent in Maltese society during these years, is also very visible in the life of the Salesian Oratory in Sliema. Fr. Pappalardo left the Oratory in the end of July 1914, only nine months after his arrival.⁶⁶ The reasons for his rather short stay, are not clearly stated, but from the subsequent events at the Oratory, one can conclude that there were serious problems.

In the following three months, three different Salesians were sent to direct the Oratory. We have very little documentation about the short stays, but we know that great changes did take place. Fr. Francesco Arisi was assigned as director of the Oratory after the departure of Fr. Pappalardo. He stayed only one month: the month of September 1914. As the Oratory chronicler recorded: "He calmly took steps to clean up the environment of those individuals who were too fanatical about being in command—Nothing else is worth handing down for posterity."⁶⁷

⁶³ Herbert Ganado, *Rait Malta Tinbidel*, 144 [translation mine].

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁶⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 164.

⁶⁶ Cf. "Oratory Chronicle," entry for July 31(?), 1914.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, entry for September 1914: "Da lui viene razionalmente epurato l'ambiente di individui troppo fanatici di comando—Nulla quindi che valga la pena di esser tramandato ai posteri."

Was there really little worth documenting? Or was perhaps the Salesian in charge at the time pleased with very little? In fact in the same chronicle entry, even the S.B.B. is mentioned for its bad behavior during one of its walks.

The writer claims that the reduction in number of people frequenting the Oratory was due to the effect of the war. And yet, this is contradicted by other historical evidence we have already quoted. Perhaps the real reason is that the Salesians had failed to foster a true family spirit, and thus, their system was ineffective in creating the right educative environment. Salesian affective presence, which was necessarily based on a relationship of trust, could not exist with so much instability in the Salesian leadership.

The much needed stability came with Fr. Giuseppe Virzì, who arrived in Malta on October 29, 1914.⁶⁸ When he began as director, he found that the Oratory had been nearly abandoned, but within a couple of months the number of boys went up to 250.⁶⁹ The Oratory started to regain life with catechism classes, theatrical performances, S.B.B. marches and Eucharistic celebrations.

The renewed pastoral approach of Fr. Virzì, who had time to establish the relationships indispensable to the preventive system, re-set the oratory on the right track. It started providing a second home, a place of prayer and moments of healthy recreation to the boys who needed it most.

The Domus did not benefit much from this revival. The spirit of renewal did not penetrate: the troubled relationships that had been fostered were not so easy to heal. In February 1915, Fr. O'Grady issued a circular by which the Domus was to be passed to the Salesians for management.⁷⁰ Fr. O'Grady who had previously signed the document by which the lay leaders were given almost total control, now had to demand the power back.

Ill feeling followed, especially from the members referred to as "l'ancien régime." The problems within the Domus had sunk too deep. The tools necessary for a lasting rescue were not present. The Salesian director was no longer seen as a father, always willing to help, but as an outsider.

As a result, Fr. O'Grady went to talk to the provincial in Sicily.⁷¹ The next mention of the Domus in the house Chronicles, is just one line entry on June 28, 1915, where the Domus opened with about twenty members.⁷²

The time between August 1915 and September 1919 will remain a mystery. While no other documentation is available, the pages of the House Chronicles of these years were neatly cut out many years ago. The reasons are not clear. But what is certain is the fact that the Oratory and the Domus went through moments of great crisis, out of which they only started to emerge with the return of Don Allegra as Director.

⁶⁸Cf. *Ibid.*, entry for October 29, 1914.

⁶⁹Cf. *Ibid.*, entries for October 29, November 8, 1914.

⁷⁰Cf. *Ibid.*, entry for February 1, 1915.

⁷¹Cf. *Ibid.*, entry for February 11, 1915.

⁷²Cf. *Ibid.*, entry for June 28, 1915.

While the Oratory went through times of distress, Maltese society too, was passing through a time of great instability. The end of the war brought even greater hardships to the local population. Unemployment was on the increase and many workers were discharged from the army and dockyard. The wages were very low and the price of bread went sky high.

These conditions led to an insurrection of workers who, on June 7, 1919, took to the streets in protest. The frustration of the people soon turned into a riot where public and private property was damaged in the capital Valletta. British troops were called in to restore order, but they unnecessarily opened fire on the crowds. Four Maltese citizens were killed and several others wounded. The Island was in a state of shock because of these unprecedented events.

The British colonial government reacted positively to this tragic situation by appointing a new governor, who consulted the people on a new constitution, which was given by April 1921.⁷³ It was during the same months that the Salesians through Don Allegra, reacted very dynamically to the needs of the population of Sliema.

Don Allegra arrived in Malta on October 5, 1920. The warm welcome he received must have boosted his enthusiasm for the work of re-addressing the Oratory and the Domus to new challenges.⁷⁴ With his arrival, the Salesian work in Malta was to undergo structural changes which lasted for many years.

The Oratory and the Domus had, up to then, depended entirely on St. Patrick's. Under Don Allegra's leadership, the two works became separate. The new community took responsibility for the Oratory and the Domus. The name given to the new house was St. Alphonsus House, in honor of its great benefactor Alfons Maria Galea.

The separation was further underlined by the fact that, since Don Allegra belonged to the Sicilian province, the newly established community also belonged there. St. Patrick's, which was just across the road, now belonged to the Anglo-Irish Province.

The changes were also inspired by a change of goal. The new St. Alphonsus House, was also set up with the specific aim of encouraging and fostering vocations for both the religious and secular clergy. For this end, even the Oratory's activities had to be boosted.⁷⁵

The renewed stability and real family spirit soon started to have its effect. The number of boys attending the Oratory soon swelled up to 300 during the week and up to 500 on Sundays. Catechism lessons were held every day and even prepared the boys for the traditional annual quiz. St. Alphonsus School, too, started to flourish and achieve the aim of supporting vocation work.

The spirit of dynamism also spread to people outside the Oratory walls. Being unable to frequent the Oratory on a daily basis, women, who wanted to

⁷³Cf. Henry Frendo, *Birth Pangs of a Nation: Manuel Dimech's Malta. 1860-1921* (Malta: Mediterranean Publications, 1972), 158.

⁷⁴Cf. "Oratory Chronicle," entry for October 5, 1920.

⁷⁵Cf. *Ibid.*

be a part of the Salesian activity, found their place in the "Dame Patroness Society" which Don Allegra himself had founded in 1911. Now, a decade later, the society re-discovered its purpose. The number of members increased and their activities became more effective. They helped vocation work by fund raising activities and by personally contributing a shilling every month. They also held monthly meetings and participated in religious functions.⁷⁶

The Association of Past Pupils also held its first reunion on May 8 1921, and was presided over by Don Allegra.⁷⁷ On the initiative of some members of the Domus and past members of the Oratory, it was set up on the same lines as Past Pupils Associations elsewhere. In his introductory speech, the Rector expressed his confidence that the association would prosper and flourish with enthusiasm and fervor so as to reach the high ideals of other long established associations.

