THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN MALTA AND MEMBERSHIP OF THE EUROPEAN UNION
FEARS - CHALLENGES - HOPES

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The Maltese Islands are strategically situated right in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea at the crossroads between two continents (Europe and Africa), as well as between two different worlds and two different cultures. They occupy an area of 316 sq. kilometres with a population of 408,000, according to the latest UN report (2008). Malta has no natural resources and its agriculture and fishing sectors are negligible. In the secondary sector, the reconverted dockyards are still an important employer, although the number of workers is in steady decline. Small labour-intensive industries in the fields of textiles and furniture-making were created during the 1970s, but their numbers are also now declining owing both to the closing down of factories belonging to multi-national corporations and to their relocation to eastern European countries, where the cost both of living and wages are substantially lower. On the other hand, manufacturing and assembly in the electronics sectors are fast becoming Malta’s main industries.

For centuries the country was considered a bastion of Christendom against the marauding corsairs hailing mainly from North Africa and the encroaching military and naval might in general of the Ottoman Empire. The ceding of the Maltese Islands on the part of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V to the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta as a fief in 1530 and the latter’s presence during the following 268 years was marked by a history of mutual hostility between the Knights and the then expanding Ottoman Empire. The Order's rule in Malta also helped secure the Catholic faith in the islands and enhance the contribution of the Catholic Church in the fields of culture, the arts, education and philanthropy. Regarding the latter the contribution of the Church in Malta through religious orders and congregations was - and still is - immense. Generation after generation of orphans or children hailing from problem families have found love and solace, as well as a solid education (especially in the crafts) that has helped them forge for themselves a future and build good families.

The French occupation of Malta, albeit brief (1798-1800), and subsequent British rule (1800-1964) contributed towards the first exposure of Maltese society to secular thought. The French experience was more violent in this regard having resulted in the looting of churches and the planned closure and occupation of religious houses. The British authorities, on the other hand, were more astute in their policies. Having realized that the Church wielded great influence upon Maltese society they strove to implement their policies without provoking unnecessary tensions with the hierarchy.

Malta gained its independence from Britain on the 21st of September 1964 and was declared a republic by an overwhelming majority vote in parliament on the 13th of December 1974. The country joined the European Union on the 1st of May 2004 and adopted the euro as its currency on the 1st of January 2008.

The Rise of Secularism in Malta

From the historical standpoint secularism is frequently identified with a negative attitude towards religion in general and towards Christianity in particular, at least insofar as Western societies are concerned. On the other hand, it appears at the same time to favour social progress and to seek better material conditions for the working class. Today secularism is more directly associated with modernity brought about by the industrial, the technological, and now the electronic age.

The origins of secularism in Malta date back to the late 18th century, albeit limited to the educated class by way of the writings of Mikiel Anton Vassalli (who, incidentally, was the first to translate substantial parts of the Bible into Maltese) and the liberal statesman, Camillo Sciberras (who, back in 1832, had petitioned the British Crown for the establishment of a Legislative Assembly). Both were the products of French and European Enlightenment and were influenced to varying degrees by the French revolution. With the
The granting of limited self-government for the first time in 1921 and the increased role of political parties in the running of the country’s internal affairs brought about an enhanced position of the Catholic Church in the political life of the Maltese but also marked the beginnings of a movement that was eventually to lead towards a better articulation of the different roles to be played by Church and State. This process continued to develop in the 1930s and in the 1960s by two events that brought the Church authorities into direct conflict with a prime minister who was still in office (Lord Gerald Strickland) and the executive of the second largest political party in Malta, then known as the Malta Labour Party, under the leadership of Dom Mintoff. In both instances the reaction of the Catholic hierarchy was swift and fierce: both leaders and their respective executive councils were placed under ecclesiastical interdict, and in the latter case absolution was withheld from those who intended to vote or who indeed voted Labour during the general election of 1962. One of the basic problems with Mintoff’s policy was that he wanted Malta to become a secular state at a time when the necessary conditions for it to become such were not as yet in place. On the other hand, Archbishop Michael Gonzi, who led the Archdiocese of Malta during the period when these events were unfolding, viewed some elements connected with Mintoff’s strategies as a direct threat to ecclesiastical authority. This political-religious conflict dragged on for eight years (1961-1969) and the harm inflicted upon the fabric of Maltese society is incalculable. The short-term consequence of these events was that the Malta Labour Party was relegated to the opposition benches for an entire decade (1962-1971). The long-term consequence was that no family has been left unscathed by this tragedy. It created an atmosphere of mutual distrust and paranoia that has yet to be overcome.

