The development of domestic space in the Maltese Islands from the Late Middle Ages to the second half of the Twentieth Century

Said-Zammit, G.A.

Chapter 6

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND TRADITIONS

"*Religious fervour is one of the leading features in the character of the Maltese people, and it discovers itself ... in the building of churches and chapels; in the erection of images at the corners of the streets, to be devoutly worshipped by the populace ....*"
(Seddall 1870: 296)

6.1 Introduction

While the previous two chapters of the thesis analysed the Maltese house through various sources, namely literature, works-of-art, notarial records and the national censuses, this and the following three chapters explore various aspects of local society and lifestyle through the ages. Chapter 6 focuses on religious beliefs and traditions and how these are reflected in the Maltese houses. The following one analyses diet, dining fashions, health and education, while Chapter 8 is concerned with furniture and costumes. Chapter 9 looks in detail at various aspects concerned with household, gender and class. The objective of these four chapters is, therefore, to study the evolution of local society and how the lifestyles of the Maltese have changed during the period under review.

To understand the relationship between religion and the house, the present chapter first explores the role of the local Catholic Church and its influence on the inhabitants through time. Following an analysis of religion as a public manifestation and how this and popular culture are intertwined, this chapter then examines how the local dwelling, apart from being a place of human habitation, was also a place of private worship.

6.2 The Catholic Church in Malta

Since the re-Christianization of the Maltese islands in the late Middle Ages the local Catholic Church has assumed an increasingly important role in Maltese society, which continued to dominate the inhabitants' life for many centuries until practically recent times (Boissevain 1984: 163-84; Bonnici 1992: 372-83). The fact that, during the period under study the Maltese islands were ruled by Catholic monarchs or by organizations which formed part of the Catholic Church like the Order of St. John, and given that in Malta this Church was highly organized, other Christian denominations had little possibility to flourish locally. During the Knights' period, Catholic teaching was regulated by the local Church and also by the Inquisition (section 2.3.1 above).

The role of the monastic orders in the Maltese islands cannot be underestimated. The earliest orders established their monasteries in the late Medieval period in Mdina, Rabat or Birgu (Blouet 1993: 40) (Figure 6.1). However, when Valletta was built these

established other monasteries and churches in the new capital. During the Knights' period new orders found their way in Malta too, for example the Jesuits (Bezzina 1994: 124). Besides their pastoral work within the community, several orders used their convents to educate children (Cassar 2000: 163).

Although the Inquisition in Malta was abolished in 1798, the influence of the Church on Maltese society in later times remained dominant. In the British period the relationship between the local Church and the Colonial government was not always cordial (Seddall 1870: 297-98; Koster 1998: 81-82). And when these islands came under the influence of nineteenth-century European architectural styles, the Church opposed the building of any Catholic churches in Neo-Classical fashion, since it believed this was reminiscent of the pagan temples that characterized ancient Greece and Rome (De Lucca 1988: 322). The only exception was the parish church of Mosta, which imitated the Roman Pantheon (Figure 6.2). The direct influence of the Church on the Maltese persisted until practically recent times. The absence of any type of civic organization until 1993, when the local councils were established by law, implied that for many centuries the islands were organized only in parishes, and therefore the main point of reference in each town or village was the parish priest, who represented the local bishop in a particular locality (Cassar 1988: 91-92).

A reference to the development of the local parish system has already been made in Chapter 2 (sections 2.2.2 and 2.3.2 above). The organization of the villages into parishes secured the Church's presence in all parts of the Maltese islands. The parish priest, apart from being the bishop's representative, had to organize the priests under his responsibility as well as his parishioners. He was responsible for the pastoral work that a parish entails and also for the spiritual needs of his parishioners (Ciappara 2008: 677). From the 16th century, particularly from 1563 onwards, parish priests were also responsible to maintain parish records to enumerate the number of baptisms, marriages and deaths that occurred during each year. They were also obliged to declare to the bishop whether their parishioners had fulfilled their religious obligations; such information was recorded in the *status animarum* registers. The parish priests were also responsible for the collection of Church taxes and land dues (Luttrell 1975b: 63).