Don Allegra remained as Rector of the Oratory for just over two years. During these months he managed to implant a real family spirit which continued to flourish even after his departure. For the second time in the history of the oratory, he had managed to defuse an explosive tension, and re-construct a wholesome environment in which the Salesian Preventive System could be effective. His contribution gave to St. Alphonsus House a momentum which carried on for a long time. Even the vocation work which started with his arrival, gave very positive results, which were to be of benefit even to the Oratory in the future.

Towards the end of 1928, Fr. Philip Borg became rector of the Oratory for the next three years. During his last months as rector, the Oratory had to reduce considerably the number of activities. A serious illness left him unable to cope with the work, and with only Fr. Luigi Mizzi to help him, it was impossible to continue the work with all the energy it needed.⁷⁸ The number of students at St. Alphonsus School was reduced. Eventually, the superiors even ordered the closure of the secondary school; only the elementary classes were kept.⁷⁹

This crisis did not last long. In 1931, the new rector, Don Salvatore Scraviaglieri arrived at the Oratory. With him, he also brought a Sicilian cleric, Antonio Rocca, and a Maltese brother Karm Galea, who was to dedicate the rest of his life to the Oratory work. This new team of Salesians was soon reinforced by two other Maltese priests who gave very long years of service in the St. Alphonsus community: Fr. Karm Fenech and Fr. J. Degiorgio.

The new community not only brought great energy into the Oratory, but also gave it a stability which lasted for decades. With the arrival of the Maltese

⁷⁶Cf. *Ibid.*, entry for March 23, 1920.

⁷⁷Cf. *Ibid.*, entry for May 8, 1921.

⁷⁸Cf. Eddie Skee, "The Tale of Two Rectors", *Bullettin Salesian*, no. 99 (Jan-Feb. 1987): 13.

⁷⁹Cf. "Canonical Visitation," March 23, 1933, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta.

Salesians, the life of the Oratory no longer depended on the Italian rectors who came and went for various reasons. With new rectors the work continued to develop without any traumatic pauses.

St. Alphonsus School was revived once again. The secondary school could resume with its three classes and the number of boys attending the Oratory reached the 600 mark.⁸⁰ Even vocations were on the increase. In 1936, nine youngsters left for their aspirantate in Pedara, Sicily. Others followed in the subsequent years.⁸¹

As war broke out, in 1939, the Italian rector, Don Pepe, had to leave the Island. Fr. Karm Fenech took over as acting rector and remained for four years; but because of the war with Italy, the Oratory could no longer remain with the Sicilian Province. In 1944, the superiors in Turin ordered the Oratory to become part of the Anglo-Irish province. As a result it once again lost the status of a separate community and was joined to St. Patrick's, with Fr. Harold Bleach as rector of both works.⁸² This amalgamation of the two communities lasted till just after the war.

3.3. World War II

With the outbreak of World War II, Sliema became deserted. Being so close to the capital city Valletta, and enclosing from one side one of the city's harbors, Sliema was considered to be in the path of enemy bombing. Many of the Sliema residents left for other towns and villages far from the capital city and harbor areas.

Gradually, however, many families started to return home and take the risks that came along, and the population of children in Sliema returned to normal. As a result, the Minister of Education, asked the acting rector of St. Alphonsus to use the Domus for classrooms. The minister explained that the government school in Sliema was not equipped enough to be safe for all the students during enemy air-raids.⁸³

With the first air-raids in June 1940, the population at the Oratory diminished drastically.⁸⁴ As the families abandoned their houses, the Oratory was left with very few members. This situation lasted for a couple of months; until in September of the same year, when the boys started returning and their numbers grew rapidly.

⁸⁰Cf. "Oratory Chronicle," entry for April 9, 1933.

⁸¹Cf. Vince DeBono, "Madwar Hamsin Sena Ilu," *Bulletin Salesian*. no. 113 (Nov-Dec 1989): 16.

⁸²Cf. "Oratory Chronicle," entry for December 15, 1944.

⁸³Cf. *Ibid.*, entry for September 10, 1940.

⁸⁴Cf. *Ibid.*, entry for June 13, 1940.

On the first day of September only sixty boys attended the Oratory, but only two days later, they had increased to one hundred.⁸⁵ The number continued to grow, so that one year later the number of boys who attended regularly had surpassed 250.⁸⁶ The highest number of boys attending the Oratory, was recorded for a party organized for them by the Lieutenant-Governor's wife.

A golden page in the annals of the Oratory! 500 boys took part in the walk to Casa Dar Iljuni.⁸⁷

And this was not a rare occasion. It is recorded that in the following months there was a regular daily attendance of 400 boys. In the same house chronicle entry, Fr. Fenech continues that this number was even bigger than the number before the war started. The reason he gives for this unexpected turnout is that:

Don Bosco himself has become director here.⁸⁸

His reference to the presence of Don Bosco in the Oratory, could be interpreted as a reference to the real family spirit that was alive among the boys and the Salesians who worked there. In contrast with the time of World War I, when the uneasy atmosphere that existed distanced boys from the Oratory; the spirit present during World War II created in the boys a desire to be at the Oratory where they belonged. In spite of the danger and limitations to activities imposed by the enemy air-raids, the boys still attended wholeheartedly.

Almost every evening during the Oratory activities we must run to the bomb shelter with all the boys. However, they are always happy and excited when they come to the Oratory, even if during these times we cannot run our drama programme or show cinemas.⁸⁹

Problems arose when air-raid warnings were sounded while the boys were at the Oratory. In a time of such great suffering and disorientation for the Maltese population, the Salesians at the Oratory felt the need to continue giving their pastoral contribution. They sought out every means available to provide the boys with the family atmosphere which they needed so much in the time of war.

⁸⁵Cf. *Ibid.*, entry for September 3, 1940.

⁸⁶Cf. *Ibid.*, entry for September 2, 1941.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, entry for May 30, 1943: "Una pagina d'oro per l'Oratorio. Grande passeggiata di 500 ragazzi alla Casa Dar Iljuni."

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, entry for June 13, 1943: "Don Bosco ha fatto da direttore."

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, entry for March 10, 1941: "Quasi ogni sera durante l'Oratorio dobbiamo recarci nello shelter con tutti i ragazzi. Però essi vengono all'Oratorio molto contenti ed allegri, sebbene di questi tempi non si possa fare teatro e cinema."

The Salesians at St. Alphonsus asked the government to dig underground shelters in St. John Bosco Street, just outside the Oratory building.⁹⁰ They believed that they should provide a safe place for the boys to meet, and hold their religious functions even during air-raids. They were also convinced that the boys felt so much at home at the Oratory, that they would accept this proposal.

