Restoring the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mercy, Qrendi

A project like no other

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The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mercy sits proud amid the open fields on the tranquil outskirts of Qrendi. Its appearance is unassuming, presenting itself as a small limestone church, detached, and elevated by only a handful of steps. The statues housed along its façade's perimeter, recessed in the upper niches, are not the first thing that one notices, nor is the sculpture work decorating elements of the building envelope, or the boundary wall to the parvis on the front elevation's arched loggia (Fig. 1). Those come later, after the peace and stillness that form part of this place are first felt. This serenity is in keeping with a significant role of the sanctuary within the Roman Catholic faith, that of a pilgrimage destination for those devoted to Mary.

The building of the church as we know it today began in 1650. A 1658 apostolic visitation report of Bishop Balaguer de Camarasa[1] tells us that, eight years earlier, the construction of this new church had started, replacing a previously existing one[2] that had become too small for the ever-increasing number of Marian devotees.[3] The sanctuary went on to welcome pilgrims throughout the subsequent centuries right up until 2000, by which time its condition had deteriorated to such a state that rendered it unusable, and it was subsequently closed to the public.

In 2019, some 330 years after its first stone was laid, the church came to the attention of the Restoration and Preservation Department (RPD), within the Ministry for the National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government, and scheduled for restoration. Between 2019 and 2022, this unique heritage went on to generate surprise and wonder, repeatedly disclosing its secrets, during an iterative process facilitated by its many stakeholders and headed by the RPD, in collaboration with the Qrendi Local Council, the Qrendi parish church and the active participation of the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage and Heritage Malta. At the same time, this project offered apprenticeship training through a *cantiere-scuola* for the RPD's latest recruits.

Much has been researched[4] and published[5] on the history of the church and its many artistic pieces and, although these are not the focus of this paper, together with the sociological value of the church, they added to the significance of the restoration project. The subject of our study here, however, is the monument itself—the building, its materiality, and inferred meaning, were all brought to the forefront during this intensive restoration project. This undertaking was thus structured around the multiple disciplines of architecture, restoration, conservation, archaeology, history, science, surveying, heritage skills, and craftsmanship, with each discipline serving to reinforce the next.

The project started off by consulting known documentation.[6] The revelations and new findings, as shall later be discussed, that emerged from our investigations and all carried out within an interdisciplinary framework, served to inform any decisions about the restoration interventions that needed to be taken.

At face value, the church did not appear to require any exceptional treatment. It would be cleaned, consolidated (to include repairs and replacements), and protected—three fundamental interventions that underpin the restoration of architectural heritage.

Externally, the building fabric was naturally weathered, as expected. The *deffun* roof, which had been repaired with cement mortar, had failed, and was cracked. Incompatible cement-based plasters on other parts of the exterior were also failing, as was the stone rainwater drainage system which was damaged. The stonework itself exhibited visible powdering, flaking, and open joints, where plants were growing. The apertures exhibited advanced, though localised, biodeterioration in the

Fig. 1
Old photograph of the exterior view of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mercy, Qrendi.
(Courtesy of the Qrendi Local Council)

timberwork and flaking paint on both the timberwork and ironwork. Both needed attention.

Internally, the space was humid. The floor was extensively damaged, with rising damp coming through the patterned cement tiles, which were stained, cracked, and broken up in places. This damp was also manifest in the walls and ceilings of the church, which were completely whitewashed. The paint was peeling, rain was finding its way in through the roof, and the lower section of the walls (up to 2.5m high) were plastered in thick cement, covering a hacked stone substrate.

These weathering manifestations, although extensive, were still considered regular, right up until the first layers of paint started to be pulled back, confirming the findings, discussed further below, from a parallel exercise that complemented the onsite condition survey, that is, the historical research and the examination of existing documentation.

