



# Renewing *the past*

Documentation about the restoration of the embroidery of the antependium of the main altar of the Parish Church of Saint Joseph of Kalkara in a historical context

*Text and research:* Chev. Duncan Brincat





*“What a country  
chooses to save  
is what a country  
chooses to say  
about itself.”*

Mollie Beattie

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Documentation about the restoration of the embroidery of the antependium of the high altar of the Parish Church of Saint Joseph of Kalkara in a historical context



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Survey Sheet, 1927.



*Kalkara strand in the 1930s.*



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*The bell tower of the church that collapsed in the war. (Credit: War Damage Commission)*





# Introduction

Since its establishment, Assoċjazzjoni Wirt il-Kalkara has pursued and strived to preserve, not only the historical and artistical heritage of this village, but above all to present it to the people of the territory for their appreciation, knowledge and enjoyment. Moreover, a nation who does not cherish the history that carved it, does not possess a robust identity that earns it a wider dimension.

This booklet is an intrinsic part of a project that the Assoċjazzjoni Wirt il-Kalkara has carried out together with the Saint Joseph Parish, and with the financial aid of the European Union's LEADER Programme. The project which was applied for, and was eventually funded, was entitled *Restoration of a Hand Embroidered Antependium* and consists primarily of two distinct phases.

The first phase was the restoration of an embroidered center-piece which in the past served as the heart of the principal antependium of the main altar of the former Parish Church. The purpose was to carry out a professional restoration for which a competitive request for quotations was issued, with the intention that upon completion it would be exhibited in the hall of the Parish Church and thus appreciated throughout the year. The second phase was the publication of this booklet. The main aim was not only to carry out the restoration work, but to share the historical importance of the antependium and that of the previous Parish Church, as well as giving account of the restoration works that took place. We believe that the appreciation of a work of art would be incomplete without knowledge of the history that surrounds it, and hence the necessity of this publication.

We hope that the appreciation of this work of art will lead us to cherish all that eventually developed us as a village.



