THE NOMINATION OF MGR. VINCENZO LABINI TO THE SEE OF MALTA*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my intention this evening to speak to you of the Nomination to the See of Malta of Bishop Vincenzo Labini. I have chosen the appointment of this Bishop, as the subject of my lecture here, for a twofold reason. Vincenzo Labini was the last Bishop to be nominated to the See of Malta under the Rule of the Order of St. John, and secondly, his nomination offers an interesting object of study to the student of Maltese Church History for the peculiarities it entails.

On the 18th March 1798, Bishop Pellenero resigned from ruling the Diocese of Malta. The reasons which he brought forward to justify his resignation before the Holy See, and which were formally registered among the records of the Datanzo, speak of his ill health and his advanced age - he was by that time seventy eight years old: "per le nostre corporali indispensioni ed avanzata eta." (1) There might have been other reasons besides those here mentioned. The diplomatic relations between the aged Bishop Pellenero and the Order of St. John in Malta were not very friendly and in his "Storia di Malta" Canon Panza Vecchione refers to the repeated petitions of the Order of St. John before the Holy See to substitute that Bishop of Malta with a more zealous and prudent Pastor. "Questa reiterate istanza vinse finalmente la renitenza di Pio VI, e Pellenero ebbe in fine l'imperiosa proposta di rinunciare al vescovado." (2) Whatever might have been the reason, Mgr. Pellenero delegated the Reverend Francesco Cachetelli, who, on the above mentioned date, appeared before Cardinal Bernardino Giraud, and on behalf of Mgr. Pellenero who was too weak of health to appear personally before His Eminence, formally resigned the Maltese Diocese (3), which was thus rendered vacant.

A new Bishop had to be appointed. But, what was the procedure adhered to at that time for the appointment of a new Bishop to the Diocese of Malta?

In answer to this question, we have to bear in mind that the Holy See did not select and appoint the person of its choice to rule the See of Malta. The Diocese of Malta, even under the Rule of the Order of St. John, was subject to the Royal Prerogatives which the Sovereign Lords of Sicily had obtained from the Holy See, and one of these prerogatives was precisely the choice of the Bishops of the Dioceses under their sovereign sway. Hence it is, that again and again, in the records of the Vatican Archives which deal with the appointment of the Maltese Bishops the Diocese of Malta is described "de jure patronatus Regii Siciliae." This phraseology is also repeatedly found in all the Royal Presentations of the candidates to the Maltese Bishopric up to the year 1807, when the King of The Two Sicilies, Ferdinand IV, presented for the last time the Maltese Ferdinand Mattei to be nominated Bishop of Malta by the Holy See.

* This talk was given on the 29th April 1961 at the Catholic Institute to members of The Maltese Historical Society.


The Nomination of Mgr. Vincenzo Labini to the See of Malta - A Case Study in Diplomatic Relations

The appointment of Mgr. Vincenzo Labini as the new Bishop of Malta was a significant event in the history of Maltese Church. The nomination was an outcome of complex negotiations between the Holy See and the Order of St. John, as well as the political landscape of the time. Labini's appointment was not without controversy, reflecting the broader tensions between the Holy See and the Order of St. John.

The selection of Mgr. Vincenzo Labini as the new Bishop of Malta was a reflection of the evolving diplomatic landscape in the Mediterranean region. The appointment process involved intricate negotiations and a deep understanding of the political and religious dynamics of the time. Labini's background and experience were considered crucial for the role, reflecting the complex interplay of political and religious considerations in the selection process.