The Church in Malta was administered by its bishop. After the Council of Trent, which was concluded in 1563, it became a common practice among the local bishops to tour the Maltese islands on a regular basis to investigate the state of every parish (Bezzina 1994: 123). During these pastoral visits they exercised their authority to examine all the priests in every parish, to order the deconsecration of particular churches or the restoration of others, and to issue regulations that were specific for certain villages (Micallef 1980: 52; Bezzina 2003: 9; 2004: 23). The pastoral visits conserved at the Archives of the Archbishop's Curia in Floriana, covering a period of about four centuries, are an important source for the study of Maltese society.

The Church was also one of the wealthiest local landowners (Senior 1882: 236; Luttrell 1975b: 60-61). Its real estate property consisted of churches, chapels and monasteries as well as various landed estates spread in different parts of the islands. Apart from the estates which it acquired through its own financial means, the Church also obtained other properties (for example, estates and houses) from the faithful. The

notarial records show that between the 15th and the 19th century it was customary for Catholics to include the Church (or the bishop, the parish priest or any other clergyman) as part of their will (*Acts* Paolo Bonello 4-xi-1467: MS 588 f. 42-42v; Nicola de Agatiis 4-viii-1536: R 202/3 f. 81v-84v). At a time when it was considered a privilege for a person to be buried in the church, the faithful were encouraged to leave a sum of money to the Church for this particular end. Moreover, the testator usually also left another sum of money to the parish priest to cover other expenses, such as church maintenance works, the celebration of mass and the purchase of candles (*Acts* Paolo Bonello 12-x-1512: MS 588 f. 69-70; 1-x-1517: MS 588 f. 72-79v).

The particular situation which prevailed locally during the period under study demonstrates that the Church dominated the life of the Maltese from the cradle to the grave. Its involvement started immediately at one's birth, when a new born baby was baptized, and ended up with extreme unction before a person passed away. Whether a person got married or received holy orders was also marked by its direct involvement. The priest accompanied the moribund on the death bed and also attended funerals. It is no wonder that in the 19th century the Rev. Henry Seddall (1870: 296) commented: "*religious fervour is one of the leading features in the character of the Maltese people, and it discovers itself ... in the building of churches and chapels; in the erection of images at the corners of the streets, to be devoutly worshipped by the populace; in the frequent observance of saints' days; and in the endless processions at which the lower classes gaze with feelings akin to those with which a London mob looks at the show on Lord Mayor's day*."

6.3 Religion as a public manifestation

For many centuries the Catholic religion has often served as a means of public manifestation. The great number of chapels and churches built in various parts of Malta and Gozo since late medieval times is a clear evidence of this. The devout and the faithful, whatever their social status, often donated their money and land or contributed with their service (for example, stonemasons and carpenters) to build places of worship in all the local towns and villages. The number of churches and chapels varied from one settlement to the other. For example, in 1575 the hamlet of Ħal Millieri, situated in south-eastern Malta, had four churches and a population of less than a hundred persons who lived in fifteen houses (Luttrell 1976: 20-22).

6.3.1 Wayside churches

The extensive number of churches and chapels throws light on the devotion that the local inhabitants had for particular saints, for example St. George, St. Michael, St. Roche and St. Paul. The deep devotion to the Virgin Mary is noticeable in all the local towns and villages. Apart from the various parishes specifically dedicated to St. Mary, there are many churches spread in various localities which are also dedicated to her. Marian devotion in Malta and Gozo dates back to the early Christian period (Buhagiar 1984: 17-22; Bezzina 1985: 41).

Wayside churches are spread in various parts of the Maltese islands and usually have a rectangular or a square plan (Figure 6.3). Their back wall, dominated by the main altar, is often flat or apsidal (Luttrell 1976: 69; Buhagiar 2005: 84-86) (Figure 6.4). These churches usually have a simple and austere façade, similar to the rural dwellings analysed in the *Cabrei* or during fieldwork. In fact, the church façade generally included a main entrance leading directly to the main altar on the opposite side; just above the main door a small circular or square window is usually added to provide lighting and ventilation to the interior. The uppermost part of the façade is often dominated by a small bell pinnacle. The austerity of the church façade was sometimes alleviated by the addition of certain architectural embellishments, for example hood mouldings, which were generally reserved for specific areas, such as the main doorway (Figure 6.5).

