

THE SUNDAY TIMES

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## Mqabba's titular statue of the Assumption turns 175



Today marks the 175th anniversary of the arrival of the wooden statue of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in the parish church of Mqabba.

The origin of the bond between the feast of the Assumption, popularly called Santa Marija, and the people who centuries ago lived in this traditional village of the south is unknown.

The first reference comes from a petition made in 1592 by the villagers to the bishop of the time, asking to have a parish erected in Mqabba under the patronage of the Assumption. Their wish was fulfilled six years later, in 1598, when Bishop Tommaso Gargallo founded the new parish dedicated to the Assumption.

Since then, the parish feast has been celebrated on August 15 each year with the rituals of the most important feast of the parish.

From a document written in Italian by parish priest Tumas Agius-Caruana (1833-1849), now in the parish archives, we learn that at the beginning of the 19th century Mqabba already had a processional statue of the Assumption. This statue, however, according to the parish priest, was unattractive.

Early in 1835, the parish priest announced his intention to adorn the parish church with a beautiful titular statue depicting the mystery of the Assumption.

He asked two priests serving at the parish to help him collect the necessary funds. Fr Agius-Caruana says that "when the announcement was first made during Mass on a Sunday, the collection made in the church yielded almost the entire sum needed."

On October 30, 1835, a contract was signed between the Mqabba parish priest and the well known sculptor Alessandro Farrugia in the presence of notary Massimiliano Menville-Troisi in Zejtun.

The sculptor agreed to produce a wooden statue of the Virgin in assumption and to abide by every detailed conditions as to its shape, delivery time, checking to be done twice by a group of artists and payment.

Mqabba's titular statue is the only serpentine baroque statue in the parish church. This style was introduced in Malta by Melchiorre Gafà in the 17th century and the processional statues considered to be the most artistic are all in this style.

The characteristic feature of these statues, very visible in the titular statue of Mqabba, is the flowing movement showing action, which is found in no other style.

The body is never standing straight; it is either in the act of walking, or else turning around. In the case of Mqabba's Assumption, Farrugia sculpted the Virgin half-kneeling and half-leaning on the clouds beneath her, giving the figure an exquisite pose.

Once the statue was completed, at the beginning of August 1836, the date for carrying it from the artist's residence in Zejtun to Mqabba was set for the eve of the feast of the Assumption, being a Sunday like this year.

The detailed account given by parish priest Agius-Caruana describes how all streets from Zejtun to Mqabba were decorated with flowers, the entire village was lit up with coloured oil lamps, three triumphal arches were built and under which the statue had to enter the village, and the church was also lit up and decorated.

Many villagers went to Zejtun that day to accompany the statue of their patron on the longest ever procession it has had – four miles.

Leaving Zejtun at about 1.30 p.m., the new titular statue was welcomed in the parish churches of Għaxaq and Gudja, arriving on the outskirts of Mqabba late at night, where it was welcomed by a troop of soldiers saluting with their guns.

The statue was then taken solemnly around the streets till it reached the parish church. Bells tolled, fireworks lit the skies and music was playing in the church, says Fr Agius-Caruana. He concludes that “the great joy of these events merit being passed from generation to generation.”

In the last 175 years, no alteration was made to the statue. Two major restoration interventions were made in 1966 (by Samuel Bugeja) and in 1986 (by Horace Farrugia and Michael Camilleri-Cauchì). In 1928, the original wooden sarcophagus was replaced with a silver one designed by Abram Gatt and produced in Milan. This silver pedestal followed those made in Senglea, Vittoriosa and Cospicua between 1903 and 1905. It cost £400, £10 of which are said to have been contributed by Sir Gerald Strickland, Prime Minister of Malta at the time.

To this day and for years to come, the statue of the Assumption is the foremost Marian image which gives identity to the village and the people of Mqabba. This beautiful and devout baroque statue represents the Virgin Mary under the title chosen by our forefathers to be the patron and protector of their village and parish.

The logo chosen by the parish of Mqabba for this anniversary shows a drawing of the statue and the words ‘175 sena xbihetek tressaqna lejn Alla’ (175 years your image drawing us closer to God). This message is witness to the Virgin Mary’s role in the life of every Christian.

*Fr Jonathan Farrugia, BA, (Hons), S.Th.L., is reading for a doctoral degree in Patristic Sciences at the Augustinian Institute in Rome*

## 0 Comments

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