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della Sambuca and bearing the date of the 4th March 1780 — that is, a fortnight previous to the actual resignation of Mgr. Pellicano before the Holy See. The Marquis wrote to Grand Master De Rohan:

“Eminenza,

Desiderando il re che vostra eminenza, nel dover nominare a custode vacante vescovado, faccia cadere la sua nomina sulla persona del Padre Dottor Vincenzo Labini, sogetto fornito di tutte quelle doti ottime prerogative, che meritano i riguardi e della maestà sua e dell'eminenza vostra, e sono le più desiderabili per corteza Chiessa; mi ha la maestà consolato di palesare, come ha l'onore di eseguire, queste sue reali premure a vostra eminenza, dei cui sperimentati sentimenti la maestà sua è nella maggior sicurezza. Io la supplico intanto a per- suaderli che sono nel mio particolare pieno del maggior rispetto”. (6)

Nor were these letters from Naples the only despatches that reached Grand Master De Rohan to make him include Vincenzo Labini among the three nominees for the vacant bishopric. Other letters came from Rome, for on the 4th April, 1780, the Cardinal Secretary of State Pallavicini directed this message to the Grand Master:

“E. M. e R. M. Sgr. mio Oss. mio.

Per l'organo di questo diligenzissimo Sigr. Ambas. del Sagro suo Ordine Gerosolimitano sarà pervenuta a Vostra Eminenza la notizia del Vescovado di Malta fatta da Mons. F. Carmine Giovanni Pellicano, che per l'avanzata ed informa sua età, riconosce di non essere in caso di amministrare con spirituale profido del grigio, che gli era stato consennuo. Al seguito di tal rinuncia dovrà adunare così qual Consiglio ci corrisponde la formazione della Terna de' soggetti, fra quali cade poi la scelta del Vescovo nuovo, allorché custodia Chiesa Vescovile viene vacante. I molti riflessi per il quale la provvisoria della Chiesa stessa si rende ose, benché sempre importissimissima, più importante ancora del solito non ingiungono al certo alla illuminata mente di Vostra Eminenza, ne a quella de' Soggetti a quali appartieni la formazione della terna già detta; non potendo ad ogni modo non tevenir presenti il Santo Padre, ne valutati, la paterna zelante sua sollicitudine lo esigere a sospirare, chi i nuovi Candiati tali sieno tutti da poterene riposizionare il più provvisto e salutare governo della Chiesa di Malta. E siccome i più appurati riscontri rendono giustamente persuasiva la Santità Sua, che il Fra Cappellano Conventuale Vincenzo Labini unisce in se i requisiti più desiderabili, o conducenti all'uso sussidio, di questa sua persuasione non sà lasciare oscuro l'Eminenza Vostra, persuasa, ch'ella, non solo sia per valutare quanto a se medesima, ma per renderne come la contezza ai rispettabili for- tiori della Terna sussistuta, creòche si vi trovi effettivamente compenso. Mi ha ingiunto dunque Su. B. de rendere consapevole V. Em. alla fondata persuasione, che saprà fare l'uso il più accoconto, e il più profuso della notizia, che si comunica.

A me, dopo di avere soddisfatto il Pufficifio comando non rimane, che il debito e l'onore insieme di baciare affettuosamente le mani.

Roma, 4 Aprile, 1780.

Di V. ra Em. za
Aff. mio Serv. re
L. Card. Pallavicini.” (7)

Though couched in most polite diplomatic terminology, the letter of Cardinal Pallavicini no less than that of the Neapolitan Court amounted to dictating to the members of the Council of the Order to give their first preference to Vincenzo Labini. And when these despatches were read at a sitting of the Council on the 24th April 1780, there was universal surprise at this blatant interference with the rights of the Order over the Diocese of Malta (8). How was the energetic Grand Master to react? Or did he secretly know beforehand the step which the Courts of Naples and Rome were to take to put on the Maltese Episcopal throne the person they favoured? Such questions inevitably came to the mind of all those who participated in the meeting of the Council that day. But, in spite of their justified indignation the members of the Council had to accept the person proposed, and the prudent De Rohan thought it best to comply with the request of the Neapolitan and Papal Courts. As Panzavecchia puts it: “La dipendenza che aveva l'Ordine da un monarca, dal cui regno l'isola riteneva la propria sus- sistenza, sofocò le tumultuanti voci dei più determinati balli, che si erano sollevati contro quel violento atto di prepotente intervento” (9).