*Kalkara in the 1920s.*



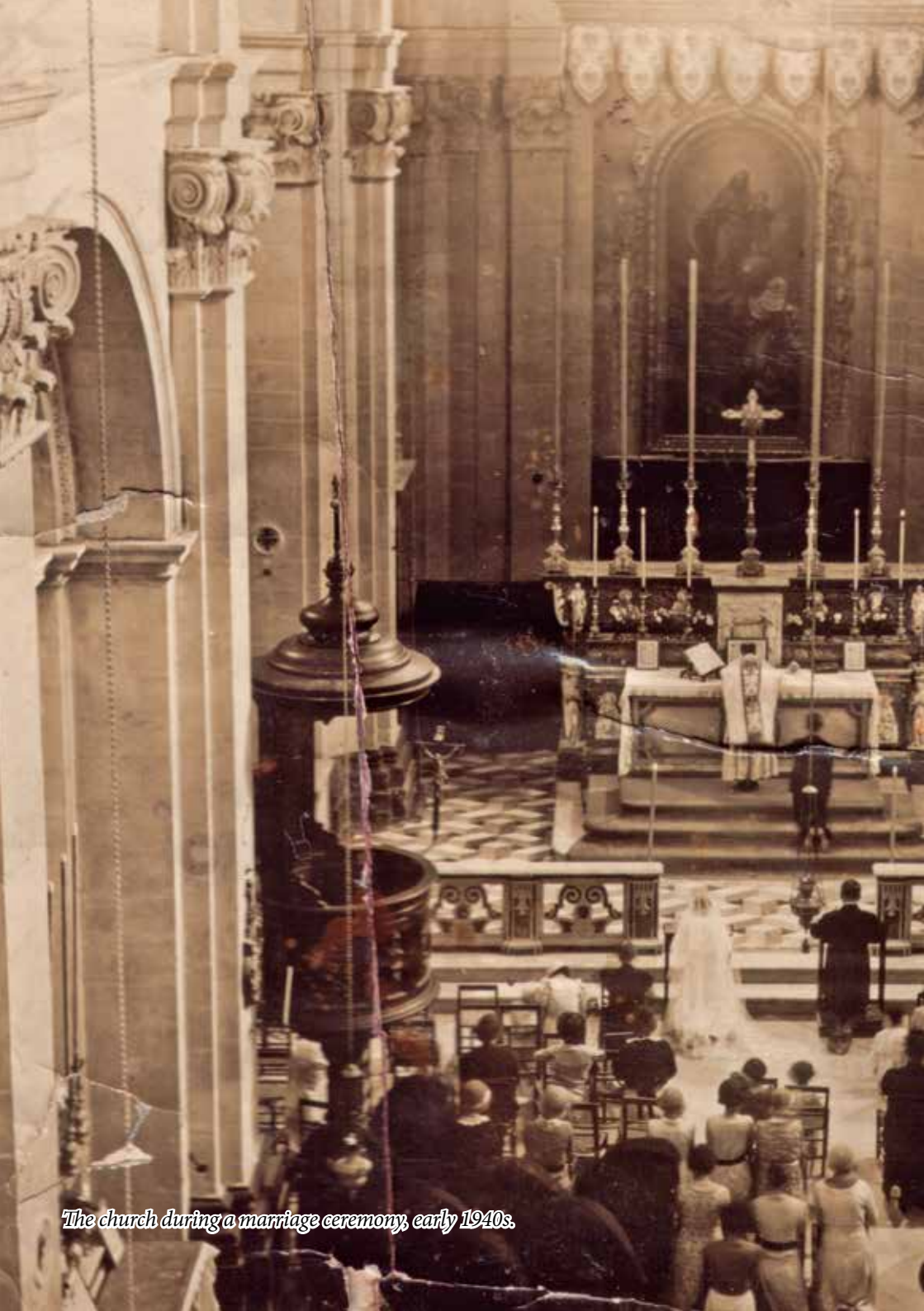
# Kalkara

The village of Kalkara, situated in the South Eastern Region of Malta, has a population of around 3,014. The name is derived from the Latin word for lime due to the presence of a lime kiln since Roman times, hence its motto *A Calce Nomen* and the emblem represented by a green scutcheon divided in two parts: half being blue representing the sea, and the other being gold with a burning flame.

Kalkara consists of two peninsulas: that of Ricasoli, formerly known as *Punta Sottile* or *Punta delle Forche* due to the gallows found there; and that of Bighi, formerly known as *San Salvatore* due to the old church with the identical title. Two creeks form Kalkara: Rinella a name from Italian origin *arenella* due to its shape and that according to historian Ġan Frangisk Abela was good for swimming; and that of Kalkara which in ancient times had several names including *Porto del Infermeria*.

Kalkara's history is buried in its glorious past: the presence of archaeological cart-ruts near it-Turretta, Egyptian stelae brought by the Phoenicians found in Bighi, and the construction of the Palaeochristian hypogea in the zone of Xagħra ta' Santa Duminka. Moreover, the first church of Our Saviour built before 1487 implies the presence of a community in the area, sustained through fishing and agriculture. Development of Kalkara surged during the periods of the Knights and British, especially with the construction of fortifications and Bighi Naval Hospital. It became an independent parish in 1897.

Kalkara bore the brunt of World War II, with a number of casualties and destroyed edifices. Reconstruction after the war proved the strength of a community to start afresh: transforming Kalkara into a gem of the Maltese islands.



*The church during a marriage ceremony, early 1940s.*





# Church construction

On 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1884 merchant Fortunato Gulia filed an application with the Archbishop's Curia of Malta, before Archbishop Carmelo Conte Scicluna, to donate part of his land in Kalkara for the building of a church for the use of the people of village, thus serving as an alternative to the church of Our Saviour. Through a decree issued on the same day, the Archbishop accepted this request, and delegated Canon Primicerius Fr. Joseph Azzopardi, Rector of the church of Our Saviour, as responsible for the building of this new church. This donation was accepted in accordance with the deed issued by Notary Giuseppe Rossi on August 24<sup>th</sup> 1884.

Forthwith, Canon Azzopardi constituted a committee for the building of the church, composed by the merchants Carmelo Bugeja, Fortunato Gulia, Gio Batta Farrugia together with Orazio Agius and the lawyer Dr. Paolo DeBono as Secretary. The Archbishop approved this committee by a decree of 13<sup>th</sup> September 1884.

Architect Guglielmo Attard, an Admiralty Engineer, was commissioned to prepare the designs for this church, a task he did free of charge. Since the land that Gulia offered was not large enough, another piece of land adjacent to it, owned by the Cospicua Chapter, was bought. For this purpose and in order to raise the necessary funds, Canon Azzopardi rented a property from Mr. Spinocchio in which *Teatrino San Giuseppe*, a small theater, was setup. At that time the population of Kalkara was about 900 people or 150 families.

Works on the foundations of the new church began in 1887, while a small model of the building was constructed and exhibited to the public. The foundation works were completed within two years, thus on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1890 at 5.30pm the first stone was laid and blessed. Archbishop



*Canon Fr. Joseph Azzopardi  
1848-1913.  
(Credit: Fabian Mangion)*



*Fr. Joseph Ciangura, first Parish  
Priest of the new Parish of Kalkara,  
1871-1931.*

Pietru Pace attended the occasion, arriving in a special car and was greeted joyously by the people of Kalkara. A throne was setup with a chair for the Archbishop and for the occasion the streets were lit through gas by Mr. Cordina. The committee invited two marching bands to perform a musical programme for this

occasion, and fireworks were let off. The trowel that was used for this occasion was specially manufactured at the Malta Drydocks, and it was the same trowel that was then reused for the blessing of first stone of the present church.