The inside of the church includes one single collective space—the nave. It is roofed over with high arches, cross vaults, and a capping cupola. Natural light enters from above through the high-level windows and the dome lantern,

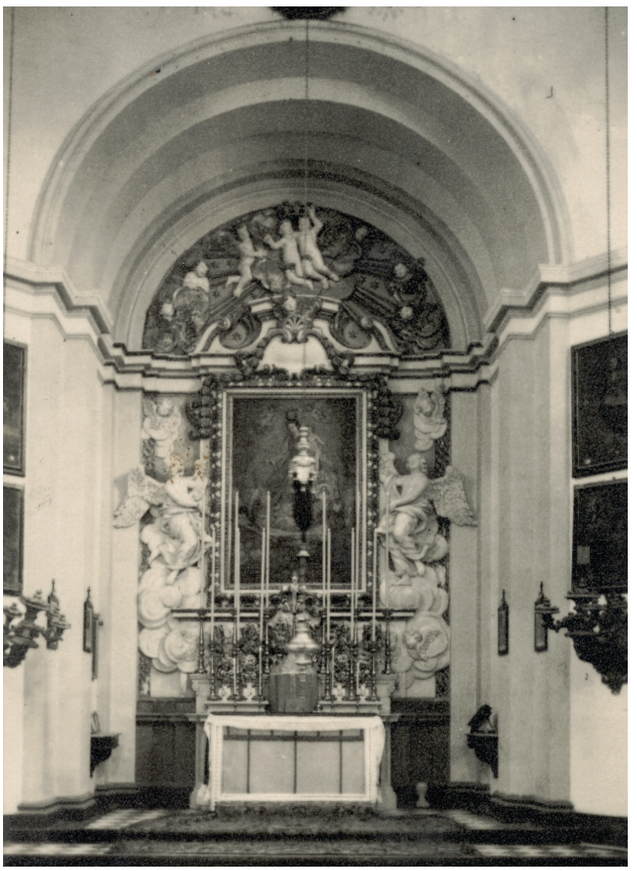

Fig. 2
Photograph of the polychromed altar reredos of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mercy in Qrendi, taken in 1968.
(Courtesy of Heritage Malta / Photo: Mario Buhagiar)

Fig. 3
Photograph of the interior view of the cupola of the sanctuary, taken in 1968, and clearly showing the light-coloured painted pilasters, six in all.
(Courtesy of Heritage Malta / Photo: Mario Buhagiar)

which is strategically located to diffuse light onto the three altars below, where the central one is arguably the showpiece and focal point of the whole church. This is the altar reredos, a wall entirely decorated with high-relief sculpture.

Even when still completely covered in white paint, the altar reredos was impressive. When evidence of the original polychromatic treatment surfaced, as could be deduced through a 1968 black-and-white photograph taken by Prof. Mario Buhagiar (Fig. 2), the project took an exciting turn. Another black-and-white photograph, also from Buhagiar's 1968 collection (Fig. 3), showed that the cupola, too, was not painted in a single colour but displayed a *trompe l'oeil* feature—a series of six, lighter-coloured pilasters.

In keeping with this, Camarasa's 1658 report referred to light blue and partially gilded stone decoration in the altar reredos, providing invaluable information on the original colours that were used here. He also reported the existence of a medieval church prior to the current one. This was further referred to in Leopoldo Fiteni's 1841 account.[7]

With all of this in hand, the site was mobilised, scaffolding was put up, and the works began.

The external fabric of the building was the first area of intervention and commenced with cleaning, which generally involved dry and wet brushing using deionised water. In localised areas, where stubborn blue-black biological growth remained, biocides were applied.

Fig. 4
Stone statue of St John the Baptist on the external façade, before restoration. (Photo: Restoration and Preservation Department, Malta)

Fig. 5
Stone statue of St John the Baptist on the external façade, after restoration. (Photo: Restoration and Preservation Department, Malta)

The *deffun* roof screed was retained, patch repairs were applied to missing or broken parts, and hairline cracks were filled with a lime slurry, the whole intervention consolidating and protecting the church from water infiltration. Very little stone replacement was carried out. Instead, delaminated stonework was pinned back and injected with a previously tested lime-based grout. Stonework which had either lost its sculptural detail, or its general surface material was repaired using a mortar mix compatible with the existing limestone.