And, in conclusion, the Vice-Chancellor of the Order Fra Luigi d’Almeida was directed to write to the Prince of Stigliano Don Marzantonio Colonna then Viceroy of the Bourbon King of the Two Sicilies in Palermo to submit the names of the three candidates nominated by the Venerable Council for the See of Malta:

“Primo luogo, Fra Vincenzo Labini, Professor of Sagra Theologia, Cappellano Conventuale della Veneranda Lingua d'Italia, nato in Bitonto, suddito di S. Maestà Re delle due Sicilie” (10). Fra Raimondo Albino Menville and Fra Francesco Silvestri were the other two proposed candidates.

The Palermitan Viceroy did not delay to inform His Majesty King Ferdinand IV of the Two Sicilies of the Council’s decision, and on the 3rd June 1780, His Majesty formally proposed the name of Mgr. Labini to the Holy See to be appointed Bishop of the See of Malta. The original letter of King Ferdinand is still preserved in the Vatican Archives among the records of the Dataria, signed by His Majesty and countersigned by the Marchese della Sambuca. It reads:

Santissimo Padre

Per la rinuncia fatta dal Comandatore Fra Don Giovanni Pellicano vacando il Vescovado dell’Isola di Malta, la di cui Nomina e Presentazione a Me tocca in virtù del Mio Sovrano Diritto, ho posto in uso per disciorgo della Mia Coscienza i mezzi necessari per aver Soggetto idoneo, e meritevole, che assicurasse il miglior Servizio di Dio, e ’l buon Governo ed Amministrazione di quella Chiesa. Ed ho quindi eletto e nominato il Fr. Cappellano dell’Ordine di S. Giovanni d’Oleronse D. Vincenzo Labini di Bitonto; nella di cui Persona concorrono le lodovelli circostanze di vera pietà, di irriprensibili Costume, e di esemplar condotta, non meno che della più sodata e sana dottrina, e di una spontanea prudenza e saviezza; sulla riserva di quelle Pensioni, che corrispondono al saldo pensionabile su quella Chiesa, a favor di quelli che saranno da Me nominati nella Nota, che a suo tempo sarà in Mio Nome presentata alla Santità Vostra. Prego intanto Vostra Santità a disporre che a Mía Presentazione si spediscano al menzionato

(6) Panzavecchia, op. cit., p. 177-178.
(7) E.M.L. Archives of the Order of St. John, Liber Conciliatorum Status Arch. 375, f. 419v-419v.
(8) Id. id.
(9) B.M.L. Archives of the Order of St. John, Liber Conciliatorum Arch. 161, ff. 72-73.
Dr. Vincenzo Labini le Balle, e gli altri Requisiti del suddetto Vescovado di Malta coll’emnunciata riserva di Pensioni, ed altrove, che sia possibile; nel che riceverò particolare grazia dalla Santità Vostra, la di cui Persona Nostro Signore conservi nel felice e prospero Governo della Sua Chiesa.

Napoli 3 Giugno, 1780.

Unanimissimo Filio di V. S. Ferdinandino

Il Mar. e della Sambuca (11).

On receiving these letters of King Ferdinand, Pope Pius VI did not immediately issue the Bulls of Nomination. Certain canonical dispositions had to be observed. The Council of Trent (12) and, later on, Pope Gregory XIV in his Constitution "Omnis Apostolicae Servitutis" (13) had laid down that a thorough examination of the candidate had to be set up previous to his being promoted to the episcopal dignity. And such canonical examinations were always held in the case of the Diocese of Malta even though the candidate to the Bishopric used to be presented to the Holy See by the Sovereign Lord of Sicily. The Vatican Archives still preserve the records of these canonical inquiries concerning the candidates to the See of Malta. Several witnesses used to be summoned by the Papal Court, and these had to submit a double report — one concerning the state of the Diocese in question, and another concerning the future Bishop: his lineage, birth, career, and learning were all passed under review (14). The Holy See had to be sure that the candidate to the Bishopric was sufficiently equipped with all the requisites that one expects in a Bishop, previous to his formal nomination in the Secret Congistory.