Like the façade, the interior of these wayside churches is usually simple, with its focus point being the main altar, often embellished by a painting or fresco depicting the saint or saints to whom a particular church is dedicated. A number of churches also have side altars dedicated to other saints. Like the ground floor rooms of late medieval and Knights' period dwellings, the flat ceiling of these churches is usually supported by a set of transverse arches. Before the introduction of wooden chairs or benches the congregation made use of stone benches (*dkieken*), similar to those of Falson Palace in Mdina, which were usually located at the side.

Some of these churches do not occur in isolation. Popular Christian devotion sometimes dictated that the inhabitants of certain villages built two or even three adjoining churches. For example, the church of the Annunciation at Ħal Millieri abutted that of the Visitation, while the church of St. Basil in Mqabba borders with that of St. Michael. Several churches were votive buildings which were established in thanksgiving for illnesses cured and intercessions granted (Buhagiar 2005: 95). Some of these votive churches were built by private individuals, for example by a member of the local nobility, by a bishop or priest, or else by one of the Knights of St. John. Others may have been primarily intended as burial churches, similar to what occurred in other countries like South Italy, ensuring the founder and his family of the *ius sepulturae* (the right of interment) inside the church (Wettinger in Blagg, Bonanno and Luttrell 1990: 135-40; Arthur 2012: 561).

This analysis revealed that, in certain aspects, rural secular and religious buildings showed similarities in the construction techniques as well as in the way their façade was architecturally rendered. It was observed that in both cases the façade of these buildings was usually austere and introverted, with apertures and architectural embellishments being kept to a minimum. A number of wayside churches were used by the peasants who lived in the various villages and hamlets scattered in different parts of the islands. The quality of life and the simplicity of the villagers' lifestyle observed in our analysis of Chapter 2 are, therefore, reflected in the houses in which they lived as well as in the churches in which they practised their religious faith individually or communally (sections 2.2.2 and 2.3.2 above).

6.3.2 The parish churches

The organization of the Maltese islands into a number of parishes meant that each parochial district had to have a principal church, where the main religious services and functions of the parish were to be held. Whereas the earliest parish churches were located in strategic locations around the island each to control a number of nearby villages and hamlets, through time, particularly from the Knights' period onwards, these became a characteristic of the village centre, and symbolically this implied that this also became the main point of reference for all the inhabitants of the town or village. In a typical local village, the narrow winding streets somehow led to the main church which was usually preceded by an open irregular square (Figure 6.6). Even hamlets like Ħal Millieri (in Malta) and L-Għammar (in Gozo) were characterized by this same configuration (Figure 5.27). Through time, especially during the Knights' period, these parish churches were rebuilt or extended in line with the Baroque style which prevailed at the time. Most of the parish churches that still survive today were, in fact, built between the 17th and 18th centuries, with certain others being built between the 19th and the early 20th century. The monumental parish churches are still the main source of attraction in most contemporary local towns and villages. The church's cupola, usually characterized by a typical red colour, is often visible from all parts of the town or village. Therefore, apart from being the inhabitants' main point of reference, the parish church was also the settlement's principal landmark (Figure 6.7). Most of the parish churches are an architectural masterpiece in their own right and are usually characterized by symmetrical ornate façades typical of the Baroque period. The parish churches of Żurrieq, Siġġiewi and Rabat are clear examples (Figures 6.8 and 6.9).

These parish churches were built by the generosity of those who not only donated money or property to the Church, but also their services, for example stonemasons, carpenters and labourers (Sant Cassia 1999: 250). Wealthy benefactors included bishops, priests, knights, the nobility and the rural elite. This shows that in the proto-urban settlements the parish churches were primarily built through the influence of the elite. However, the support of those who offered their manual work cannot be ignored, because although the well-off could financially afford to commission these projects, it was often through the hard labour of the other villagers that such churches could be built (Ciappara 2014: 239). Therefore, in these proto-urban villages the parish churches became a symbol of collective identity as much as they were a symbol of economic power and social status. They also indicate a trend towards an improved standard of living, particularly among the rural elite, which allowed the rural community to emulate urban architecture and aspects of town life.