The 1971 general election brought back to power the Malta Labour Party and the newly elected prime minister Dom Mintoff soon set out his agenda for sweeping reforms, especially those connected with the separation of Church and State. But his version of the separation of powers meant in fact that the Church should be subject to the state, and that it should not interfere in politics, meaning that he did not want it to interfere in the way he ran the country. The spectre of the 1960s’ conflict militated against even a reasoned response or opposition where it might have been necessary on the part of the Church which, after 1977, was led by the mild-mannered Archbishop Joseph Mercieca. It served as a trump card in the hands of the government against any involvement whatsoever of the Church in the political and social affairs of the country. It also helped the government act with impunity. Four incidents highlight this increasingly tense situation. The first was the ransacking and burning of the headquarters of The Times in 1979 by Labour supporters. The second was the revocation in 1980 of the licence granted to the Blue Sisters to administer Zammit Clapp Hospital, which ultimately led to its closure and their subsequent departure from Malta. The third was the Church schools crisis that forced the Church authorities to temporarily close down all schools under the Church’s administration, owing to the fact that some of them had been refused a renewal of their licence as teaching institutions. The fourth was the turning of a blind eye by the government and the Police Force, when a motley crowd of Dockyard workers ransacked the Archbishop’s Curia. The last two incidents took place in 1984.

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1 Giuseppe Garibaldi spent some time in Malta recovering from wounds received on the battlefield, while Francesco Crispi (later minister of the first Italian government following the unification of Italy) owned a printing press, which was closed down several times by the British government on the charge of publishing seditious material. The Catholic hierarchy in Malta looked on these events with horror especially in the wake of the capture of Rome, of the sacking or closure of monasteries, priories and convents by the newly established Italian state, and of Pope Pius IX declaring himself a prisoner within the walls of the Vatican. In 1849 Malta came very close to giving asylum to the Pope, when he fled from Rome during the first occupation of the city under Garibaldi and Mazzini.

2 The party’s name has recently been changed to Partit Laburista (Labour Party).

3 Part of the hospital was later re-opened as a home for the elderly under the administration of Caritas Malta. The rest of the building subsequently underwent a thorough refurbishing and was inaugurated by the Nationalist government as a rehabilitation centre for elderly patients recovering from operations performed at the general hospital.

With the return to power of the Nationalist Party in 1987 Church-State relations took a turn for the better. The Church in Malta agreed to hand over to the Government much of its property while being compensated by way of government bonds. The Maltese government agreed to partly fund the running of Church schools. Barring a few hiccups, relations between Church and State have since been cordial and mutually respectful.

Where do we Stand?