Albeit the villagers were poor and the construction of the church meant substantial finances, in 1892 an important benefactor emerged: Chev. Carmelo Bugeja, who was also a member of the committee. Nonetheless, substantial efforts were done by several other persons to raise the necessary funds, among them Vincenzo Borda who was in charge of collections from the villagers and Gio. Batta Borda who had donated £100 to Canon Azzopardi for the foundation of the main altar of this church. Moreover, Canon Azzopardi donated funds from his own pocket for this project, while approximately £920 came from donations of the Wied Għammieq Cemetery.

Construction works were entrusted to F. Cilia & Company, and were completed towards the end of the year 1895. Hence during the following year the church began to be furnished and finalised. The building was 30.5 meters (110 feet) long, and 20.5 meters (67 feet) wide by 10 meters (32 feet). In September 1896 the marble was laid, and the decoration and sculpture works on the titular painting perspective where completed. The latter were carried out by a certain Salvatore who did several

other works of sculpture, among them the two perspectives of the altars of the Holy Rosary and of the Immaculate Conception, perspectives of other lateral altars and 36 column capitals. Meanwhile, in January 1897, painting works of the walls of the church began, while sculpture works were being done concurrently by a certain Michele. The stone-levelling of the façade of the church started on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1897, while its sculpture commenced during July by a certain Michelino. At the same time the marble of the presbytery and sacristy floor was laid by the Moschetti firm.

A decree of Archbishop Pietru Pace issued on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1897, declared Kalkara as an independent Parish, detached from that of Vittoriosa. It was dedicated to Saint Joseph, as was the intention from the initiation of this project. Canon Fr. Joseph Azzopardi was appointed Vicar Curate until 8<sup>th</sup> January 1898 when Canon Fr. Joseph Ciangura took over as the first Parish Priest of the new Parish. Concurrently Fr. Glivau was appointed Vice Parish Priest. The first baptism was that of Joseph Attard on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1897, while the first funeral was that of John Azzopardi at the age of 78 on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1897.

The construction of the Church was now temporarily completed and so the endeavour focused around the acquisition of important works of art including paintings and liturgical accessories. Through a decree dated 6<sup>th</sup> April 1898, the Confraternities of the Sacrament, the Holy Rosary and Saint Joseph were canonically established as one Confraternity under the patronage of Saint Joseph. In the same year the first bell was acquired, made in 1896 by Julius Cauchi and weighing 14 *qantar* (equivalent



*Digital rendering showing the previous Parish Church. (Designed by Christian Mizzi)*



*The blessing of the belfry's first stone during 1923. (Credit: Anthony Balzan)*



*Fr. Eleazzaro Balzan, second Parish Priest, 1886-1949.*

to 1,111 kgs) and 24 *ratal* (equivalent to 19 kgs). It costed more than £118, of which £70 were raised by the parishioners during a special collection. The mandatory altars were also purchased, and on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1898 the marmist Mariano Russo was paid £81 for the high altar, quite expensive since it was made of fine and coloured marble. The same marmist sculptured the two altars of the transepts, as well as the altar of Saint Philip, the altar of the Souls of Purgatory and the marble chancel that surrounds the presbytery. At the start of the twentieth century, a wooden pulpit designed by Giuseppe Decelis and sculptured by Giuseppe Gonzi was installed.

Meanwhile, in 1914 Captain Nicola Azzopardi left in his will the sum of £1000 as inheritance to the Parish Church of Kalkara with the purpose of building the two side naves. However, as there were still some fees to be paid in respect of building costs and accessories expenses, it was decided to pay them instead especially since the architect claimed that that sum was not enough.

The church was consecrated on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1921, and it was decided to build the bell tower that was to accompany this building in accordance to the original plans of the Parish Church. On Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> July 1923, Archbishop Dom Mauro Caruana blessed the first stone of the bell tower, which was soon completed since several parishioners contributed extensively towards its construction. For the realisation of this project various activities were held, among them an outdoor fair in

which the band *San Giorgio* of Cospicua took part.