The shelters were dug, and the boys often had catechism lessons, prayers and benediction in them when the need arose. During days when there were no air raids, Oratory life went on as usual with only some necessary limitations. The only section which had a reduction in members was the Society of St. John Bosco which catered for the older members of the Oratory who were no longer part of the boys' club. Many of them had been recruited as soldiers to serve the nation during the war.⁹¹

The only time when the Oratory closed during the war, was between December 1942 and February 1943. Malta was struck by an epidemic of *Paralisi Infantali*. By an order of the Government, all schools other than the University, as well as all theaters and places of entertainment had to close down for some time. The Bishops prohibited catechism classes in churches. So the Oratory could only remain open for the older members of the Society of St. John Bosco.⁹²

Even though Dingli Circus, just a stone's throw away, was devastated during an air-raid, the Oratory and Domus Buildings remained unscathed. But the war did bring about changes in the running of the work. While the departure of the Italian rector gave the Maltese Salesians a more central role in its management, it also led to the amalgamation with the St. Patrick's community. This move could have taken away the autonomy of the Oratory and deprived it of some of its identity.

3.4. Post-War Administration

Just after the war, the Salesian Oratory and St. Alphonsus School were once again confirmed as an independent community. These works were after all of a very different nature from the work of St. Patrick's, and needed a very different direction. The St. Alphonsus community were all pleased with this decision and set to continue on the same lines as they had already started. The new rector, Fr. Fenech, expressed his joy very clearly:

⁹⁰Cf. *Ibid.*, September 2, 1940.

⁹¹Cf. *Ibid.*, February 15, 1942.

⁹²Cf. *Ibid.*, undated entry between December 25, 1942 and February 17, 1943.

We ought to be very grateful to Don Bosco for this special grace, because in this way the Oratory has acquired a new life and the confreres are extremely happy.⁹³

The "happiness" which Fr. Fenech, familiarly known as "Dun Fenech," talks about was certainly a main characteristic of this charismatic priest. Together with a very dynamic Salesian community, he managed to bring to life the meaning of Salesian assistance in the Oratory. Even to this day, people who frequented the Oratory during this time, always recall with tenderness, the presence of Dun Fenech amongst them.

The sense of belonging, which the new community felt and transmitted to others, was further reinforced by a sense of euphoria which immediately followed the end of the war. The Oratory lifestyle continued to gain momentum. The theater in the Domus, was given new life. Bro. Karm Galea organized theatrical activities with the Oratory boys. And when there were no theatrical presentations, Sunday evening was cinema night for all at the Oratory.

Sports activities were given greater importance and were being organized by the S.B.B. The sports organization in the Oratory became renowned as one of the best on the Island especially for its sense of discipline and organization. The then Minister of Education, Dr. Ganado, even said that it was the best organization of all the schools he had attended.⁹⁴

In all this activity, the Salesians were trying to cater to the material, social, cultural and religious needs of their boys. They were trying to find new ways to be really effective. And judging by the developments which followed, they seem to have been successful.

Attendance for cinema shows and theatrical performances was increasing. This activity was given great importance, since it was a modern means of healthy entertainment. Already in 1936, the theater had been equipped with the latest film projector that could be used to screen sound films. This projector was donated by Alfons Maria Galea, who remained a close collaborator of the Oratory.⁹⁵

In their effort to use the most modern and effective means to reach the young, the Salesians, however, did not abandon the moral development of the boys. In fact, even the provincial felt the need to safeguard the moral situation in such a development. In a report from the canonical visitation in 1946, he expressed his concern with the dangers of overcrowding in the theater.

Every precaution must be taken to safeguard the boys entrusted to our care, especially at times when danger may possibly arise. Hence at all cinema performances it is important to avoid all overcrowding and the possibility of any group of boys being too closely clustered together. It is strongly desirable (if

⁹³*Ibid.*, November 26, 1946.

⁹⁴Cf. *Ibid.*, June 6, 1948.

⁹⁵Cf. *Ibid.*, January 31, 1936.

at all possible) to have separate performances for the boys and for the outside public; and I earnestly recommend the consideration of this matter of all in authority.⁹⁶

Having the recommended separate performances was not practical. But since they felt that the need was real, they found a real solution, that solved the moral problem and fulfilled the need to have greater seating capacity.

Fr. Anton Farrugia, who was the rector of St. Alphonsus from 1948 to 1955, immediately set out to improve the theater by enlarging the auditorium, refurbishing the facade and building a new gallery. The work was completed in April 1950, and the inauguration of the new extension was celebrated with great festivity.⁹⁷

The enthusiasm spread even on the sister island. In 1949 the Don Bosco Oratory was opened in Gozo. Three Salesians from St. Alphonsus community went to run this new venture. This Oratory developed very quickly and the Salesian method of education left its effect. Even though the Gozo Oratory had to close down because of lack of personnel in 1965, the past pupils continue to run it in the spirit of Don Bosco even today.⁹⁸

The St. Alphonsus community, in the meantime, was facing a crucial decision. In October 1950, the school opened with only two classes. The number of students was decreasing. For various reasons, the school could no longer provide an adequate center for academic education. The reasons for this were various, and were listed by the rector in a letter to the provincial, Fr. Frederick Couche.

With new schools being set up, the St. Alphonsus building was no longer adequate. During this time, the Dominican Order had opened a new school in Sliema and had taken some of the students from St. Alphonsus. The financial situation was also doubtful, and with the number of students being so small, the Government was considering withholding the government subsidy. Finally, the rector said that the Salesians were completely taken up with the ever more demanding Oratory work. The resources of time and funding needed for the upkeep of a school were simply not available, and so it had proved impossible to maintain the school's high standards.⁹⁹

After consulting provincial council, which suggested the closure of the school, the rector went to Turin where he had a meeting with Fr. Ricaldone, the Rector Major.¹⁰⁰ It was after this meeting, that the community decided to keep the school as an apostolic school, where young men who intended to join

⁹⁶Cf. "Canonical Visitation," entry for November 23, 1946 (Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta).

⁹⁷Cf. "Oratory Chronicle," entry for April 27, 1950.

⁹⁸Cf. Dolindu Cassar, "Hidma mill-Past Pupils Ghawdex," *Bullettin Salesian* no. 100 (March-April 1987): 24.

⁹⁹Cf. "Oratory Chronicle," entry for July 6, 1951.

¹⁰⁰Cf. "House Council Meetings of St. Alphonsus Community", September 7, 1951, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta.

the Salesian Congregation, could spend a year as aspirants. Eventually the school was closed down in November 1954.¹⁰¹

The oratory work, however, kept improving. Sports and athletic activities increased, the Salesian Boys' Brigade gained national renown, the cinema and especially the theatrical performances kept increasing in quality and popularity. In their decision to close down the school, the Salesians had opted in favor of the work with the local boys in the Oratory. Their choice was a re-affirmation of the choice they had made on other occasions.