6.3.3 Artistic masterpieces in churches

The Maltese expressed their religious devotion to saints not only in the churches they built, but also in the way they embellished them (Skippon 1732: 622; Brydone 1773: 313; Ciappara 2008: 679). The local parish churches are all characterized by a number of works-of-art executed by various foreign and local artists. Artistic works depicting saints, biblical figures and scenes, as well as Roman pontiffs, embellish the walls, altars

and cupolas of these churches, and perhaps this is a clear example where in Malta religion and culture become one and the same thing (Figure 6.10). While on the one hand such works-of-art express the community's religious devotion, on the other there seems to have been this tradition to render a place of worship into an art gallery. Sometimes, these works-of-art were commissioned by members of the local nobility, by certain parish groups or even by the entire parish community. Some others were votive paintings commissioned as thanksgiving for illnesses cured and intercessions granted.

Artistic works also adorned the smaller churches. These usually had at least one painting, located just behind the main altar, depicting the titular saint to which a particular church was dedicated. Some others contained more artistic works; for example the medieval church of the Annunciation at Ħal Millieri is characterized by a cycle of frescoes depicting a number of saints (Figure 6.11). These frescoes, probably datable to the late 15th century, are presumably an imitation of an earlier fresco cycle dating back to the 12th and 13th centuries (Blagg, Bonanno and Luttrell 1990: 127). These frescoes, executed by an unknown artist, cover most of the walls of this church. Traces of other frescoes depicting holy or biblical figures have been identified in other medieval and post-medieval (built or rock-hewn) churches, like that of Santa Maria ta' Bir Miftuħ in the parish of Gudja and that of St. Agatha in Rabat.

The above analysis has revealed that the parish church was an integral part of the town or village and often served as a point of reference or landmark to the villagers or town people as well as to the visitors. While the wayside churches were usually simple in style, the parish churches were more elaborate in size and architecture. The latter were generally built in Baroque style and their interior was usually embellished by various artistic works. Although the wayside churches were architecturally and artistically far less elaborate, the peasant communities scattered in different parts of the islands still sought to decorate them with at least one painting or fresco. It is interesting to note that, while the parish churches were built or rebuilt according to the latest architectural fashion of the time, the wayside churches generally adhered to their vernacular idiom. This pattern was also noted in our analysis of the Maltese houses, which showed that the elite houses had a tendency to change according to fashion, while changes in rural dwellings were minimal and more sporadic (sections 3.4 and 3.5 above). This, therefore, indicates that not only the elite houses changed according to fashion, but also the churches of the towns and the proto-urban settlements. The available evidence also suggests that the church, being the focus of the village community, expressed a sense of communal pride, in a comparable way to what the city temples of Archaic Greece had conveyed in earlier times (Snodgrass 1985: 199-200). This sense of collective identity, which made one parish community different from all the others, reminds us also of the *campanilismo* (or local patriotism) which Tak (1990: 95-96) observed when he studied the intervillage relations in the rural society of northwest Tuscany.

6.3.4 Niches and statues

Another means of popular religious devotion and expression are the hundreds of statues and niches that characterize the squares and streets of local towns and villages as well

as the corners and façades of houses. These depict various saints and holy figures, once again confirming the Church's direct influence on the local people. Most of these statues and niches date back to a period ranging from the Knights' phase to the 20th century. It seems that religious devotion in the town or village was not only confined to the parish church and its filial churches, but also to the streets and public places of the entire settlement. According to Catholic tradition, these statues were an important means through which the community could invoke the presence of God or particular saints, where the invisible is presented to the visibility of man (Figures 6.12 and 6.13).

6.4 Religion and popular culture intertwined

A clear example where religion and popular culture in Malta become one and the same thing is the traditional *festa* (feast), which still constitutes an important aspect of contemporary town or village life. The *festa* is an annual event which honours the titular saint of a town or village. In the past, these were celebrated throughout the year, usually on the saint's day, but nowadays most of them are celebrated during summer, usually on Sundays.

It seems that the *festa* became popular during the Knights' period and emerged in its present form during the early 20th century (Cassar Pullicino 1992: 63). However, it is possible that before 1530 the local parishes and hamlets were already organizing some form of public manifestation to honour their titular saint. The *festa* is an occasion which brings together the whole village or town community (Boissevain 1992: 152); it is also a period of various liturgical and social celebrations (Figure 6.14). There are historical indications that, originally, the *festa* consisted of a simple religious manifestation, but from the Knights' period onwards it became more complex and elaborate. It began to include more Church services, the religious procession with the saint's statue that passes through the main streets of the town or village included more participants, while street decorations for the occasion also became more elaborate. Our historical evidence suggests that in the major villages the development of the *festa* into a more elaborate religious manifestation coincided with the social and economic changes that the proto-urban settlements experienced from the 17th century onwards and when new parish churches in Baroque style started to dominate the village centre (section 2.3.2 above).