Besides addressing the symptoms associated with the building fabric deterioration, one main cause—the direct contact of the salt-laden soil from the surrounding fields—was dealt with by isolating it from the church through the insertion of a damp-proof membrane.

When cleaning started on the delicate statues (Figs 4-5) and the coat of arms on the portico, traces of original coloured lime renders were revealed, serving as a prelude of what was to be found later in the interior of the church. After cleaning, powdering areas were consolidated

and lime-based colour renders were applied in a semi-transparent *velatura* effect.

When works moved inside, the focus shifted towards making the space usable again, and a large part of that was addressing the humidity in the walls and the effects that this would have on the finish. The impermeable cement-based plaster that was present in the lower 2.5m of the walls, with its restricted network and size of pores, was shifting humidity further up the walls causing flaking and powdering above. This incompatible plaster was replaced with a macroporous lime-based plaster, with a pore network that was more open, connected, and included larger-sized pores which are able to better accommodate the pressure from the salt crystallisation buildups.

During this process, details of original pilaster base mouldings, which had been hacked off in the 1960s, were discovered, and were subsequently re-established through plastic repair techniques. This process saw the build-up of mortar in stages, and layer by layer, was modelled into the form of the sculptural elements that were being reintegrated.

At the same time, systematic investigations were ongoing. In these exercises, localised testing was being carried out on strategic areas of the upper walls above the 2.5m level, the ceiling, the altar reredos, and the cupola. The burning question was: what was lying underneath the white painted surfaces, and would any original polychromatic paint layers be found?

In these localised areas of investigation, the paint layers were meticulously removed, one paint layer at a time, to reveal the colour stratigraphy, down to the oldest paint layer directly above the stone. This exercise was used to give a representative picture of the church's colour scheme as a whole. The scenario which emerged was one where the upper walls and ceiling were painted in various types of white and cream, the cupola did indeed indicate two colours—white and blue—and the altar reredos revealed an array of colours of blues, greens, reds, and gold. Samples were taken and stratigraphic studies under the microscope were conducted on the cross-sections of all these paint layers.

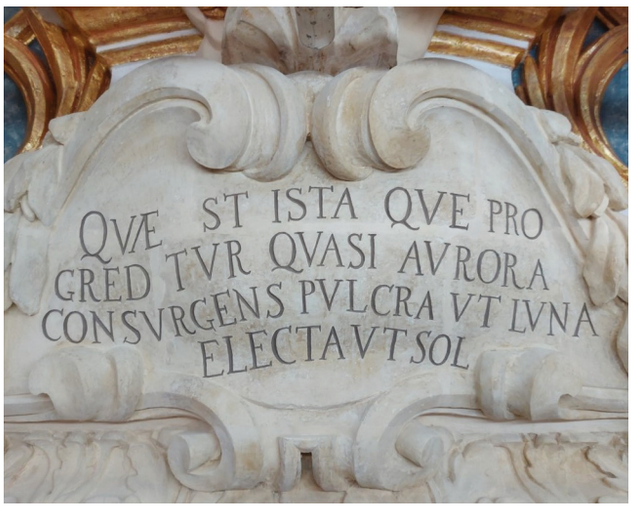

Fig. 6
Inscription quoting the biblical verse from the Song of Songs.
(Photo: Restoration and Preservation Department, Malta)

Enough information on the colour scheme was now in hand and could guide what kind of interventions were to be taken on the many surfaces of the church's interior. The upper walls and ceiling would retain a cream hue, in a shade close to the innermost layer found; the cupola would be restored with the *trompe l'oeil* pilasters, and the altar reredos would be stripped down to its original colours and restored (Figs 9-10). The testing which followed examined the composition of the existing paint materials so as to allow compatible restoration. One of the most thrilling finds of the restoration project was the verification of the gold layer, which was indeed found to be real gold, reaffirming the reverence which the sanctuary enjoyed.