In the Sliema area, the government and other religious orders, were providing the schooling facilities necessary. The need for a Salesian school in the area therefore was not greatly felt. Oratory work however, which was much needed, was not available elsewhere. The Salesians, however, had the people, the tradition and the will to do this work. They believed that the boys needed a place of healthy recreation and formation. They also believed that the preventive system was an adequate means for this work.

Society was changing and so were its needs. An effective response had to change accordingly. During this period of World War II and the following years, the community at St. Alphonsus kept looking for the best ways to meet the demands of the boys in its care. The developments seemed quite natural at times, and required courage at others. Throughout this period the Salesian system seems to have been largely successful in creating a family spirit which resulted in healthy relationships, and led to constant growth both in the activities of the Oratory and in the formation of its members.

3.5. Political Cross-Currents

The first reference to Maltese politics can be found in the House Chronicle of St. Alphonsus in the early 1960s. Contemporary political unrest in Malta is seen to have influenced Oratory life.

Drastic measures against anticlericalism announced in every church through the reading of a Pastoral letter by the Archbishop. Various reactions and some protest in a few churches. This step has been taken to stun the ever increasing ebb of anticlericalism and socialist ideology which has been ruining our religious patrimony. The *Helsien*, *Voice of Malta* and the *Whip Labour* publications are condemned. Mintoff officially interdicted and supporting his policy and attitude towards the church is considered a mortal sin. Priests have been instructed how to deal with penitents. Members both young and old of the Oratory, unfortunately affected by the Mintoffian disease have been approached and asked to give information about their stand. Consequently quite a few had to leave after being called by the rector and discussed with him the present situation.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹Cf. "Chronicle of St. Alphonsus School," November 1954, Salesian Archives, Sliema Malta.

¹⁰²"Oratory Chronicle," entry for February 26, 1961.

Unlike the situation during World War II, when Oratory life prospered in the midst of national ruin, now the problems of society also infiltrated the life of St. Alphonsus.

This did not happen over-night. Since 1947, Maltese society was going through great social strife. During this period the Oratory had maintained its normal lifestyle and family spirit. It was with Archbishop Michael Gonzi's pastoral letter that any personal disagreements which had remained under control in the Oratory for so long now gained prominence and took on immense proportions.

In 1947, Malta gained self-government. The Malta Labour Party won the election and worked for social and fiscal reform. But their strength was threatened by the inflexible decision of the British Government to discuss dockyard workers. There was a split in the labor ranks with Dominic Mintoff becoming the leader of the new Labour faction which was less flexible in its demands.¹⁰³

Britain's lack of financial assistance and its unwelcome interference in domestic matters created greater resentment from all political parties and brought increased instability. In 1951 and 1953 governments collapsed due to financial difficulties.¹⁰⁴

Dom Mintoff's Labour Party took office in 1955 and immediately embarked on a series of social and educational reforms. Among other reforms, the Labour administration proposed "Integration with Britain" as a solution to Malta's economic problems. Opposing political parties disagreed about the benefits of this proposal, but the final blow to the idea came when the local Church pronounced itself against Integration. It feared that British Protestantism would take over even in Malta. In a pastoral letter, the Archbishop demanded guarantees that would leave the Catholic Church the sole guardian of morality of Maltese society.¹⁰⁵

Archbishop Gonzi and his successor as bishop of Gozo, Msgr. Giuseppe Pace, told the Maltese that the preconditions they demanded had not been fulfilled, as the British Government had not decided to embody in the new constitution or in a separate constitutional document the subjects of legislation which were exclusively to be reserved to the Maltese parliament, such as marriage. They also informed the faithful that continued British economic aid to Malta did not depend on the implementation of Integration. Finally, there was an admonition to do one's duty as true Catholics.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³Cf. Ganado, *Rajt Malta Tinbidel*, 3:356.

¹⁰⁴Cf. Joseph Attard, *Britain and Malta* (Malta: PEG Publications, 1988), 175.

¹⁰⁵Cf. Adrianus Koster, *Prelates and Politicians in Malta* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1984), 154.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 155.

The direct involvement of the local Church gave the issue a new, perhaps uncontrollable dimension. The Labour Party resigned in 1958. This decision was followed by street rioting which left many injured. The Nationalist Party, then in opposition, declined the Governor's invitation to form a new government. The Constitution was suspended, and the Governor took over the administration of the island and restored order.

But the clock had been set. The tension which was set in motion would soon become uncontrollable. It was only a matter of time before the Church and the Labour Party would clash in a very dramatic and violent way.

The Church was a strong and omnipresent power in Malta at the time.¹⁰⁷ In the atmosphere that prevailed in the Maltese church before Vatican II, Archbishop Michael Gonzi, always expressed himself in direct and directive tones.¹⁰⁸ He always presented himself as the one chosen by God for the people, "to lead them to the salvation of their souls."¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, he had a very forceful personality. As a young man in his early twenties, Dennis Sammut reports, he had been a senator with the Labour Party. Only later, his leadership qualities and determined ambition led him to the Archbishopric.¹¹⁰

Dom Mintoff, on the other hand, as leader of the Labour Party, posed a real threat to the local church. Though using a very different and more popular style to that of the Archbishop, he was a very influential leader who could work to achieve goals in spite of the most aggressive opposition.¹¹¹ His clash with the Church's view regarding Integration did not stop him in any way. In fact he continued to express his disapproval of Church interference with the political freedom of the people.¹¹²

The fight culminated in the imposition of interdiction on the party's leadership and a series of religious sanctions against anyone who had anything to do with the Labour Party or even intended to vote for it in the elections. This certainly influenced the voting in which the Labour party was not elected in Government, but still got a surprising number of votes.

The local Church certainly hoped that the Interdiction would stop the Labour Party from being elected. But perhaps it had hoped for more than that, in

¹⁰⁷Cf. Dennis Sammut *Too Early for Freedom* (Malta: Union Press, 1984), 7.

¹⁰⁸Michael Gonzi was born in Vittoriosa on May 13, 1885. He was ordained to the priesthood on December 19, 1908, and elected bishop of Gozo on June 13, 1924. On January 1, 1944, he became Archbishop of Malta. It was only after celebrating his Golden Jubilee as bishop that he retired on November 30, 1976. Archbishop Gonzi died in Valetta on January 22, 1984, at the age of 98.

¹⁰⁹Archbishop Michael Gonzi, and Bishop Joseph Pace, "Pastoral Letter," in *Times of Malta*, February 5, 1962.

¹¹⁰Cf. Sammut, *Too Early for Freedom*, 7.