The festivities and religious services which form part of the traditional *festa* are usually spread over a number of days. Nowadays, the local parishes tend to organize their titular feast over a longer period to include all the different groups forming part of the parish community. The peak of these celebrations is reached on the actual feast day, which is marked by special religious services and socio-cultural programmes (Boissevain 1965: 77). Its highlight is the procession with the saint's statue along the streets of the village or town. Before the development of the local band clubs in the 19th century, music services for these feasts were provided by traditional groups of musicians who played their fifes and tambourines through the streets (Cassar Pullicino 1992: 64). Fireworks are also an important component of the traditional feast, and there

is historical evidence that pyrotechnic works were already quite popular during the Knights' period (Cassar Pullicino 1992: 65-66) (Figure 6.15).

The traditional *festa* is certainly a clear example where it is difficult to differentiate between what constitutes the religious and the cultural perspective of this community occasion. While the parish celebrates high mass in the church on the feast day morning, the local band club organizes its traditional march programme along the streets of the town or village; while the parish church is internally and externally decorated for the occasion to honour its titular saint, the streets are embellished with flags, banners, statues and lights (Figure 6.16). The balconies and façades of private houses, clubs and other organizations are also highly decorated for the occasion. The evidence of the previous chapter also revealed that it was customary among the village or town people to clean their houses and paint their façade in preparation for this religious feast, a practice which still occurs in several towns and villages (section 4.2 above). This demonstrates how houses participate actively in these communal village celebrations through lights and decorations, through opening their doors and allow visual access to the interiors, and by putting religious statues or pictures of saints in prominent places. It is a time of great preparation, during which the whole village or town community rejoices in the name of religion (Black 1993: 138). It is also during this festive period that people from the neighbouring settlements come to participate in these celebrations, by attending religious services or other socio-cultural activities. The local band club entertains the village or town streets with its music and traditional marches, while fireworks add colour and amusement to the entire locality. During this festive season the village or town deviates from the usual routine and transforms itself into a social magnet which draws together the various groups of the parish community. The *festa* comes to an official end when the statue of the titular saint returns to the parish church and the last liturgical celebrations are concluded. Unofficially, the inhabitants of the town or village continue with their enjoyment on the following day, when several families spend a whole day by the seaside (in summer) or in the countryside (in winter).

Through the ages there have been various changes in the form and organization of the *festa* (Cassar Pullicino 1992: 63-64). In certain instances these also became a source of rivalry between different villages and sometimes even within the same village (Boissevain 1965: 62; 74-96; 1969).

Reference should also be made to the national religious celebrations, for example the feast of St. Paul Shipwrecked which is celebrated on the 10th of February. The veneration of St. Paul in the Maltese islands dates back to at least the Middle Ages, as witnessed by the great number of churches, including the Mdina cathedral, which are dedicated to him (Cassar 2000: 209-19). Other major national religious feasts linked to particular historical events are that of St. Mary (celebrated on the 15th of August) and that of Our Lady of the Victories (celebrated on the 7th of September). In the former, while the Church celebrates St. Mary's Assumption, the State records the arrival of the Allied supply convoys that sustained the besieged island of Malta in August 1942. In the latter, while the Church celebrates the nativity of St. Mary, the State marks the victory of the Great Siege of 1565 and the end of the Second World War in Malta.

Culture and religion manifest themselves together during Christmas and Holy Week. For example, on Good Friday when the Church in Malta contemplates the death of Jesus Christ, various parishes in Malta and Gozo organize the traditional Good Friday procession, a long demonstration consisting of various statues and actors clothed in biblical figures, which narrates the passion of Christ. Such processions are characterized by pageantry and fine costumes and, according to tradition, these serve as a means of meditation and reflection for the believer. These processions were introduced in Malta by the late 16th century through Sicilian and Spanish influence, but were much simpler (Cassar Pullicino 1992: 54). Through time, they became more complex, with the inclusion of more actors, statues and other related paraphernalia (Figures 6.17 and 6.18). On Easter Sunday the Church celebrates Christ's resurrection, with several local parishes organizing the Easter day procession along the town or village streets (Figure 6.19).