Not all discoveries were made through intentional investigation or following a hypothesis as a result of historical research. Some were uncovered by sheer serendipity. Such was the case with the undocumented biblical inscription from the Song of Songs, located right above the titular painting (Fig. 6). A happy discovery, incorporated into the ongoing restoration works:

> Who is this that appears like the dawn,
> fair as the moon, bright as the sun.[8]

Fig. 7
Facial and floral motifs uncovered on the sacristy door during restoration. (Photo: Restoration and Preservation Department, Malta)

Another fortunate finding was the decorative art, depicting floral and face motifs, painted directly onto the timber of the sacristy door (Fig. 7). As the restoration works to the apertures were in full swing, which besides disinfestation and localised replacements involved paint removal, the unexpected face—later rumoured to belong to one of the church's benefactors, Fra' Philipp-Wolfgang von Guttenberg[9]—revealed itself to the craftsman restoring it. This prompted, yet again, more scientific investigations which suggested that the paintings date to before the nineteenth century.

Similarly, during restoration works to the altar platform, which was heavily damaged at the start of the project, another revelation surfaced. The undated floor, painted in a checkerboard tile pattern, rotated at 45 degrees, appeared to be 'wrong' at the start of its restoration, until it became evident that yet another *trompe l'oeil* was present here—a skew of the angles, so as to be 'correctly' perceived by the congregation present in the church.

The church's final disclosure, at least within the framework of this restoration project, came during the restoration of the rest of the floor, in the main space of the nave. From the outset, it was known that this church was built on the foundations of another, but when the existing and heavily damaged cement tile floor started to be lifted off and the underlying debris cleaned up, the traceable outline of the medieval chapel revealed that it had a completely different orientation to that of the present-day church.

An archaeological dig ensued, the perimeter of the mediaeval church was unearthed (Fig. 8), the remains consolidated and fully documented with 3D-laser scanning, for the first time recording the shape, form, and orientation that this medieval chapel had. A geotextile was then inserted, the area was backfilled, and the new floor was laid above where the old and degraded cement tiles were replaced with new copies carrying the same pattern and colour scheme, but with a new addition. The medieval church perimeter below was now outlined in deep red and incorporated into the new patterned cement tiles above, visibly linking these two churches for the very first time.

Heritage buildings, monuments and sites are all distinct, each unique in their own way. Every one of them has its own set of difficulties to address, and its own uniqueness to conserve. It therefore follows that their restoration will also be unique, designed, and site-specific, with each intervention considered and deliberated by the assigned team. While the heritage will always be unique, the restoration process itself does not need to be. This process, rather than being improvised, benefits from building on a sound way forward, one that is widely applicable and forms part of a shared and collective scope, that of preserving heritage. Such was the approach

Fig. 8
Archaeological remains of the foundations of the earlier medieval church were unearthed during the restoration works. The discovery showed that the present-day church has a different orientation from that of the earlier one. (Photo: Restoration and Preservation Department, Malta)

taken with the restoration of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mercy in Qrendi. This was a case of unique heritage utilising a comprehensive approach, a compass of sorts, that reassuringly guided each intervention through the restoration process, seeing the individual heritage piece through to a preserved state. This methodology which integrated documentation, investigations, decision-making, intervention, and protection in an iterative manner, is built on more than twenty years of compounded experience and research at the Restoration and Preservation Department, here put to the test and service of this extraordinary historic church.

Ivana Farrugia holds a doctoral degree in the restoration of architectural monuments from the Università degli Studi di Roma, La Sapienza. She currently works as Chief Architect and Civil Engineer within the Restoration and Preservation Department (RPD) and was the leading architect of the restoration of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mercy in Qrendi.

