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## Il-Bolla tal-Kollegġjata tal-Għarb: Oration delivered at Prof. Vella's 2018 book launch

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### Introduction

*...in praefato loco, qui inter ceteros dictae insulae Gaulos epulentissimus  
reputator, Instituta elegantis nobilisque sturctura existit...<sup>1</sup>*

'In the above-mentioned location, renowned for its wealth among the rest of the so-named island of Gozo, there exists an elegant and noble structure...' Verily do these words capture the devotion to, the love for, and also to the truth about the Parish Church of Għarb, dedicated to the Visitation of the Holy Virgin. And verily, it was this declaration of devotion, of a deep and heartfelt devotion, of His Holiness, Pope Clement XIV, who, in his fifth year of his pontificate, and to be precise, on the 20th of May 1774, elevated this temple to a Collegiate Church with the Bull *Ex Beati Petri Cathedra*, making it the first Collegiate Church on the island outside of the walls of Victoria. And it was this declaration of love, of a sacred love, that saw the fulfilment of the clergy's and of the locals' desire for a Canonical College to be established in this sacred place. And verily, it was this mighty truth that confirmed, once and for all, that which was held dearest by the people of Għarb, namely that their church was – and still is – a temple singular not only in the nobility of its liturgy, but also in its artistic elegance.

All this, Your Very Revered Excellence Monsignor Bishop, Very Revered Vicar-General, Very Revered Archpriest, and Most Revered Canons of the College, honoured Mayor and local councillors, distinguished guests, all this is true. Not only is it true, it is also perennial, for we, ladies and gentlemen, have gathered today, after two hundred and forty years, with the same dedication and love, that we might reassert the same truth, though in a new way. Two hundred, forty years ago, the Papal Bull of Clement XIV, which founded the Canonical College of Għarb, ushered in a new and glorious epoch for this ancient parish. And today the same Bull will be rewritten – that it may never perish – in the hearts and in the souls of

<sup>1</sup> Translated, from impeccable Maltese, by the editor. The last part of the speech, which touches not so much on Professor Vella's work, but on the people of Għarb, has been omitted.

every member of this Christian community, for the event which occurred more than two centuries ago shall be transformed into an imperishable heritage and renewed.

And all this is due to the publication of a new book with the name *Il-Bollat tal-Kollegġjata tal-Għarb* which we have the pleasure to assist in its launch today. This book is, first and foremost, the fruit of the great ability and extraordinary dedication of Professor Horatio Vella, who has now taught Latin and Greek in the university of Malta for the last twenty-nine years. And we may omit to mention that ten years before, in 1979, he was already teaching in the University of Rhodesia and that he had also lectured in Malawi, Australia, Sweden and Lithuania. He has also written a large number of books and academic articles on texts, written in Latin or Greek, on topics of supreme importance for the history of Malta and Gozo, and about inscriptions found in the many churches which dot our island. He has also published the first English translation of a poem written in Gozo in the 12th century and, every year, he finds time to work for the Custodians of the Holy Land, in Jerusalem.

As he himself tells us in the preface of the book, Professor Vella is bound to this College of Għarb, and with good reason. Indeed, his affiliation with the church goes back to 2003 when the then-Archpriest, Monsignor Karm Gauci, learnt of the publication of the Catalogue of the Cathedral of Gozo by Vella. It appears that Monsignor Gauci soon conceived of a desire for the Professor to turn his attentions to the Archive of the Parish Church in Għarb. Not one year passed that the Catalogue was published. And before his term as Archpriest came to an end, Monsignor Gauci also suggested that Professor Vella be engaged to transcribe and translate the Papal Bull mentioned above. It was to be, however, for his wish to be fulfilled by his successor, the Archpriest Monsignor Joseph Sultana, who invited Professor Vella to embark on this work back in 2011. And when Monsignor Trevor Sultana became the Parish Priest, he continued to encourage this work and, indeed, to suggest that it be published in order that the Bull be accessible to the general public.

## The Collegiate Bull

Yet, what do we mean when we talk of the 'collegiate bull'?

