

What good fortune for the women of Ghajnsielem, young and older, to have a new priest who wants them to participate as ushers and in other roles in the Mass; to have a football club president who wants them as players; a band club president who welcomes them as musicians... and a treasure hunt team that wins!

Saturday evening was a vigil night with a two-hour prayer service at the parish church. This special service was well attended by parishioners who joined in prayers, hymns and meditation. The congregation was led by Fr Emmanuel Magro. Bishop Mario Grech prayed with the people in the pews. This was the day, too, that Fr Zerafa learned he'd been given the title of "Monsignor" as a chaplain of Pope Benedict XVI.

Sunday morning, *Jum Ghajnsielem*, and the liturgical feast of Our Lady of Loreto dawned bright and sunny. Canon Bajada first joined his fellow priests in Xaghra for a prayer service. Then he was surprised by the long, sleek silver grey Pontiac Parisienne 1965 convertible driven by George waiting to transport him.

Off they sped to Munxar, in recognition of the start of Fr Frankie's ministry. And there with prayers for the future and great honking of horns and celebratory cheers, the carcade to Ghajnsielem began.

First stop: St Anthony's in Ghajnsielem, where the Franciscans prayed with him and wished him well.

Next: the sweet chapel of Our Lady of Lourdes, where the children of the home prayed for him to be blessed.

Finally: marching through the gorgeously decorated streets of Ghajnsielem, was the Victory Band of Xaghra joining the St Joseph Band of Ghajnsielem. The members of both contributed their talents to honour Fr Frankie Bajada, Xaghra-born and Ghajnsielem-blessed, on this beautiful December day when even the weather was celebratory.

Holding a pillow with the stole of the archpriest, Lelio Spiteri waited patiently at the front door of the church. Beside him, Laurie Ann Camilleri with another pillow on which the gold cross for the archpriest was placed. Mgr Joseph Zerafa may not have known that the cross he placed around Fr Frankie's neck was made in Rome one year before Fr Bajada was born.

Bishop Grech waited as the mayor spoke, followed by Rita Meilak, parish pastoral council secretary. Then he too spoke a few words as he draped the sacred stole over Fr Frankie's shoulders. Then came the 41-year-old gold cross. And, then, Fr Frankie knocked on the church door, it opened and a throng of well-wishers pushed them all inside.

Everything went smoothly. The church, however, was packed beyond capacity. Only 1,200 seats were available. Standing room only. Still, nobody complained.

Mro Frank Debono's musical presentation was heavenly. The *Missa Sancti Antonii* by recently deceased Mro Nazzareno Refalo, was incomparable, as were soloists Andrew Sopiano and Pio Dalli. Leader Sunny Galea was superb. And the other words and music by Marco Frisina was all that one could hope for.



AT THE END of the procession, Mgr Saviour Debrincat from Munxar, Chancellor of the Curia, is in the lead followed by Fr Frankie Bajada, Bishop Grech, Fr Zammit, and Mgr Zerafa

Five choirs joined in: from Ghajnsielem came Lauretana and St Anthony; from Munxar, Allegro and *Ilhna Smewwija*; and from Xaghra *Voci Angeliche*.

The whole service was transmitted live on radio, thanks to the efforts of Lelio Spiteri, and was heard in Australia on Sydney One Radio.

At the end of the ceremony, outside the church on the parish square, seats and tables were arranged so that people could comfortably celebrate the day. Food was served without fuss and everyone enjoyed the afternoon.

Only a short time later, festivities began again. Through the gaily decorated streets, the St Joseph Band marched from the old parish square to the *Ghaqda Armar's* new warehouse where all the elaborate street decorations will be stored.

Rudolph Cauchi, leader of the decorations team, is clearly proud of what they have accomplished. He designed almost all the street and pedestal decorations. During the year, he and six others work to create and manufacture these inspiring models. One, he points out, however, is not his design.

Michael Camilleri Cauchi, a professional artist from Nadur, designed the latest version on display of Our Lady of Loreto. She's a fiberglass shell which allows her to float, as her story is told, actually to fly by cable from one space to another. At present, she's designed to fly from the church to her pedestal, signifying where her Holy House was relocated.

As one version of the story of Our Lady of Loreto has it, the Holy House of Mary and Joseph where the Word of God became flesh, was transported to save it from Muslim invaders and landed in what is now Loreto in Italy on December 10, 1294.

Just as she flies to her new location, and as the archpriest flies to his new ministerial position, the fireworks smashed through the sky making celestial space for their new roles.

Some say that in Malta priests shift positions all the time and such changing roles are no big deal. Well, here on Gozo welcoming a new parish priest, particularly after 26 years, is an important occasion. Each shift like this in the firmament is something to be celebrated.

And so it is that the new archpriest, Fr Frankie Bajada, is welcomed and embraced and celebrated by the people of the port village of Ghajnsielem. We all wish him well.



RUDOLPH CAUCHI, leader of the feast decorations team, shows the new statue of Our Lady of Loreto, designed by artist Michael Camilleri Cauchi of Nadur



RUDOLPH CAUCHI, with street decorations he designed and helped to make

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