

The Reassembling Church: Paradigms from Nehemiah–Ezra for the Local Church in Malta

Models of the Church: Introducing a New Model

During the sixty years which have elapsed since the genesis of the Second Vatican Council, scholars from various theological schools and backgrounds have reflected on a variety of models of the Church, particularly on *communio*-ecclesiology and synodality, on the preferential option of the Church for the poor, on ecumenical dialogue and relations with other religions, and on the Church in relationship to postmodern society. Avery Dulles (1918-2008), in one of his most acclaimed works, presents five models of the Church¹ – institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald and servant – which he later supplemented with a sixth unifying model, namely, the Church as a community of disciples.² Recalling the words of Filipino theologian Antonio B. Lambino (*b.*1938), John Fuellenbach (*b.*1935) affirms that “a model is a conceptual and symbolic representation or system by which we try to grasp and express reality

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¹ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1974). This work is considered as the most influential English-language study of Catholic ecclesiological paradigms since 1965.

² Avery Dulles, “Community of Disciples,” *Philosophy and Theology* 1 (1986): 99-120. See also, Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*. Expanded edition (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 195-217.

in whole or in part.”³ Subsequently, citing fellow Divine Word missionary and anthropologist Louis Luzbetak (1918-2005), Fuellenbach goes on to state that well-chosen models will always be useful, open, fitting and stimulating.⁴

A very wide spectrum of works on the Church by theologians and authors from all continents has been published since Vatican II.⁵ Going through a wide selection of works on the Second Vatican Council (only giving second place to descriptive and anecdotal works on the Council, as well as Council diaries), a careful analysis shows that in hermeneutical works on the Council,⁶ a *reassembling model* waits to be discovered. Moreover, although Avery Dulles’ models present what many consider to be comprehensive and complementary ecclesiological perspectives, the general thrust of this research lies in addressing the experience of the Church in the third decade of the twenty-first century in a small island-nation. While reading the signs of the times, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah will be used in elaborating an ecclesiological model which seeks to address the situation of a local Church in exile during the 2020s, and its resilience in seeking to reassemble itself. Although both Ezra and Nehemiah are not classified as prophets in the traditional sense of the word, yet their commitment to the task with which they were entrusted is markedly prophetic. The much-loved Liverpool parish priest and moral theologian Kevin T. Kelly (1933-2018) states:

³ John Fuellenbach, *Church: Community for the Kingdom* (Maryknoll/NY: Orbis, 2002), 109.

⁴ See *ibid.*, 110.

⁵ Some examples suffice. They are not mentioned in order of importance, but only chronologically: Yves Congar, *The Mystery of the Temple* (Westminster/MD: Newman Press, 1962); Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church* (New York: SCM, 1989); Francis Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988); Leonardo Boff, *EcclesioGenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (New York: Orbis, 1995); Bruno Forte, *La Chiesa della Trinità. Saggio sul mistero della Chiesa, comunione e missione* (Cinisello Balsamo: Edizioni Paoline, 1995); John Fuellenbach, *Church: Community for the Kingdom* (Maryknoll/NY: Orbis, 2002); Gerard Mannion, ed., *Comparative Ecclesiology: Critical Investigations* (London – New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2008); Walter Kasper, *The Catholic Church. Nature, Reality and Mission* (London – New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015); Brian Gleeson, “Images, Understandings, and Models of the Church in History: An Update.” http://aejt.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/107526/Gleeson_Church_in_history.pdf [accessed on January 15, 2022].

⁶ See, for example, René Latourelle, ed., *Vatican II, Assessment and Perspectives: Twenty-five Years After (1962-1987)*, 3 vols. (Mahwah/NJ: Paulist Press, 1988-89); Gerald O’Collins, *Living Vatican II. The 21st Council for the 21st Century* (Mahwah/NJ: Paulist Press, 2006); Agostino Marchetto, *The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. A Counterpoint for the History of the Council* (Chicago: University of Scranton Press, 2009); Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II. The Battle for Meaning* (Mahwah/NJ: Paulist Press, 2012).

Prophecy is not linked necessarily to the role of the teacher, though some teachers in the Church have also been prophets. However, part of the teacher's role is to listen out for the voice of the prophet and then enable that voice to be heard as widely as possible.

In that sense, it could be argued that the most important exercise of teaching authority last century was the calling of Vatican II by Pope John XXIII. He enabled the prophetic voices in the community to be heard by the whole Church.⁷

The Context, Then and Now ... in the 6th Century B.C. and the 21st Century A.D.