Let us start with 'College'. By this term, we mean that institution of the Church which consists of an established group of priests, who meet on appointed days for the purpose of worshipping God either by means of the solemn celebration of the Holy Eucharist, or by means of psalms and public prayer, such as the Liturgy of the Hours. This liturgy includes the Office of Readings which we call the Matutin, the Dawn Prayer, which we Maltese and Gozitans call *Lawdi*, the Midday Prayer or the

*Terza*, and the Evening Prayer, or *I-Għasar*. This group of priests, as I said, is called a 'Chapter' and its members 'Canons'. Without discussing the virtues of the concept of the Collegiate, this type of ecclesiastical body has the sacred duty to glorify the name of God and to pray on behalf of the people of God, and for their needs. And though all the Colleges around the world have the very same goal, every one of them is born and nurtured in particular circumstances. And this is easily the case with the College of Għarb.

Next, let us come to the word 'Bull'. For hundreds of years, Colleges could be established only by means of a Papal decree, which is given the name 'Bull'. Interestingly enough, the term comes from the Latin *bulla* which originally referred to that lead or wax – and on occasion also gold – that was poured over the end of an official document and stamped with the Pope's or a King's coat of arms to mark the document as official and, above all, authoritative. In due course – indeed, during the 15th century – this term was naturally extended to refer to the entire Church document for it carried the Papal Insignia, which we refer to as *I-inċira*.

The Collegiate Bull of Għarb, which, as we have mentioned, was written on the 20th of May 1774, was signed and stamped with the authority of Pope Clement XIV in the Basilica of *Santa Maria Maggiore* in Rome. It is noteworthy that this particular Bull was not addressed to the then Bishop of Malta, Brother Giovanni Carmelo Pellerano, for the simple reason that he was not on the island owing to problems with the then-Grandmaster Ximenes. It is addressed, then, to his Vicar-General, Monsignor Albinu Portughes, who was, therefore, also serving as acting Bishop of Malta at the time.

## **The Transcription**

It is only fitting that we mention, if only briefly, the exceptional role which Professor Vella played in the realization of this book. Surely, the first work on the Collegiate Bull was the transcription of the document. This refers to the reading and the copying, word for word, of the entirety of the original text. In this process, errors of orthography and grammar are also corrected.

The Bull is written in a Gothic style and, consequently, it is very difficult to read. Indeed, a number of different letters are indistinguishable from one another. Consequently, the decipherment of a single letter may take long hours of careful reading, even days. Moreover, the state of the document itself was a less than a happy one. And, though some parts are extremely lucid, other parts of the document, as Professor Vella tells us, took years of obsessive work to decode completely. Yet this was not the first time that a document engaged Professor's Vella for many years. And indeed, his enormous patience was proved when, some years ago, he worked on a document far older than this Bull, namely the first

clerical register of Gozo, which was written in the year 1554 and which contains the oldest sacramental, pastoral, and social data about the oldest two parishes of Gozo, the Cathedral of the Diocese of Gozo and Basilica of St. George, both in Victoria.

Believe me when I tell you, from my own experience in the field, that this work demands the patience of two Jobs. I can also imagine how much patience it demanded, and still demands, of the Professor's wife, Vivienne, whom I take the opportunity to greet. One can only imagine the amount of support she showed her husband in his travail, his head lowered for hours on end, his eyes locked for whole days on a single tract of text, and – as he himself tells us – running around from one room to another, document in hand, testing various shades of sunlight to aid in his decipherment. And surely, he will be the first to tell us that sometimes it is best to leave a particularly difficult passage alone, gathering dust for months, that one may look upon it with fresh eyes. Sometimes it works. At other times, it does not.

It is also of note that Professor Vella is often approached for such work, namely for the translation of some manuscript or other. Few are aware, however, of what they are truly asking of him, work which demands the skill of a palaeographer and a deep knowledge of writing conventions long dead.

## The Translation

After transcription, comes translation. In the case of the Bull of Għarb, this process was difficult too. We may start with the fact that the Bull lacks all punctuation. Quite apart from this, the Latin used in the Bull is a mixture of Classical and Neo-Latin. Above all, however, it is written in legalese. Just as in notarial documents, then, the author of the Bull makes frequent use of legal phrases. To take one example, one such phrase, the one most frequently used, is *ut praefertur*, meaning 'as already said'. This phrase is used around 108 times in a document 146 pages long. There are, moreover, another 40 such legal expressions. All this shows us that the Bull took the form of a legal contract. There are also frequent repetitions which often confuse rather than assist, because the meaning of these phrases often changes depending on context. A collection of these repeated phrases are found in Appendix II.