The celebration of Christmas in the Maltese islands is also marked by various traditional peculiarities. Apart from the different religious services that the local parishes organize during Advent, many families manifest their religious beliefs and devotion in their house through the traditional crib (locally known as *presepju*) with figurines that collectively depict the nativity scene (Cassar Pullicino 1992: 42-43). The crib tradition has its origins in medieval Italy (it was invented by St. Francis of Assisi) and was probably introduced locally during the Knights' period. Through time this tradition became increasingly popular and eventually the crib found itself in the local houses too. Prior to the introduction of the Christmas tree in the late 19th century and other types of more recent decorative lights and trimmings, a small wax statue representing baby Jesus was usually placed in a prominent place in the house to remind the members of the family of this important moment in the history of Christianity (Figure 6.20). This tradition is still popular among many Maltese, although its significance has diminished due to other external influences and mass-produced cheaper decorations. Another popular tradition associated with the house during this festive season, which was probably introduced in the 19th century through British influence, is the Christmas dinner which brings family members and relatives closer together; it is also a moment characterized by the exchange of gifts and/or homemade sweet pastries.

6.5 Religion as a private or semi-private manifestation

According to Catholic tradition religious devotion is a public manifestation as well as a means of private expression. The house is, therefore, a place where the members of the family live and socialize, but where they also conduct their private prayers. In the past, particularly during the Knights' period, it was customary among the local elite families to possess a private chapel in their own *palazzi*. Casa Rocca Piccola in Valletta and Stagno Palace in Qormi (House 15) are two typical examples of this (Figure 6.21). It was also common among various noble families in Malta to have their own portable altar. According to Catholic tradition the altar is the central point of religious worship

where holy mass is said. Some of these altars are an artistic masterpiece in their own right, which often have the outward guise of armoires or bureau-bookcases (Figure 6.22). Many of the existing local portable altars date back to the 18th century (Magro Conti 2000: 19-28). Our analysis in Chapter 3 has revealed that it was normal for the elite families to own more than one house, therefore these portable altars were a useful piece of furniture since these could be transported from one residence to another (section 3.5 above). Private chapels and portable altars served as a means where the members of noble families conducted their private prayers and enjoyed the exclusive privilege of hearing mass away from the rest of society, particularly when a member of these families belonged to the clergy.

In the more common dwellings, the family's religious manifestation and devotion was expressed through the various pictures (or statues) of saints spread in different rooms or spaces. The presence of pictures and statues depicting holy figures was considered of utmost importance because, according to tradition, these provided divine protection to all the household members. Sometimes, statues and pictures of saints or holy figures were placed together on a piece of furniture, forming a small private shrine where the members of the family conducted their private prayers individually or collectively. These private shrines were usually dominated by an effigy of the cross (Figure 6.23). It was also customary among many local families to put some flowers in front of these statues or pictures and to keep a candle burning. Although this local tradition may have declined due to the secularization of Maltese society during the last thirty years or so, it is still quite popular among many families.

Religious items related to private religious devotion occur in several notarial contracts, which refer to icons, crosses and rosary beads as forming part of dowries or wills. Crosses and icons of holy figures appear to have been common in the bedroom, as one of the paintings studied in the previous chapter suggests (Figure 5.38). The analysis conducted in Chapter 5 has also demonstrated that another place in the house in which the symbol of the cross was likely to be found, at least in the rural dwellings, is the courtyard (Figure 5.45). This suggests that the central courtyard was another place in the house where private prayers were said. Our review of local literary works has revealed that the roof of the house also served as an area where the family members prayed together, especially in summer during the evening (section 4.2 above).