In many ways Maltese society is in a state of constant flux on both the social and the religious level. This is due to the country being an island that has steadily emerged from a position of isolation to one that is in continuous contact with the outside world through travel, tourism and mass communication. It has yet to come to grips with this new situation and its collateral effects. Right up until twenty years ago there was only one national television station; today this station has to compete with six others, two of which belong to the main political parties. Likewise the number of radio stations is rising rapidly. This phenomenon has obviously brought about an increased participation of the public in the programmes they produce. In itself this is a hallmark of a healthy pluralistic society. However, as is the case with other European countries, pluralism has come to mean that issues of all sorts are constantly being discussed and that everybody has a say, irrespective of whether his or her opinion is informed and worth reflecting upon, or even taking up. There is an increasing danger that such an approach to pluralism will lead to the possible misuse of the public forum, the possible forming of strong subversive pressure groups, and the possible promotion of strident and well-organised minority movements that are high on demagoguery but low on constructive dialogue. These could not only make for a collapse of traditional values, but also stall development of every kind. It is a well-known fact that some sections of the Maltese media do hold talk shows in which religious or moral issues are discussed without the required respect for or deference to the knowledge, culture or social standing of those who are in a better position to speak about them. It is indeed a pity that such shows are intended more to boost the number of viewers or listeners than to enhance an informed public opinion. One of the results has been a steady increase in criticism of the Church as an institution (it being equated with civil institutions) as well as regarding its teachings. This is leading towards an increasing marginalization of religion from the public domain and a mounting anti-Catholic rhetoric marked by a sharp drop in Church attendance, a steady flow of articles and letters in newspapers with an obvious hostility towards the local Church hierarchy, and the constant accusation that Church teachings are a threat to one’s individual freedom and to progress. These attitudes have sought and have indeed found support from various European movements. Entry into the European Union has speeded up this painful process, which is at once inevitable and dramatic. It is inevitable because, as already mentioned above, Maltese society is no longer isolated and, for better or for worse, it has to catch up with Europe and with the rest of the world. On the other hand it is also dramatic because the speed with which these changes are taking place has left no possibility for them to be slowly absorbed within the fabric of Maltese society. The past twenty years have proved to be a classic example of shock therapy. Already Pope John Paul II, in his address to the representatives from the world of culture delivered during his first pastoral visit to Malta, gave this timely warning which has lost none of its freshness:

"The exercise of freedom must be accompanied by a growth in moral and spiritual maturity. Unfortunately… our dominant culture shows signs of a weakening moral commitment and a narrow sense of spiritual inspiration. People are often more sensitive to feelings, emotions and impressions than to thought, reflection and discernment. To act without reason is not worthy of man, whose freedom is based on knowledge of the truth, which enlightens his judgement."

5 In 2004 the proportion of Catholics to the population of the Maltese Islands stood at 95.18% for Malta and 98.06% for Gozo. On the other hand, according to a census carried out in 2005 at the request of the Maltese Episcopal Conference, the percentage of Catholics attending Sunday Mass stood at 51.0% for Malta, 72.7% for Gozo and 52.6% for Malta and Gozo together. This indicates a sharp drop of almost 11% between 1995, when the previous census was carried out, and 2005. See Discern: Institute for Research on the Signs of the Times, Sunday Mass Attendance Census 2005: Preliminary Report, Malta August 2006: http://www.discern-malta.org/pdf_files/census_2005.pdf.

6 Pope John Paul II, Address to Representatives from the world of culture, 27th May 1990. This line of reasoning bears a striking resemblance to the Lecture delivered by Pope Benedict XVI at the Aula Magna of Regensburg University on the 12th of September 2006 and which has attracted so much undue controversy.
There are many young people who have lost their faith as well as their trust in the Church partly because of the effects of the 1960s’ religious-political struggle on their families. There are, of course other reasons such as the perceived intransigence on the part of ecclesiastical authorities regarding moral and ethical issues.

On the other hand, one must also note that during the past thirty years there have been sustained attempts by a good number of parish priests to present a vision of the Church that is more communitarian while maintaining the necessary structures of parish life. This was brought about by means of Youth Centres and parish groups who cater to the needs of the more vulnerable sectors of society, such as the elderly, unmarried mothers and the unemployed. The introduction and outreach of Christian movements consisting of committed lay people makes possible the carrying out of the enormous amount of work needed to address those who, for some reason or other, considered themselves (and sometimes still do) marginalized from the life of the Church.

Orphanages and hostels run by religious have opened their doors to refugees and migrants in dire need of humane treatment and loving care after the harrowing experiences suffered in their countries of origin. Church organizations such as Caritas Malta and the Archdiocesan Commission for Migrants and Refugees are addressing their needs on the humanitarian as well as on the diplomatic level.