The second Parish Priest of Kalkara was Fr. Eleazzaro Balzan who was installed on 5<sup>th</sup> July 1925. He planned the construction of an organ balcony, designed by artist Giuseppe Decelis, to be



*The previous Church as seen from Kalkara's strand.*

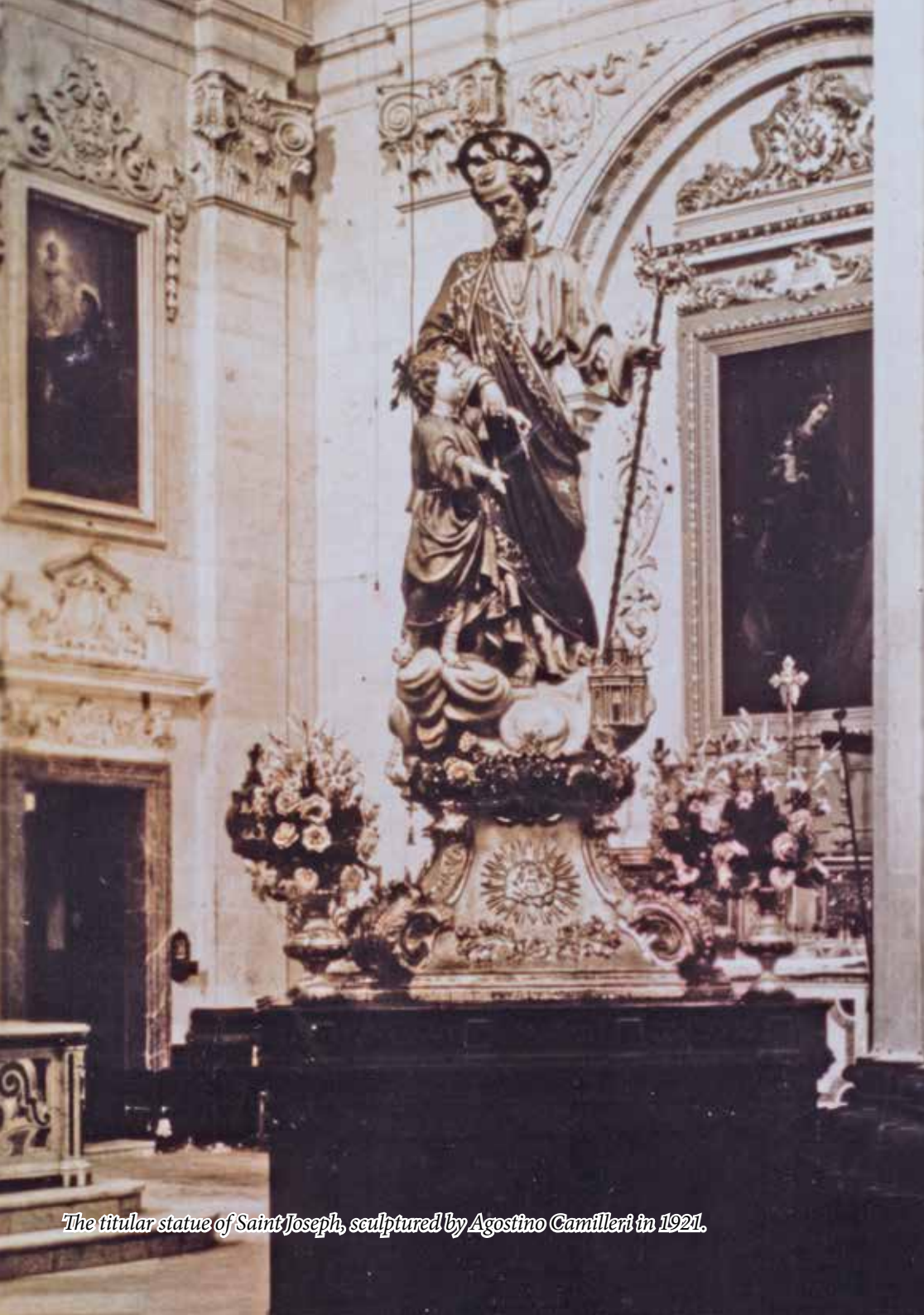
built in 1933 through a decree issued on 11<sup>th</sup> February of the same year. The large pipe-organ was acquired by the church in 1925 after a generous donation.



*The Church ruins. (Credit: War Damage Commission)*

World War II broke out in 1939 and Kalkara was bound to suffer like the rest of the country. The population had risen to about 1700 people. Several tragedies happened, some of them including the demise of various villagers, but the date of 10<sup>th</sup> April 1942 and the time of 5pm mark

the siege of the Parish Church with enemy bombs and its complete destruction. Many artistic works were lost that day, including the titular statue of Saint Joseph. Only the paintings, that had been transferred to Gozo on the instructions of Bishop Michael Gonzi who hailed from Kalkara, and some other accessories, that were stored in a rock-cut cupboard in the sacristy, were saved. All the rest was a complete ruin, and the people of Kalkara were left orphans without a church.