¹¹¹Dominic Mintoff, born August 6, 1916, became prime minister of Malta in 1955-1958 as leader of the Labour Party. He again served as prime minister from 1971 to 1984.

¹¹²See: Dom Mintoff, *Priests and Politics in Malta* (Malta: Union Press, 1961), 7ff.

its condemnation of the party with "proposals that are manifestly socialist and against the Church."¹¹³

In a fanatically religious society as Malta was then, this should have meant political extinction, as was the case with Malta's first socialist, Manwel Dimech, at the beginning of the century. However, the mentality of the country had changed considerably since the Second World War, and despite a prevalent religious frivolity, the Maltese worker and peasant was now less ready to drop his leaders, especially those from whom he had already benefited through substantial gains, at the whims of clerics. The priests had in the past successfully rallied the people to revolt against Napoleon's French; they had also instigated the stoning of Dimech. This coaxing of history to repeat itself was now to split the Maltese people right through, creating village and family feuds which took years to heal.¹¹⁴

3.6. Oratory Attempts To Foster Unity

On May 8, 1958, less than two weeks after the resignation of the Labour government and the following street riots, the Oratory celebrated Rector's Day. A concert was held in the theater hall, and included "the S.B.B. band... stage shows, sketches, gymnastics, recitals, music etc."¹¹⁵ The activity was a success with many people attending.

Organizing such an activity at such a critical moment in history, may give the impression that the leaders and members of the Oratory were oblivious of what was happening around them. But this was not the case. Most of the members at the Oratory came from the working class which formed the majority of Labour Party supporters. Some of the older members were even directly involved in the Party's organization. Yet there seems to have been a spirit which transcended political antagonism.

In 1956, when the tension between the local Church and the Labour Party was already moving towards breaking point, the Holy Week retreat at the Oratory was organized specifically to analyze the current Church-State relations. The outcome seems to have been very positive. The retreat was held just in time to counteract the ever increasing anti-clerical feeling amongst the youngsters as a result of the political religious crisis.¹¹⁶ Having clarified the situation, the Oratory could continue its development, in an effort to constantly renew its response to new needs.

In an effort to involve more parents in the activities at the Oratory in 1959 the S.B.B. organized a theatrical evening on the feastday of its patron

¹¹³Gonzi, and Pace, "Pastoral Letter," in *Times of Malta*, February 5, 1962.

¹¹⁴Sammut, *Too Early for Freedom*, 7.

¹¹⁵"Oratory Chronicle," entry for May 8, 1958.

¹¹⁶Cf. *Ibid.*, entry for March 18, 1956.

saint, St. Sebastian. "This was done intentionally to make the parents feel their share of responsibility in the education of their children."¹¹⁷

It was at about this time that the Salesian Co-operators introduced the "Laboratorio Mamma Margherita." The members helped by making uniforms for the S.B.B., church linen, altar boys' cassocks as well as various other works in preparation for the annual September fair.¹¹⁸ This way more people, both men and women, could form an active part of the Oratory family. This also meant that while political inflexibility was destroying the unity in Maltese society, the Salesians were creating a family spirit, strong enough to resist political fragmentation.

New ways of catering to the needs of the young were constantly being tried. An example of this spirit of effective renewal can be seen in the organization of the Sunday meetings for the members of the St. John Bosco sodality.

It has been the custom to have lectures for our St. John Bosco sodality members and for the public in general on Sunday mornings. But this year we have switched to a new system to have more contact with our members. Lectures will be held in a more private way, in a conference style, no more academic speeches. We hope to get more good... Shall we succeed? We must try. It's always a change and it is bound to give some results.¹¹⁹

Always in search of new methods, the rector of St. Alphonsus met the Director of Education and discussed the possibilities of setting up new activities in the Oratory, especially to young men who had outgrown the Dominic Savio club. The Youth Center system that existed in some European countries was discussed, and the possibility of sending Salesians abroad for a training course was mentioned. Following these meetings a course for young leaders was organized under the auspices of the Education Department. These young, lay leaders, some of whom were Oratory members, were sent over to the Oratory to observe the way it was run.¹²⁰

The only way in which the Oratory actively participated in the political religious struggle, was through the S.B.B. Every time the Archbishop organized meetings or marches as a show of force, the S.B.B. put on "a magnificent parade in Valletta."¹²¹ The rector continues to write:

There is something which cannot be overlooked; inspite of the danger of meeting hostilities of the Labour Party members and their infamous Brigade our boys played their part very well. Only a few did not turn up.¹²²

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, entry for January 17, 1959.

¹¹⁸*Cf. Ibid.*, entry for April 13, 1959.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, entry for October 31, 1959.

¹²⁰*Cf. Ibid.*, entry for December 19, 1959.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, entry for September 8, 1959.

¹²²*Ibid.*, entry for September 8, 1959.

It was with the issuing of the Bishop's uncompromising Pastoral Letter of Lent 1961 that the external tension managed to break through the wall of tolerance that existed within the Oratory.

The Rector called a General Meeting of all members and invited them all to take their position that is, either side with the ecclesiastical authorities or leave the premises. We regret to say that quite a few had to clear off the Oratory although they have been approached by the Rector individually.¹²³

This decision must have been difficult both for the members who left as well as for the Salesians. One of the expelled members recalled years later that one of the Salesians from the Oratory did in fact go to his house some time later, asking him to return to the Oratory. This individual refused because of other commitments he had taken upon himself by then, but admitted that even 30 years later, he still felt that he belonged to the Oratory.¹²⁴

One month after the general meeting, a novena in preparation for the feast of Saint John Bosco was conducted with a special intention. They prayed "for the needs of all those young men once exemplary Oratory boys who have gone astray through the political turmoil."¹²⁵

Rereading this situation now at a distance of thirty years, is both interesting and useful. An analytical approach will have to tackle questions regarding what the real issues were, on a political level, and how these were understood and lived, by the Oratory community and members. The political debate centred on two types of approach which were rigid in their format, closed to any possible contact. The church model, omnipresent and triumphant, even with political tones, could not avoid clashing with a model which was also rigid in its propositions. The stand of the Church, since it was strongly against the implications of Integration, was allowing itself to be seen as against this type of political proposition and the party who represented it.

All in all, the Oratory atmosphere was not a replica of the popular way in which this struggle was lived by the common people. On a national level, being with the Church, necessarily meant being against the political party who disagreed with it and vice versa. Real issues gave way to partisanship and rigid position taking. But since the Oratory was catering to boys coming mainly from a working class area, the consequences of the political feeling had to affect it.

This same working class also formed the basic support for the Labour Movement. Yet, because the atmosphere in the Oratory was very much a continuation of family life, the dilemma arose: how can one be against the Church and yet feel that the Salesians can continue to offer an atmosphere which is to

¹²³*Ibid.*, entry for May 28, 1961.