The Challenges that Lie Ahead

In the next few years the Church in Malta will have to face the same challenges that European societies have faced for the past fifty years or more: the challenge of divorce (which is now becoming increasingly a question of ‘when’ rather than ‘if’, given the fact that both political parties have agreed to discuss the issue), the challenge of co-habitation, of same-sex marriages, of adoptions by parents of the same sex. The promise given by the European Union on the eve of Malta’s entry that legislation on the introduction of divorce and abortion is left to the single member states to decide has proved to be nothing less than an illusion. Pressure is mounting from bodies of the European Union in subtle and in not so subtle ways.

The Church in Malta must likewise face the challenge brought about by advances in the field of biotechnology such as in-vitro fertilization, cloning, and stem-cell experimentation. Most of all, it must face the challenge posed by a new poverty that has become a constant presence in European societies and to which Malta is not an exception. This consists of a haunting emptiness that lies at the heart of modern society where human life is being progressively viewed as a commodity from the moment of conception through the crisis of a terminal or irreversible illness, where public opinion is being persuaded that the human being is master of his or her own destiny and that whether one’s life should continue or not is a matter that is better left to the discretion of the individual. If human life is perceived in this way, it is no surprise that even human relationships suffer. These present and future challenges lead to a question of vital importance, namely, will the Church still be considered relevant to Maltese society now that our country is a full member of the European Union? This means that the Church must first and foremost face the question of its own identity and role in Maltese society in order to be capable of addressing the challenges posed on our country by a greatly expanded and continuously evolving European Union.

In order to respond to this daunting task the Church in Malta must draw inspiration from the prophetic words of Pope Paul VI:

> The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make.  

This implies a complete overhaul of the way this communication is taking place. It calls for a thorough examination of how catechism is being taught in schools and parishes. It calls for closer ties in parishes between the clergy and the faithful that should not be limited to the administration of the sacraments; it calls

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7 Pope Paul VI, Ecclesiam Suam, n. 65. This call has been repeated by subsequent popes, including the present one. See Pope Benedict XVI, Homily for the Conclusion of the 12th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Sunday, 26 October 2008: [http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20081026_conclusione-sinodo_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20081026_conclusione-sinodo_en.html).
for a calm and sober examination of the content of delivery of the Sunday homily as an explication of the Word of God and how it is put into practice in everyday life. All of this requires a sustained programme of on-going formation for clergy, religious men and women, and for pastoral workers. Pope Benedict XVI has judiciously pointed out this aspect in his recent letter to the Bishops regarding the Lefebvrist movement in which he stated:

In our days, when in vast areas of the world the faith is in danger of dying out like a flame which no longer has fuel, the overriding priority is to make God present in this world and to show men and women the way to God. Not just any god, but the God who spoke on Sinai; to that God whose face we recognize in a love which presses “to the end” (cf. Jn 13:1) - in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. The real problem at this moment of our history is that God is disappearing from the human horizon, and, with the dimming of the light which comes from God, humanity is losing its bearings, with increasingly evident destructive effects.

Leading men and women to God, to the God who speaks in the Bible: this is the supreme and fundamental priority of the Church and of the Successor of Peter at the present time.8

Another challenge that needs to be addressed in the context of Malta’s membership in the European Union is the one concerning ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. The question of ethnic, cultural and religious diversity that has faced the European continent and, in our particular case, the European Union is also one that needs to be dealt with by Maltese society. Inter-marriage between Maltese and people hailing from other countries, cultures and religions has now become a constant phenomenon in our country. Here again, the Church in Malta is called upon to address the issue with sober realism and with fidelity to its identity and role as a Catholic community. The Catholic hierarchy, through its representatives, already has cordial relations with representatives of the main Christian denominations in the country as well as with the Muslim community. However much still needs to be done. It is important that the Catholic community receive adequate formation in ecumenical and inter-religious issues so as to enhance the spirit of dialogue and mutual understanding. It is to be set within the role of the Church to encounter the other as well as to proclaim the Word of God. Ecumenical and inter-religious encounters will always remain the best way of witnessing to one’s faith as well as deepening one’s understanding and appreciation of another’s. Their importance can never be underestimated, as the present Pope has recently pointed out:

Leading men and women to God, to the God who speaks in the Bible: this is the supreme and fundamental priority of the Church and of the Successor of Peter at the present time. A logical consequence of this is that we must have at heart the unity of all believers. Their disunity, their disagreement among themselves, calls into question the credibility of their talk of God. Hence the effort to promote a common witness by Christians to their faith - ecumenism - is part of the supreme priority. Added to this is the need for all those who believe in God to join in seeking peace, to attempt to draw closer to one another, and to journey together, even with their differing images of God, towards the source of Light - this is inter-religious dialogue. Whoever proclaims that God is Love “to the end” has to bear witness to love: in loving devotion to the suffering, in the rejection of hatred and enmity - this is the social dimension of the Christian faith, of which I spoke in the Encyclical Deus caritas Est.9

Solidarity and Hope

The Church in Malta today does not and must not wish for a return to the ways of the past, but neither is it condemned to remain bogged down in the present. Nostalgia of “better times in the past” does not bode well for a Church that needs to be forward looking and which requires leaders capable of realizing its aspirations and hopes. The Church must never agree to allow itself to be relegated to the sacristy or to have its role restricted to liturgical functions; nor should the Church’s pastoral planning reduce itself to a reaction to

9 Pope Benedict XVI, op. cit.
government agendas and legislation. A fundamental step forward has already been taken by the convocation of the Diocesan Synod in 1999 (and which was concluded in 2003), which has painstakingly worked on the basic issues facing Maltese society and how the Church is called upon to respond. Numerous documents issued as a result of this event testify to the spiritual and cultural richness of Maltese Catholics, and the implementation of these documents would go a long way towards the ongoing formation of the Catholic Church of the future into a creative, dynamic and vibrant community that can continue its mission at the heart of Maltese society.

As is the case with other European countries, the Church in Malta has much to say to Maltese society in the European Union. The society that is now emerging is becoming increasingly individualistic, pluralistic and secular. It has a word to say to civil society. If it wants to live up to its vocation as Church it must be first and foremost a prophetic community. In a society that is undergoing a crisis of values it has a duty to affirm and restore ideals, such as the dignity of the human person, the centrality of reason, social solidarity, and society as community. The project of Malta as a full member of the European Union is not exempt from the temptation of Babel. Europe is not the Promised Land nor is it the heavenly Jerusalem.

Although Malta is one of the smallest countries in the European Union, it has a right to voice its grievances, especially at times when this same Union appears to adopt policies that are suggestive of a super-state rather than a union where unity in diversity is cultivated. The Maltese language and the Catholic religion lie at the very roots of our country’s identity. European Union policy makers are called upon to respect Malta’s uniqueness as expressed by these two elements instead of attempting to eradicate them in the name of a false European secularism. This holds true especially as regards divorce, same-sex marriages, euthanasia, abortion, cloning and so forth.

Maltese society should beware of throwing out the baby with the bathwater, of denying its Christian, or in this particular context, its Catholic past, limiting it solely to the events of the sixties. By pretending to flee from what some would dub “the tyranny of the past” it would simply be floating aimlessly into the tyranny of the present, without roots, without any fixed goal, precisely as a result of having disowned its identity. Instead of accepting in humility the past with all its glories and tragedies it would end up taking an attitude of arrogance by creating a collective amnesia, pretending to start anew and ending up living in a historical vacuum. This tragic error has already been committed by those who drafted the so-called European Constitution and who opted to do away with any mention of the Christian roots of Europe.

The Church in Malta needs to be vigilant in order to avoid ambiguities that have, alas, become the hallmark of much of European Union policy. Malta in the European Union needs the Church in order to avoid the extreme pitfalls of losing its identity or of making of its identity an absolute to the detriment of other peoples and falling into the clutches of an extreme nationalism.

On the other hand Maltese civil society is called upon to give serious consideration to what Church authorities have to say. Church leaders, be they bishops, clergy, religious or lay people involved in pastoral work, have a right and a duty to act as the conscience of Maltese society without having to go through the indignity of being stereotyped as fundamentalists, Talibans or latter-day inquisitors. As free and responsible citizens of the Republic of Malta they have a right to voice their concerns on issues that affect the moral standing of the country; as leaders they have a responsibility to “preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching.”