Volume 179 of the records known as the "Processus Constitoriales" informs us that Pope Pius VI on the 16th June 1780, delegated Cardinal Bernardino Galia to carry out the canonical investigations concerning Vincenzo Labini (15). That day, in fact, His Eminence summoned to his Office, in the presence of the Notary Public Pietro Spada, four witnesses who had to furnish him with the necessary information concerning the state of the Diocese of Malta and its future Bishop. The witnesses, as registered by that Notary Public, were:

R.P.D. Antonio Barretta Clericus Neapolitanus Religiosae expresse professor Congregationis Clericorum Regularum Theatinorum nuncupat[ae]
R.P.D. Aegellus Caracciolo Subdiaconus Neapolitanus Religiosae expresse professor super suis Congregatione.

The first two witnesses, being Maltese, furnished His Eminence with a report concerning the Diocese. The other two spoke of Vincenzo Labini.

(12) Section VII. XXII. XXVIII.
had been ordained priest on the 23rd September 1758 in Rome at S. John the Lateran by Mgr. Francesco Mattei, Patriarch of Alexandria. (18)

After his Ordination, as a third document attests, Vincenzo Labini taught Theology and Canon Law to the Students of the Order of the Theatines for four years, and for twelve years taught Theology at the Seminary of Capua. (19)

Convinced by such evidence submitted to him by the witnesses and the documents, that Vincenzo Labini was fit to govern the Maltese Diocese, Cardinal Giraud admitted the future Bishop to the Profession of Faith in Catholic Doctrine as stipulated by the Tridentine Council (20), and annull'd His Holiness that there were no canonical impediments that hindered the appointment of Mgr. Labini to the See of Malta. As a matter of fact, three days later, on the 17th June 1760, Pope Pius VI appointed Vincenzo Labini, Bishop of Malta, in the Secret Consistory summoned at the Vatican Palace (21). Such a nomination carried with it the right to enjoy the income of the Maltese "mensa episcopalis" cum reservatione pensionis trium millium scutorum monetarum romanum, salvis antiquis, pro nominato Carmine Joanne Episcopo dimissante."

The Papal Bulls of Nomination were accordingly issued bearing the date of this Secret Consistory, but they had to pass through the Royal Court of King Ferdinand IV for the necessary Exequatur. They had to be examined by the Palermo Vicerey Marcatzontole Calzola lest they contained anything which were against the Royal Prerogatives enjoyed by the Sovereign Lord of Sicily over the Diocese of Malta (22). On consultation with the Crown Advocate Michele Ferremuto, the Vicerey brought forward a small objection to the terminology inserted in the Bulls nominating Vincenzo Labini Bishop of Malta. The Papal Court had described the Maltese Diocese by the phrase "de jure patronatus Carissimi in Christo Filii Nostri Ferdinandi Universis Sicliae et Jerusalem Regis III." The Palermo Vicerey claimed that such a right over the Diocese of Malta was based "ex fundatione principiampque dotatione", even though such an explanatory phrase had been left out from the Papal Bulls. And it was on the explicit condition "absque ullo prejudicio eadem regni patronatus, ob omis-sam in dictis bullis constitutam ex fundatione aut dotatione" that the Royal Exequatur was granted on the 30th July 1760.

Only then, could Mgr. Vincenzo Labini come over to Malta to take possession of his Diocese. And the galley of the Order of St. John went out of the Grand Harbour of Malta to escort for the last time the newly elected Bishop of Malta where he arrived from Rome on the 7th September 1760.

3. A.R. Caruana, Vaticanolo della Lingua Maltense... Prima edizione, Malta, G. Munzart 1919.
4. M. Malin, Illustrato, ovo Descrizione di Malta... del Commandante F. Giaccheroncini, Abbe... corretto... e continuata del Conte Giovanni Biondi... Libro Primo e Secondo, Malta, Stamperia del Palazzo, 1775; pp. 771-4. In quest’opera, comunemente citata come Abbe Biondi, è facile distinguere le cose saggio da del Gianbattista dell’Abbe perché sono contrassegnate con alcune virgeline poste nel margine. Questa distinzione è necessaria per notissere il contrasso del Gianbattista allo studio del folklore maltese.
5. Family Malea Descrizione e comunanza regione quotidiana... P. Jann. Quintini, Redini ad Sophum, Lugduni, 1516.