¹²⁴Interview with "X," by Paul Formosa, January 15, 1994, Sliema, tape recording, Salesian Archives, Sliema. Malta.

¹²⁵"Oratory Chronicle," entry for June 20, 1961.

one's own liking? This dilemma shows that the model of the Church on a diocesan level was not the one to be found at the Oratory. The hierarchical model of the Church could easily be considered as an enemy in the struggle with the Labour Movement. But the same cannot be applied to the model of the Church as lived at the Oratory.

The result was, that when the members were given the decisive choice between the Oratory or the Labour Party, a few opted to give total support to the Labour Movement. And even these felt that the Oratory and its way of life could not be completely abandoned. One of them explained in an interview, how after leaving the Oratory, he started to reorganize a branch of the Labour Party Brigade on the same lines as the S.B.B., and with the same preventive system that he had learnt at the Oratory.

In the interviews with the members of the St. John Bosco club, who either left of their own choice or were asked to do so by the rector, we can see a clearer picture of the life at the Oratory during this time of social turmoil. Their experience as young men in the Oratory, can help us understand better how the Salesians succeeded or failed to preserve a healthy family spirit in such difficult moments.

In the interviews no one felt that there was unrest at the Oratory because of the political atmosphere. This shows that the atmosphere at the Oratory was not greatly influenced by, nor was it a reflection in miniature of the struggle of the hierarchical church. This could also mean that the way of life lived at the Oratory did not leave much room for political antagonism.

At the same time all of them agreed that siding with the Church necessarily meant opposing the Labour movement. There was no choice in between, because of the rigidity of both parties. Yet, despite this clear-cut situation, the interviewees believed that although in the political sphere they were siding with the Labour movement, they felt that they could still belong to the Oratory. For them the Oratory was far different from the established Church.

The fact that they had to leave either suddenly or gradually, was not blamed on the Salesians responsible for running the Oratory. Some lay leaders of the same Oratory, put pressure on the interviewees and on the Salesians, with the result that, the interviewed had either to change their political views or to leave. For all of them leaving the Oratory was a painful experience which in some cases took many years to heal. Pressure also came from the hierarchy. The interviewees realized in retrospect that the Salesians were forced to comply to the Church policy of rigid position taking.

A common element in all the interviewees was the fact that the Oratory represented for them a venue where they could be themselves, even if this space was short lived. The Oratory was not dogmatic and hierarchical in its structure and function. This, though, did not stop the Oratory from supporting the Church in its public manifestations against the Labour Movement.¹²⁶

¹²⁶Interview with "Y," by Paul Formosa. January 16, 1994, Sliema, tape recording, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta.

The political and religious struggle of the 1960s is a very complex reality. The way it was lived at the Oratory shows that the reality at the level of the hierarchical Church differed from the model of the Church at the Oratory. There, the either-or situation was not totally absent, but it was not as forcibly present as elsewhere. The inability to cater to differences and disagreement was not mainly due to the inadequacy of the Oratory lifestyle; it was due to the fact that, at a certain point, the Oratory had to be politically involved in the struggle of the hierarchical church and also to the fact that certain political tendencies by some members played an important role in the development.

The problems related with the religious-political crises did not, however, directly affect the young boys' section of the Oratory. In another interview held with a member by the name of Arthur Micallef—a young boy of ten years during this crisis—there is absolutely no mention of any crisis. Micallef, who came from a well-off area in Sliema, remembers:

... the family spirit we had. Boys came from all parts of Sliema, from different social classes, from different political and educational backgrounds, playing, praying, and having innocent fun together.¹²⁷

Micallef claims that he never even knew which political party he or his friends supported. He only realized how different their backgrounds had been when he was much older. Only then did it dawn on him that one of his best friends at the Oratory came from a different social stratum and supported a different political agenda. He also believes that their friendship is still alive today thanks to the Oratory which he describes as "an experience and a way of life."¹²⁸

Yet the repercussions of the crisis between Church and State in Malta would effect the whole work of the Oratory in the years that followed. Just as progress in the local Church was hindered by the need to protect itself, so in the Oratory the Salesians started looking back rather than forward.

In an effort to solve the problem of lack of vocations, they sought to recreate the same situation that had produced many vocations thirty years earlier! In April 1962, the Salesians commenced the building of a new story on top of the Oratory chapel to provide classrooms where the vocational school, St. Alphonsus, could resume.¹²⁹ The work was completed a year later.

But the problems that had faced the school some years earlier, had become more prominent now. The Oratory building and community were even less equipped to provide adequate, modern means now, than they had been before. In 1966, during a canonical visitation, the Provincial pointed out that once the new Salesian school projected for construction on the opposite side of the island would eventually open, St. Alphonsus School would have to be closed

¹²⁷Arthur Micallef, interview by Paul Formosa, October 20, 1994, Sliema, tape recording, Salesian Archives Sliema, Malta.

¹²⁸Micallef, interview, October 20, 1994.

¹²⁹Cf. "Oratory Chronicle," entry for April 23, 1962.

down.¹³⁰ In fact this happened in 1968 when Savio College was opened in Dingli, with the specific aim of encouraging vocations, especially missionary vocations.

For some time already the Oratory seemed to be going through a period of inertia, as is reflected in the comments made by the rector major's representative during an extraordinary visitation in 1962. He wrote that the teaching of catechism needed to be updated. He encouraged the community to avail itself of modern teaching methods in order to be more effective in their formation of boys.

Social life and its requirements are changing fast. Let us beware of continuing ourselves with what used to be good and sufficient in other times. We don't want to become museum pieces; we must be with Don Bosco in the forefront of progress.¹³¹

But change was slow to come. Society was changing very quickly: too quickly for the Oratory! By the end of 1964, the "Oratory Chronicle" notes that attendance at the youth center was decreasing, especially for religious functions.

The young men are getting more disinterested in what are the spiritual activities. Apathy is also noticed in the sports side. This modern approach to life in which they find everything they want and lack nothing they would like to have, is the cause of the loss of that sense of evaluation, of sacrifice and noble ideals. So what? It is indeed a great problem.¹³²

It is true that the introduction of television and other new means of entertainment could have been the cause of a reduction in the number of boys attending Oratory activities. But the problem certainly went deeper than that. The Salesians seemed to have lost the ability to attract young people to the Oratory. In their pastoral activity, the Salesians were not creating an environment that catered for their needs.

In January 1965 only "very few members" attended the recruiting ceremony of the S.B.B. which had always been the largest section of the Oratory. The real reason for this is expressed in the chronicle:

It is high time to discuss the position of the movement, bring it up to date and make it more attractive for the boys to join it.¹³³

¹³⁰Cf. Fr. George Williams, SDB, notes from "Canonical Visitation," February 5, 1966.