Religious devotion in Malta, at least in the past, was sometimes also a public-private enterprise. Until the mid-20th century it was customary among several families from the same neighbourhood, particularly in the villages, to gather in the street or in an alley to say the rosary or other popular prayers together. Sometimes this was an organized affair, with people from the same street taking it in turns for who had to gather the 'flock' for the next evening and say the rosary. From the interviews the author conducted among various villagers in Malta and Gozo, this practice seems to have been still popular in the late fifties of the previous century. The author's mother, who was a Catholic and passed away in 2002, used to narrate that, in the late forties/early fifties, being still a young girl at that time, she still assembled with her siblings together with other neighbours from the same street to say the rosary and recite other prayers. The secularization of Maltese society since the second half of the 20th

century led to this particular tradition declining until its complete disappearance. Although this was a form of private religious devotion, in the sense that such prayers were conducted outside the church and were not led by a priest, yet there was still a public element in it, since this brought families from the same street together and such prayers were conducted in a public space.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an insight into the religious beliefs and traditions of Maltese society during the period under study. It has first analysed the role of the local Catholic Church and how this has influenced Maltese society in various aspects: spiritually, pastorally, culturally and socially. This chapter has provided various examples from the local context where religion and culture merge into each other to express the common beliefs and traditions of the people, whatever their social and economic background. The teachings of the Catholic Church and the community's devotion to a particular saint often become an instrument of various public manifestations, celebrated in a town or village or even on a national scale. Sometimes, this devotion and religious fervour for a particular saint become the subject of rivalry and competition between different factions of the same parish community or even between different villages. The fact that until the present day the Catholic Church still enjoys the privilege of being the official Church in the Maltese islands has led to a situation where its influence on the local society is still tangible, despite the fact that the latter has become quite secularized. For example, today there are many Maltese who no longer attend church services but then, out of tradition, participate in the village *festa* or for other 'religious' public manifestations. In this sense, one can observe here a metamorphosis from what is purely religious to what is cultural and traditional.

This analysis has also revealed the importance which the Maltese gave to church building during the period under study. Churches are practically found everywhere, in the towns and villages as well as in the islands' rural areas. The settlement analysis of Chapter 2 showed that the parish church usually occupied a central position in the town or village, particularly from the Knights' period onwards. During the Knights' period many of the old parish churches, including the old Mdina cathedral which was destroyed in the 1693 earthquake, were replaced by more elaborate structures in Baroque style. Many of these churches were built through the generosity of many benefactors who came from different economic and social backgrounds, including bishops, priests, knights, noble persons and the rural elite. The historical evidence also shows that the parish churches were often built voluntarily by the villagers themselves whilst being supervised by professional stonemasons and architects. On the inside, these churches were embellished by marble altars and various artistic works, including statues and paintings. Silver or gold altar sets, mainly consisting of chalices, patens, ciboria and candelabra, were other invaluable treasures that several parish churches possessed. These churches, built at the heart of the town or village, therefore became a communal focus of identity that expressed a sense of collective pride. This joint effort

to make the church the community's main point of reference and also the most elaborate building in the town or village gave also the parishioners a sense of belonging. Church building was a widespread phenomenon, even in hamlets like Ħal Millieri in Malta and L-Għammar in Gozo, although on a lesser scale. In the hamlets, the church was likewise built in a central location, which in a way symbolized the collective identity of the villagers and their communal effort to make this building a proper place of worship. This analysis also revealed that, similar to the Maltese houses, the 'elite' (or main) churches of the island had the tendency to change according to architectural fashion, while the wayside churches generally adhered to their vernacular idiom.

Religion can also be a private affair. The house was, and to a certain extent still is, a place of private worship where members of the same family gather and conduct together their private prayers. In the past, the elite houses, both in the towns and in the countryside, often included a private chapel or a portable altar. In most houses the presence of pictures and statues of saints and holy figures, sometimes grouped together to form a small private shrine, serves as a means for private meditation and reflection. Occasionally such pictures and statues can have an artistic value, and therefore they add to their religious symbolism the aspect of a work-of-art. Our analysis has revealed that in the past, particularly in the local villages, the roof and the courtyard of the house also served as a place that brought the members of the family to pray together. Other traditions, for example when families from the same neighbourhood used to gather in the same street to pray together, transform religion and religious devotion into a public-private activity. Therefore, the Maltese houses, both internally and externally, have a strong connection with religion and the religious beliefs of their dwellers, because they are closely related to the established cult as much as they are a place of private worship and religious meditation. The above analysis has also revealed that there is a close relationship between houses and the village feast. This is manifested in the way the *festa* is expressed in the houses and how they participate in these communal celebrations, for instance through the use of lights and decorations and through the opening of doors to allow visual access to their interiors.