*The titular statue of Saint Joseph, sculptured by Agostino Camilleri in 1921.*



# The antependium

Promptly once the construction of the previous church was completed in 1896, it began to be decorated with works of art of various kinds. The builders of the church, the firm F. Cilia & Co., at the end of their commission decided to donate a painting of Saint Philip to this church since they hailed from Żebbuġ. This canvas was painted by artist Lazzaro Pisani, also from Żebbuġ, and is highly acclaimed for its exotic colors and details. In the same year the altar and the painting of the Holy Rosary in the south transept were donated by benefactor Antonio Bezzina, the painting depicting Our Lady of Pompeii made by painter Giuseppe Cali, the altar and the painting of Saint Vincent Ferrer donated by benefactor Vincenzo Borda, and the altar and painting of Saint Francis donated by benefactor Tousants DeMaria. The artists of the latter two paintings are unknown.

During this time Canon Fr. Joseph Azzopardi was exerting pressure to have Kalkara declared as a separate Parish dedicated to Saint Joseph, and all the villagers were behind him in this move. So in 1897 he ordered the first statue dedicated to this saint, which would later become the first titular statue, from the statuary Etienne Puccini situated in Toulouse, France. This statue was made of terracotta, depicted Saint Joseph holding Jesus in his hand, was decorated in the richest way and costed 400 French Francs. In April of the same year a temporary pedestal for this statue was taken to sculptor Abram Gatt so as to carve sculpture on it.

Meanwhile, on 20<sup>th</sup> October the door of the tabernacle was purchased, while at the same time some altar cards and five chasubles were acquired, and a painting by a certain Abela was paid for. In November, Canon Azzopardi continued to purchase the final necessary accessories for the sacred rites and other celebrations. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month





*The first titular statue of Saint Joseph carved in France by the statuary Etienne Puccini in 1897.*

two chasubles were purchased, as well as brocade and gold gallon. After the founding of the Confraternity in April 1898, a banner of the Holy Viaticum and a small banner of the Christian Doctrine were made. The main white banner was sewn by a certain Vassallo. As from this year Kalkara had its first Parish Priest, Fr. Joseph Ciangura. A set of thirteen candlesticks was purchased from Valletta, and later in the same year they were silver plated, while the temporary pedestal of the statue of Saint Joseph was gilded and completed by Abram Gatt. An altar-canopy and a baldacchino were sewn by a certain Fortunato, while a set of statue-bearer supports (*forçini*) was ordered, and a room in the sacristy was organised as a repository for the storage of these accessories.

During the same year the statue-stand, with wood inlaying, for the statue of Saint Joseph was made. This was to be the first titular feast, celebrated on the second Sunday of July, so various other accessories were also purchased including a silver monstrance, a display case for the sacristy, twelve crosses for the eventual consecration of the church, seven small candlesticks, a clock and even some copes. The marble baptismal font was also bought, along with a silver spoon used for the administration of the same sacrament. This year also saw the completion of several paintings, the most important being the one depicting the patronage of Saint Joseph by Giuseppe Cali, which is signed in reverse as a sign of protest that several churches were preferring work from lower paid foreign



*The procession in Rinella Street during one of the first titular feasts of Saint Joseph.*

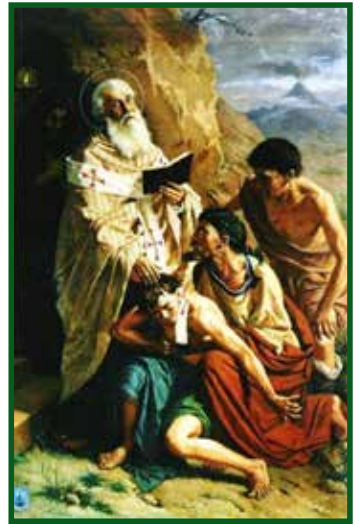




*The high altar and the one dedicated to the Souls of Purgatory decorated for the feast of Saint Joseph. The embroidered centre-piece of the high altar's antependium is clearly seen.*

artists. This painting cost £27. However, several works by the Italian painter Filippo Fortunato Venuti were also executed, including that of the Immaculate Conception in the north transept, of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in the chancel, of the Annunciation, Saint Anthony, Saint Agnes, Saint Fortunato and of the Souls of Purgatory. The latter is painted as remembrance of the two daughters of a certain Fabri from Kalkara, who had died at a young age.