Civil society must listen and evaluate their opinions; it must live up to its name, that of being truly civil.

In the not too distant future Malta will undoubtedly produce its fair share of Theo-Cons or clerical atheists who in their writings and public speeches will strike a chord in Catholics who feel aggrieved by the wave of an already present secular fundamentalism, but who no doubt have their own agendas. The Church in Malta would do well to avoid being associated with such currents of thought.

The role of the Church in Malta should not be reduced to that of a tenacious apologist obsessed with preserving Christianity from extinction. In this environment of spiritual and moral poverty it is called to demonstrate that the human being is not reduced to what he or she shows or produces; that the family is the

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10 2 Tim. 4:2.
natural environment in which one learns how to love; that simple gestures are enough to restore hope to those who consider themselves marginalized or, even worse, forgotten.

The role of the Church in helping construct a more humane Maltese society is to be an attentive listener to the cries of anguish which betray a sense of the meaninglessness that lies at the heart of humanity today, as well as an impassioned and coherent witness of a faith that is forever new, dynamic and relevant. Maltese society is also suffering from a deficit of hope, that hope which enables its citizens to give meaning to their lives and history, and to look ahead and continue on their way together. In this context it is called to seek inspiration from the words of Pope Benedict XVI at the close of the 12th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops:

So many people are seeking, sometimes unknowingly, to encounter Christ and his Gospel; many need to find in him the meaning of their lives. To give a clear and common witness to a life according to the Word of God demonstrated by Jesus, is therefore an indispensable criterion to verify the mission of the Church.

In this mission Catholic intellectuals have a vital and indispensable role to play. The terms of reference have already been set out in Pope John Paul II’s above-mentioned address. One excerpt in particular is worth quoting in full:

*The decline of traditional values* on the one hand and of ideological tensions on the other has left many of our contemporaries defenseless, disoriented, and in many cases with a dramatic crisis of identity. You who are among the leaders of the cultural life of your country cannot remain deaf to those who cry out in anguish in their quest for meaning and certainty. That would be to betray their expectations, especially in the case of young people on the threshold of adult life.

The extent and novelty of the problem affecting the evolution of society must not cause you to ignore your fellow-citizens, your brothers and sisters, considered in their real existence and not in the light of abstract ideological concepts. It is to real people in their actual condition that the Creator addresses the call to live in the fullness of dignity and freedom. Your mission, I repeat, is immense. It is no less than an untiring effort to seek and uphold the truth about man’s life and destiny.

The Church in Malta has a unique opportunity to live up to and renew its mission of giving a coherent and courageous message of hope in an age of anxiety and uncertainty characterized by the long-term prospects of economic crisis and decline leading to unemployment and the rise in property prices that is taking its toll on both established families as well as prospective ones.

The witness of the Church in Malta must therefore be manifested as a life in all its fullness and freedom, a love that does not experience the bonds of love in terms of dependence and limitation but rather as an opening to the greatness of life. The Church in Malta has a future because it has always risen to the occasion whenever the Maltese population was in dire need of inspiration and hope. Participation in the life of the European Union should not be a cause of fear, but a call to live up to one’s faith and find in it the realization of human dignity and purpose. As the Archbishop of Malta and the Bishop of Gozo clearly stated in a jointly written pastoral letter last year:

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Our society expects from us, as a Christian community, an answer that is first and foremost one of true and authentic witness. It is our authenticity, which makes our words and our deeds credible, and to be relied upon when we speak about what is the true meaning of life and what is most important in life\textsuperscript{14}.

At this crucial moment in the history of our nation as a member of the European Union the Church in Malta is called upon to respond with courage and determination, with compassion and love, with joy and hope. It is called upon to show the same leadership that has made the population of our islands seek its guidance in times of crisis and danger throughout the centuries. It is this role that has made the Church the backbone of Maltese society.

\textsuperscript{14} Pastoral Letter on the Occasion of the Pauline Year, Archdiocese of Malta, Media Office - Archbishop’s Curia, 28 June 2008.