¹³¹Notes from the "Extraordinary Visitation," January 30, 1962.

¹³²"Oratory Chronicle," entry for December 16, 1964.

¹³³"Oratory Chronicle," entry for January 24, 1965.

3.7. Adjusting to Modern Society

After the Declaration of Independence in 1964, Malta underwent years of instability on all levels. For a small island with a history of foreign occupation, and unaccustomed to democratic, constitutional life, making independence work was not an easy political task. Economically, the change was perhaps more difficult. The main task was that of

...re-orienting the economy from one based on British naval to one generating more tourism, manufacture and agricultural production.¹³⁴

The social implications of this development were unprecedented. Unemployment rose dramatically and a large number of people emigrated to England, Canada, Australia and the United States. Between 1960 and 1969, 48,669 people (about 16% of the Maltese population) emigrated.¹³⁵

Even on the religious level, change in pastoral approach was being promoted by the echoes of Vatican II. The newly formulated documents of the Council were still in the early stages of being understood and at times misunderstood. In Maltese society, which was experiencing a shift from being a very religious to a more secular population, the new "Vatican II approach" brought a breath of fresh air welcomed by many, but coldly received by others.¹³⁶

In this situation, the Oratory was trying to find new ways of being effective. Creating an educative environment which was also attractive and appealing to boys and young men was becoming increasingly difficult. Decisions had to be taken, which sometimes went against traditions which had become synonymous with past Oratory life. By 1966, for example, the catechism classes were reduced to only 20 minutes daily. The "Catechetical Competition," which used to be an annual event of major importance, was dissolved. The need for a new form of religious education was keenly felt.

During a canonical visitation in 1966, the provincial Fr. George Williams, commented on the role of priests working in the Oratory. He felt the need to reprimand the Salesians for eliminating the "Catechetical Competition" from their calendar of events.

The Rector Major has also insisted that our priests should be reserved for the kind of work that only they can do, and that use be made of cooperators for other work... If we made better use of our priests, perhaps we should not have had to abandon the catechism competition, surely a retrograde step.¹³⁷

¹³⁴Henry Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience* (Malta: Midsea Publications, 1991), 214.

¹³⁵Cf. Carmel Tabone O.P., *The Secularization of the Family in Changing Malta* (Malta: Dominican Publications, 1987), 198.

¹³⁶Cf. Herbert Ganado, *Rajt Malta Tinbidel*, 4:538.

¹³⁷Fr. George Williams, SDB, notes from "Canonical Visitation," February 1,

The Provincial's comment about this change in tradition, seems to show his lack of understanding of the needs and the value of the work at the Oratory. It needed a change and needed new energy if it were to promote an effective Salesian presence.

But the follow-up to the Provincial's visitation was a reversal of what Fr. Fenech, the rector of St. Alphonsus, had described as a "special grace" in 1946. In July 1967, the community of St. Alphonsus was amalgamated with that of St. Patrick's. As a result the rector of St. Patrick's was also in charge of the Oratory. Again, the Oratory lost its independence and the attention it required.

The work at St. Patrick's often took up the agenda of the house council meetings and little importance was given to the needs of the Oratory.¹³⁸ Three of its established and hard-working Salesians, Fr. Fenech, Fr. Degiorgio and Fr. Joseph Mangion, were transferred to St. Patrick's and to the new community at Savio College in Dingli; none of them were replaced.¹³⁹

St. Alphonsus School was closed down to be replaced by the new and well-equipped school. Even the aspirantate, which had been central to the Oratory work was now moved to Savio College.

These radical changes forced the Salesians at the Oratory to question the ethos of their work. They had to find new ways and adapt themselves to the needs of the society which was changing so quickly.

Need is felt to adapt ourselves to the present times and conditions. Difficulty to hold catechism classes before 6.00 p.m. Children stay at home for their homework. Difficulty also as regards the sodality meetings on Sunday morning. The provincial wishes that we give the boys a chance to take part in activities with outsiders. Difficulty regarding the Sunday Conference for adults.¹⁴⁰

Immersed in all these difficulties, the Salesians at the Oratory did not abandon their work. On the contrary, they looked for a new pastoral approach which could fulfill the purpose of helping the young people of their time to become "good Christians and honest citizens."

In the summer of 1968, the "Dominic Savio Camps" were introduced at the Oratory. A group of 26 boys from various localities spent a week at the Oratory, in a Salesian environment.¹⁴¹ This activity proved very successful even as a means of fostering vocations. Fortunately for the Oratory, the rector of St. Patrick's, Fr. Joseph Borg, did not abandon this project. In fact, together

1966.

¹³⁸Cf. "Oratory Chronicle," entry for October 2, 1968.

¹³⁹Cf. *Ibid.*, entries for September 26, 1966, and November 30, 1967.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, entry for October 31, 1968.

¹⁴¹Cf. *Ibid.*, entry for June 22, 1968.

with the Salesians at the Oratory, he often organized hikes and outdoor camping which increased in popularity as the months passed.¹⁴²

Theatrical activities were given a new boost. They were re-launched with the young boys, rather than the older members as had previously been done. The standard of performances was lower than what it had been with the older members of the Domus. Starting with the young boys now meant, re-building what had been temporarily crumbling.¹⁴³

One development which was necessary and yet difficult to implement, was the introduction of girls in the Oratory. In December 1969, the Oratory staff met to discuss the possibility of having mixed groups. "No real objections" were put forward in the meeting, but in practice the change happened very gradually and carefully.¹⁴⁴

When Fr. Joseph Borg took charge of the Oratory in 1970, he immediately started the mixed group of young cooperators who eventually put on the first mixed stage show in the Domus theater in May of the same year.¹⁴⁵ Once the idea of having girls in the Oratory was becoming more acceptable, more and more activities became mixed.

The presence of girls in the Oratory, however, remained a point of discussion for many years. Throughout the late 1970s and until 1989 girls were admitted at the age of fifteen. Many felt that, at this age, it was too late for the Salesian in charge to provide them with the formative experiences that the boys were getting. It was difficult for the teenage girls to absorb the family spirit in which the boys had been brought up. Furthermore, the concept of the "Oratory for boys only" was seen to have started with Don Bosco himself, and this became a tradition which was difficult to break. Finally the presence of girls was probably seen as a threat to the aim of fostering vocations for the religious life.

In 1989, the long established Salesian Boys' Brigade changed its name to Salesian Boys' and Girls' Brigade.¹⁴⁶ This step was welcomed by the many girls who joined as well as by the boys who increased in numbers. This was only another step in the total insertion of girls in the life of the Oratory. In fact, two months later even the Juniors' club admitted girls as members.¹⁴⁷ In this way, the Oratory family was made up of both male and females in all its sections.