From the Italian firm Gio. & G. Fratelli Bertarelli, which had its principal seat in Milan, various silver accessories were bought, including the silver lily of the titular statue which was donated by Nicola Cachia in 1899, the sanctuary lamp, a door for the



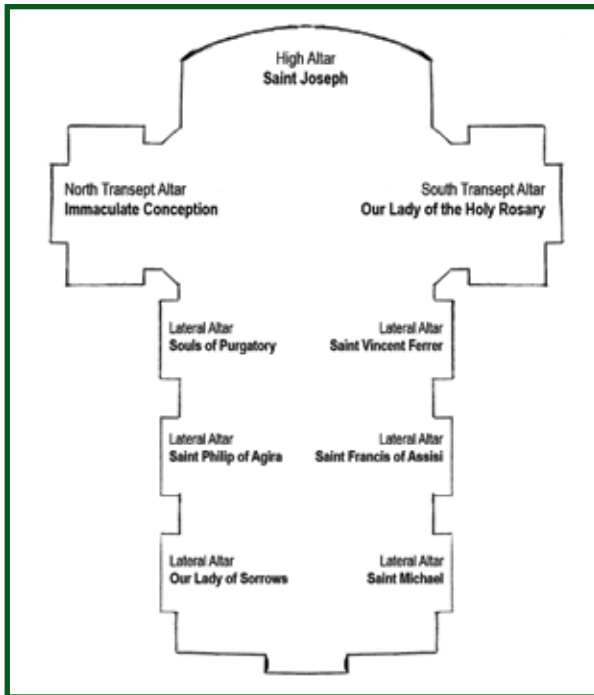
*Saint Philip, painted by Lazzaro Pisani, an artist from Žebbuġ.*



*Remnants of the Confraternity's embroidered banner.*

high altar tabernacle, a cross, an umbrella for the Holy Viaticum and a small silver canopy. Some contributions were made by some benefactors for these costs. Meanwhile, before the feast, the gilding of the titular statue of Saint Joseph was completed by the gilder Giorgio Schembri.

Parish Priest Ciangura ordered various liturgical accessories including embroidered items and other fabric works from the Italian firm Alessandro de Signi. These sacred accessories included chasubles, dalmatics, flowered brocade for the altar-canopy, flowered satin, fringe, damask for antependiums and copes, and further brocade for the baldacchino.



A rich antependium, or rather the embroidered central part of the antependium of the high altar, technically known as the embroidered *palla*, was also ordered from the same Italian firm. In this antependium the central figure is the lamb, a symbol of the holy Eucharist, certainly depicted here with the aim of this sacred item being used not only for the titular feast, but also in the feasts of the Eucharist. Unfortunately nothing was found about who was the designer.

*The distribution of the altars in the former Parish Church.* For the feast of 1899 a gold-

plated silver reliquary was inaugurated, half of its expenses donated by a benefactor, while during the beginning of the twentieth century more items were procured, such as the gold-plated *girandola* sculptured by Giuseppe Gonzi (1902), and two new statues one of Our Lady of Lourdes and another one of Our Lady of Sorrows respectively.



*The high altar decorated for the feast of Corpus, early 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

In 1921 a new titular statue of Saint Joseph patron of the Catholic Church was made. It was sculptured in papier-mâché by the Gozitan artist Agostino Camilleri and was donated to the Parish by the *Circolo San Giuseppe* in the same year. Meanwhile, in 1922 the altar of Our Lady of Sorrows was blessed, with the painting done by Ramiro Cali. In 1932 some modifications were made to the pedestal of the statue of Saint Joseph through a decree issued on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1931, costing £30 and collected from the parishioners. Mons. Joseph Ciangura left in his will his pectoral cross to adorn this statue.



*Mons. Michael Gonzi 1885-1984.*

Almost all the works of art that were kept in the church were destroyed during World War II in the enemy attack on 10<sup>th</sup> April 1942. Fortunately, the embroidered central part of the antependium of the high altar was saved since it was stored inside a rock-cut cupboard located in the sacristy. The same fortune befell on the *girandola* and one of the candlesticks of the high altar.



*During the treatment of lacerations in silk fabric.*





# The restoration

The conservation and restoration of the main altar's antependium depicting the 'Agnus Dei' conserved inside the Parish Church of Kalkara dedicated to Saint Joseph was completed in February 2020 by the company Atelier del Restauro, chosen after a public call made by Assocjazzjoni Wirt il-Kalkara during the months of June and July 2019.

The endeavour consisted in the care of the artistic value of the work of art and of its constituent materials. This brought about the necessity of a scientific and methodological approach for the proper conservation and restoration of the artefact. The project was led by Dr. Maria Grazia Zenzani and Ms. Valentina Lupo.