Tabitha Dreyfuss has a doctorate in conservation and built heritage and was awarded a postdoctoral research scholarship on the in-situ conservation of historic limestone, both completed with the Faculty for the Built Environment, University of Malta. In 2019, she founded the research laboratory within the RPD where she currently conducts research on the physical properties of inorganic heritage materials.

Norbert Gatt is Director General of the RPD. He specialised in architectural monument restoration at the Università degli Studi di Roma, La Sapienza, obtaining his doctorate in 1996. Since then, he has been very active in Malta's architecture restoration scene and was directly involved in the setting up of the Restoration Unit in 1997, which has since evolved into the RPD. Gatt is presently a member of the National World Heritage Technical Committee, the National Council for Cultural Heritage, and the Board of Warrants for Conservators and Restorers.

Joseph Magro is a principal technician at the RPD and works within its documentation office. He is specialised in baroque architecture, and his diploma dissertation was focussed on the case study of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mercy in Qrendi. He holds an M.A. in Baroque Studies as well as a Diploma in Baroque Architecture, both from the Institute for Baroque Studies, University of Malta.

The authors form part of the interdisciplinary team at the RPD within the Ministry for National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government. The RPD is the main government body entrusted with safeguarding Malta's built heritage, much of which falls under public ownership. With its dedicated team of skilled professionals, technicians, and craftsmen, and holding a workforce of over 160 individuals, the RPD is specialised in the documentation, design and implementation of restoration, conservation, and rehabilitation projects.

Notes

1 AAM [Archivum Archiepiscopale Melitae], PV [Pastoral Visitation] 17, Miguel Juan Balaguer de Camarasa, 1656–1659, f. 114v.
2 AAM, PV 05, Pietro Dusina, 1575, f. 103r.
3 AAM, PV 13, Miguel Juan Balaguer de Camarasa, 1635–1637, f. 130r.
4 Among these: Alexandra Scicluna, 'The Church of the Virgin of Mercy (Tal-Ħniena), Qrendi. Its History, Architecture and Works of Art' (B.A. dissertation; Department of Art and Art History, University of Malta, 2002); Joshua Micallef, 'Excavations at the Madonna tal-Ħniena Church, Qrendi (Malta): A preliminary assessment of the cultural evidence'

Fig. 9
The altar reredos before restoration.
(Photo: Restoration and Preservation Department, Malta)

Fig. 10
The restored altar reredos.
(Photo: Restoration and Preservation Department, Malta)

(B.A. dissertation; Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta, 2023); Maria Fsadni, 'The Filial Churches of Qrendi: History, Architecture and Works of Art' (B.A. dissertation; Department of Art and Art History, University of Malta, 2015).

5 Among these: Rajmond Ellul assisted by Luigi Galea, *Il-Parroċċa tal-Qrendi f'għeluq it-350 sena* (Malta, 1968), 11-12; Mikiel Spiteri, A *hundred wayside chapels of Malta and Gozo* (Malta: Heritage Books, 2000), 103-105; Alexander Welsh, 'The Church of Our Lady of Mercy – Tal-Ħniena, Qrendi', in *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. 9 No. 27 (Malta, Summer 2003), 11.

6 Joseph Magro, 'Documentation Methodology: Tal-Ħniena Church at Ħal Lew in the Village of Qrendi' (Diploma dissertation; International Institute for Baroque Studies, University of Malta, 2004).

7 Leopoldo Fiteni, *Le Conversazione di Filoteo* (Malta: Tipografia di Francesco Cumbo, 1841).

8 Song of Songs 6: 10 (NIV).

9 Guttenberg, a German knight of the Order of St John, built his palace in the immediate vicinity of the chapel, still present today. His coat of arms depicts a floral motif of the English rose, similar to that found painted on the historical door.