¹⁴²The "Oratory Chronicles" are full of references to the outdoor activities organized in the late 1960s and 1970s. Even today, the "Dominic Savio Camps" are still organized and remain very popular, with hundreds of children participating every summer.

¹⁴³Cf. Lino Ferris, interviewed by Paul Formosa, May 22, 1993, Sliema, tape recording, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta.

¹⁴⁴Cf. "Oratory Chronicle," entry for December 23, 1969.

¹⁴⁵Cf. *Ibid.*, May 23, 1970.

¹⁴⁶Cf. *Ibid.*, February 16, 1989.

¹⁴⁷Cf. *Ibid.*, April 19, 1989.

In the years between 1970 and 1989, the total insertion of girls in Oratory life was not the only change being made. Society was changing fast and the Oratory needed to change with it. Adapting itself to new social demands, the Oratory was divided in three main groups: the Juniors' Club, the Youth Center, and the Parents and Friends Section, for the older members. Each of these groups had its own separate activities but came together for fund-raising activities, feast-days and other activities like the S.B.B. and the Drama Group.

In the Youth section, sport became the central activity. Teams began to take part in competitions outside the Oratory even on a National Level. This new and whole-hearted involvement in sports brought about some criticism. Questions were being asked by Salesians and lay people about the progressive nature that the Oratory was assuming. The fear was that they were no longer faithful to the traditional Oratory of Don Bosco. The need to clarify ideas regarding apostolic work was felt.

We are always in the news regards sports, drama and the Boys' Brigade. And it is not surprising that many feel that we are overdoing these activities to the detriment of the spiritual and apostolic ones. However, when it comes to spiritual and apostolic activities, we all realize that they are not newspaper items.¹⁴⁸

The problem with spiritual activities had already been felt years earlier. What was needed now was an approach that remained faithful to Don Bosco's system while responding to the needs of modern society. Three students of theology (the present author included) expressed this conviction in 1988:

We need to change our mentality towards our members; nobody comes to the Salesian Oratory because it is the custom or tradition of the young in that area. They come in order to actively participate in the sports and cultural activities of the club.¹⁴⁹

The same students noted that the Salesian then in charge of the Oratory, Fr. Anthony Sultana, approached the young people at the youth center in this fashion. Rather than invoke the traditions of the past, he tried to respond to their needs with "keen interest, creative initiatives, dedication and attention."¹⁵⁰

This pastoral approach was based on personal contact. Emphasis was placed on making the Youth Center, attractive enough for the young people to come and spend their free time there. Don Bosco's advice about how to be effective in youth work was given great importance.

¹⁴⁸"House Council Minutes of St. Patrick's School," entry for November 20, 1980, Salesian Archives, Sliema, Malta.

¹⁴⁹Francis Camilleri, Richard Ebejer, and Paul Formosa, "So Rich in Promise" (B.D. Project, St. Patrick's College Maynooth, 1988), 19.

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 18.

By being loved in the things they like, through taking part in their youthful interests, they are led to see love in those things too which they find less attractive, such as discipline, study and self-denial, and so learn to do these things too with love.¹⁵¹

As a result of this fresh approach to spirituality, traditional practices of piety were not given the great importance that they had in the past. Emphasis was placed on a personal and more meaningful approach to the spiritual dimension.

Before the Christian message can be presented and produce practical results a relationship based on mutual trust and appreciation had to be experienced. When do difficulties arise? According to the Salesian in charge, "the lack of effective Salesian presence can be another major problem. We are trying to maintain the same volume of work which used to be done when six Salesians were available to help in the Oratory. One full timer and one part timer is not enough."¹⁵²

The problem of lack of Salesian personnel was repeatedly put forward in community meetings. Since the opening of the new community at Savio College, there were no Salesians available. As a result, the work at the Oratory was done by the lay members who through various committees organized most activities.

The involvement of lay people had been an intrinsic ingredient of the pastoral approach of the Oratory since its foundation. The need of Salesian presence was deeply felt, even by the lay members themselves; the significant participation of lay people in all levels at the oratory, was always indispensable. And it continued to be so, even when there was a change in the Salesian Director. Even in the new pastoral approach adopted by the new Salesian director, the lay members continued to fulfill a key role in the running of the Oratory.

When Fr. Francis Zammit became director in 1988 he immediately set out to reorganize the Oratory along traditional lines. He re-introduced the Seniors Club with its traditional name of "Ghaqda San Gwann Bosco" to replace the "Parents and Friends" section.¹⁵³ He also set up a Central Committee where all different section of the Oratory met with the Rector to co-ordinate their efforts.

Fr. Zammit tried to promote spiritual development by re-emphasizing the traditional practices of piety. Night prayers with a short spiritual message known as the Goodnight were introduced in the Youth Center on a daily basis.¹⁵⁴ Catechism classes were reviewed for girls and boys, belonging to the

¹⁵¹St. John Bosco, "Letter from Rome," in *Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales*, ed. extra commerciale (Roma: Editrice SDB, 1984), 257.

¹⁵²"St. Patrick Chronicle," entry for November 20, 1980.

¹⁵³Cf. "Oratory Chronicle," entry for December 27, 1988.

¹⁵⁴Cf. *Ibid.*, entry for October 3, 1988.

Juniors Club.¹⁵⁵ Attendance at mass on Sundays, the "First Friday" of the month and the monthly commemoration of the Feast of Mary Help of Christians were once again presented as a necessary part of Oratory membership.

The Oratory Chronicles from 1988 to 1990 are full of references to the large number of members who attended these religious activities. Some people were thinking that the loss of spiritual values, which had been experienced until then, was being overcome. But perhaps this was only a very short term solution. This form of traditional spirituality proved to make little impact on the young people. Thus, within a few months catechism classes were phased out; when young members were given the freedom to opt out of religious ceremonies, many chose to do so. The pastoral approach begun in the 1970s and 1980s had been reversed, but this change did not seem to bring about the anticipated renewal. The Oratory had not succeeded in offering its members a meaningful religious experience.

At the same time, the Oratory continued to be a hive of activity. Many members attended regularly and found a family atmosphere which satisfied their social, psychological, physical and emotional needs. The Oratory Chronicles for 1989 often refer to the large number of members attending activities. Even on special occasions, like the wedding and even the death of members, a strong sense of family spirit was evident.

But it was in 1990 that the Oratory was given the space to develop its full potential. On September 22, the St. Alphonsus Community was once again officially inaugurated as an autonomous community.

Thanks be to God and to Our Lady!¹⁵⁶

The community made up of four Salesians, now had the time, the people, and the means to study the present reality of the young members, and find meaningful ways to respond to their needs.

¹⁵⁵Cf. *Ibid.*, entry for March 10, 1989.

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*, entry for July 14, 1990.