## **Manufacturing technique**

The important work consists of an antependium of Italian manufacture by Alessandro de Signi in 1898. The antependium is made of a woven silk fabric interwoven with silver foil yarns with an embroidery in the centre made of metal yarn with a paper core representing the 'Agnus Dei' framed by floral borders. The artefact was mounted on a wooden frame by means of perimeter nailing and had a white lining that was fixed to the frame. The metallic yarn decorations were made using different techniques and with various types of yarn, in order to create a variation in brightness due to the different refraction.

## **Brief state of Conservation**

The Antependium was not found in a good condition with damage pertaining to both wear and tear and environmental factors. The latter includes exposure to light, dust, temperature changes and humidity. The harmful effects of light had caused the weakening of the lama fabric while the handling caused the deterioration and embrittlement of the lama silk along the perimeter.

From both tactile and visual observation it was found that the thin silk fabric is very fragile. Silk fibre is considered to have the lowest resistance of all fibres to degradation from ultraviolet light known as photo degradation. It follows that one of the reasons that silk is the most fragile fibre under light exposure is the fact that it is the finest natural fibre. A series of cuts and lacerations. A fine layer of dust obscures the original colours of the textile and embroidery.



*Observation of the current state of the antependium.*

## **Restoration phases and technical procedures**

### **Disassembly**

The first operation performed was the single removal of each nail that fixed the perimeter of the Antependium so as not to further compromise the state of conservation of the fabric.

### **Dry Cleaning**

The work has been carefully dry cleaned from the front and on the back by means of controlled low suction power vacuum cleaner, using filter nets to protect the fabrics.



*Details of the antependium showing damages to silk fabric.*

### **Vaporization**

Abundant vaporization was carried out on the entire surface in order to restore the fibers their natural hydration and elasticity.

### Stain Removal

An attempt has been made on stains by mechanical cleaning and solvents (alcohol, ligroin and acetone). The final result was that of a discreet lowering of the waterstains of larger dimensions through the application of water and a surfactant (*saponin*).



*Detail during the dry cleaning process.*

### Cleaning

All the golden metal surfaces were mechanically treated with cotton wool soaked in ligroin. The treatment, in addition to having removed most of the oxidations, has made the surfaces more shiny, especially the flat-rolled ones.

### Consolidation

All the lacerations have been consolidated by placing on the front and back of the work local portions of resin-coated Lyon veil. The perimeter has been consolidated on local supports treated with Beva 371 O.F film 65 resin placed on the back of the work. At this juncture all the warps were ordered and put back in position, finally stopped by the application of controlled heat.



*During the cleaning and lightening of the watermark stains.*

### Mounting

In agreement with the Parish and Assocjazzjoni Wirt il-Kalkara, for reasons of conservative integrity, it was decided to replace the wooden frame with a polycarbonate panel. The front surface of the panel was covered with a silk fabric of the same colour tone as the background of the original. The work was



*Detail of the consolidation at the perimeter.*

fixed by means of seams placed in correspondence of the two joining joints of the original fabrics and, in the central area, with threads that follow the vertical lines of the embroidery.

The perimeter has been folded inwards leaving about half a centimeter of ease with respect to the edge of the panel so as not to incur again the risk of abrasions by rubbing against the surfaces. Finally, an additional fabric covering the panel was sewn on the back.

### **Suggestions for the correct conservation of the Antependium**

In order to keep the work in good condition over time, it is recommended to keep it at a constant temperature (between 18°C and 22°C) and under controlled humidity conditions (50-60%).

It is also recommended not to place the work near sources of heat, to avoid direct exposure to sunlight and to take care that the room/storage space in which it will be placed is not subject to water infiltration.



*Detail during the sewing of the embroidery.*

It is also a good practice to keep the work under control in order to promptly notice the occurrence of problems or damage.

For a prolonged conservation of the Antependium it is advisable to carry out regular maintenance of the work, it is hence advisable to schedule dusting yearly and vaporization every 3-4 years. The work when not in use must be covered/ packed



in a cotton or linen fabric. Plastic packing materials should not be used in order to prevent the formation of condensation and in consequence mold and bio-films.