As a document of Neo-Latin, we also find that old norms of prose, found in classical authors, are somewhat relaxed. Despite these departures – often authorial erroneous – one must recognize that the author of the Bull, though heavily restricted by legalese, was deeply familiar with classical authors, especially the far-famed Cicero. This is evidenced by the phrases which are also found in

these same authors, as by the heavy use of a somewhat poetic Latin which, incidentally, also makes translation more difficult.

One small, but noteworthy, detail is that the translation of parts of this document did not take place in Malta or Gozo, but in the Holy Land, under the shade of the Holy Sepulchre, where Professor Vella is engaged in similar work for the Order of the Friars Minor of the Franciscans of the Custodians of the Holy Land.

As in his other publications, Professor Vella has ensured that every page of the Maltese translation is followed by a page of the corresponding Latin, making reading a far less cumbersome affair. This is, also, a tried and tested way of publishing classical documents abroad.

## **The Commentary**

Apart from transcribing and translating the document, Professor Vella has also included other sections of interest in this books. Of particular note is the preface which focuses on several issues which pertain to the Collegiate Bull. These include:

1. The Foundation Bull
2. The Latin used in the Bull
3. The founders
4. The first Canons
5. The salaries of the Chapter
6. The admission of people into the Chapter
7. The administration
8. The property
9. Problems dealt with by the Chapter
10. The privileges
11. Notarial documents
12. Writings about the College
13. Commemorations of the foundation of the College and, last but not least,
14. The close association of the author of this book to the founders of the College and with the first Canons.

## The Founders

Surely, we cannot but remember that person who first conceived of the foundation of the College of Għarb. I am referring to Father Ġużepp Axiaq, who, in 1712, was appointed as the second Parish priest of Għarb by the Bishop Brother Davide Cocco Palmieri to replace Father Ġwann Marija Camilleri who resigned his post to become Canon. The Bull also mentions various priests and lay persons with the surname Axiaq and who are related to one another. The priests were Father Ġużepp, Father Lawrenz, Father Tumas, Father Nikol, Father Feliċ and Father Mikelang. Some of these men, together with the Reverend Feliċ Axiaq, Mikiel Camilleri, Frangisk Vella, Ġużeppi Micallef, Pawlu Mizzi and Pawlu Farrugia were admitted as the first Canons and Parish priests of the body. In all, the document mentions twelve members of the clergy of Għarb who were related to one another. Father Nikol Axiaq, Father Feliċ Axiaq, Father Mikiel Camilleri and Father Frangisk Vella were admitted as Canons, whilst Father Ġużepp Micallef, Father Pawl Mizzi and Father Pawl Farrugia were admitted as Parish priests. Indeed, prior to the foundation of the Diocese of Gozo in 1864, all the priests of the island were tied to the Cathedral of Malta. This fact explains why they were said to 'belong to Mdina', although they did not live there, but in Għarb. Donations in the name of these Canons and Parish priests were given by the bothers Axiaq and by Father Paskal Farrugia, Orazju Cauchi, Tereža Axiaq and Duminku Cauchi.

## The Family Trees

A work of this sort, one of a pastoral and social nature in which a strong sense of family obtains and in which various individuals are mentioned, is also ideally suited to one of Professor Vella's deepest passion, namely the the construction of family trees. This work, then, besides focusing on the Papal Bull, also shines a light on the people of Għarb. Indeed, the Bull, which mentions not only people but also family relations between them, has enabled Professor Vella to construct various family trees which are found in Appendix IV. Here, one can find clear evidence of the tightly-knit family relations of the people of Għarb.

This genealogical information is a veritable treasure trove – tracing, as they do, various family trees from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century – for any future research into these matters. And it is only fitting, then, for Professor Vella to indicate how he, and his wife, are related to some of these founders who now find their names inscribed in the enormous family tree which adorns the roof of Professor Vella's study in Kirkop and which, no doubt, was also fruit of Professor Vella's years of patient research.

## **Conclusion**

And, finally, allow me to turn to you, ladies and gentlemen of Għarb, and invite you to remain ever grateful to Professor Vella who has shown you such love and dedication in this masterly and beautiful work. Had he added the number of hours spent poring over this document, Professor Vella would, perhaps, not have taken up such a laborious endeavour which has occupied so much of his precious time. And yet, I am convinced that this work has carved your names, and the name of this Parish, into Professor's Vella heart.

Thank You.