*The antependium after conservation.*

*Object:* Antependium

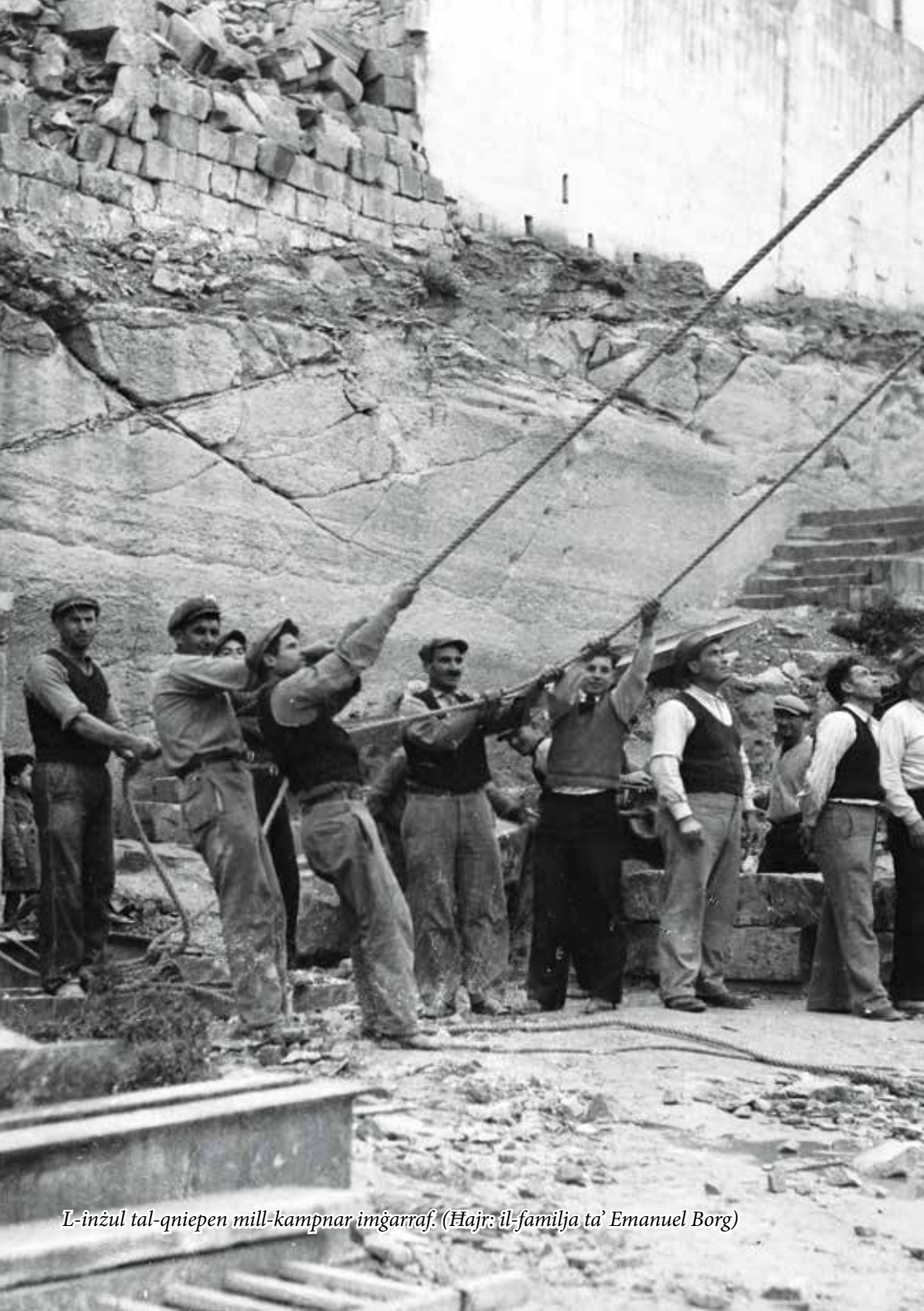
*Manufacture:* Italian – Alessandro de Signi

*Period:* XIX century - 1898

*Materials:* Silk and golden and silver metal threads

*Dimensions:* 80.5cm x 161cm

*This information was compiled by Atelier del Restauro, and is an excerpt from the final report issued.*



*L-inżul tal-qniepen mill-kampnar imġarraf. (Hajr: il-familja ta' Emanuel Borg)*



# Conclusion

Assoċjazzjoni Wirt il-Kalkara strongly believes that the development of a village and territory cannot be thorough if it does not include the restoration and conservation of what moulded the same village during the passing of times.

The village of Kalkara is no exception. Major developments have taken place in the last century that have changed its shape: new buildings, roads along its entire stretch, and even businesses and industries that have found themselves on this land. Not to mention the increase in population, its diversification and even the way people consider this area. Contradictory, one dares to state that exponentially extensive development has taken place in Kalkara considering what it has endured due to the Second World War.

The past shouldn't be considered only nostalgically, and maybe even melancholically. Every period is sustained by its own unique history and trends, but every period should consider that it is based on what has built before. Hence, respect from each generation should be present for what previous generations have accomplished. As far as Kalkara is concerned, this is particularly more relevant, especially since the building of a stronger community had to take place more than once due to what the village had suffered over time.

With this in mind, this restoration and conservation project was carried out: to cherish what was inherited from our fathers, to give due care to it for future generations, and to expose it to all the villagers and the whole territory.