The books of Nehemiah and Ezra focus on a particular historical reality. In 538 B.C., Babylon disintegrated as a result of the attacks by the Persians, under the leadership of Cyrus who promulgated an edict which permitted all the deportees to return to their respective homelands. After a long period of captivity (from 587 to 538 B.C.), many Jews made the journey back to the land of their ancestors: the members of the People of God, still traumatised by their long exilic experience, and seeking to come to terms with their newly-acquired freedom, were still in a bad shape and experienced uncertainty. Some exceptional personalities animated this communal renaissance on various levels: Nehemiah, the (community-) builder, Ezra, the priest, Haggai and Zechariah, the prophets. Initially, the Temple of Jerusalem and the city's fortifications were re-constructed. The centrality of the Word of God and its proclamation in this Old Testament context was a determining and defining feature in the re-imagining experience of the People of God. In this, there was an explosive vitality which generated new processes. The very soul of the community was re-built on the Law which is an expression of God's word.

The renowned American biblical scholar Robert Alter (*b.*1935), professor of biblical Hebrew and comparative literature, provides an insightful analysis on the books under study. He affirms that in that particularly turbulent and uncertain period in the history of the People of God

political power is divided between two figures working in a complementary fashion—Ezra the scribe and priest, who is concerned with the all-important project of the restoration of the cult and the canonisation of the newly redacted Torah through the institution of its public reading, and Nehemiah, coming to Jerusalem from a high position in the Persian court, the political leader who addresses security issues of rebuilding the walls of the city and confronting armed

⁷ Kevin T. Kelly, *50 Years Receiving Vatican II: A Personal Odyssey* (Dublin: Columba Books, 2012), 90.

enemies—reestablishing the Temple and the cult within it, authorising a legal and historical national text, and creating a security apparatus—are conceived as the essential activities for the renewal of the life of the nation in its homeland after the long decades of exile.⁸

A small selection of texts constitute the framework of this present study. Under a number of overarching ecclesiological sub-themes, the following aspects are to be explicitly (and implicitly) underlined: personal and ecclesial discernment, evangelisation and catechesis, reassembling the ecclesial community, pastoral processes, the *pusillus grex*, and Christian witness and holiness in an age of confrontation. This research is not meant to be one in the field of biblical scholarship and exegetical studies. Although acclaimed biblical commentaries were used, this was carried out with the sole aim of corroborating the ecclesial model which is being proposed in the final section of this present work.

The study will be contextualised by focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of Maltese society, and *pari passu*, the testimony and counter-testimony of the Church in Malta. Inspiring and challenging texts from the universal and local magisterium will be referred to and confronted with the Nehemiah–Ezra model. The reassembling model will be proposed as a complementary model to other well-known models of the Church. This innovative model seeks to be a source of inspiration, as well as a catalyst, to the experience of the local Church in the 2020s as it seeks to re-image its pastoral being and mission.

Already prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was already evident that the number of churchgoers was dwindling. The last Mass-attendance census in Malta, held in 2017, offered a reality-check to Church leaders and to all those involved in the running of the local Church. The pandemic continued to take its toll on Church-attendance, although a new virtual community coalesced in front of television sets, computer screens, tablets and smartphones. It has to be said that belonging to the Church is not necessarily directly equivalent to Mass-attendance. Undoubtedly there are other ways of belonging to the Church which may not necessarily be part and parcel of liturgical celebrations. The sociologist Joe Inguanez (1943-2023) states:

In these last five decades, attendance at Sunday Mass has been regularly falling. It is a pastorally defeatist attitude to rationalise that this is a universal phenomenon. Nor is it healthy to give a partial explanation of this phenomenon by blaming only ‘the world’ – the facile attribution of this phenomenon to the process of secularisation, a process about which several sociologists have become skeptical.

⁸ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, The Writings. A Translation with Commentary* (New York – London: Norton and Co., 2019), 3:803-804.

It is hardly ever correct to give a mono-causal explanation of a social or religious phenomenon. It is a must to do what Jesus taught in the parable [of the king who was pondering on whether his ten thousand-strong army could defend his nation against an army of twenty thousand men (Lk 14:31)]. It is time to examine our conscience and convert. It is a fact that at times our celebration of Mass swings between two unhappy extremes: at times it is full of pomp and spectacle, at others it is an outright inappropriate ritualisation of a religious experience.⁹

This study will not reiterate the findings of the research and the intelligent analyses on the local Church within the context of Maltese society, published since the Second Vatican Council.¹⁰ The aim of this study is solely to focus upon the books of Nehemiah and Ezra with the scope of gleaning a number of perspectives which may contribute to the ongoing ecclesial discernment of the local Church.

The Reversal of the Experience of a Church in Exile within its own Homeland: Crosscurrents

The books of Nehemiah and Ezra narrate the vicissitudes of a section of the People of God which returned to its homeland after long painful years of exile. It was indeed remarkable that, rather than being moved by a temporal political dream, the most open-minded and pragmatic among the Jews who returned to Jerusalem accepted with astounding loyalty the authority of the Persian king, and concentrated their efforts into giving birth to and re-assembling a fervent and specifically religious community. Cyrus' edict, marked by political acumen, was very conciliatory, and rather than subduing the conquered peoples under an oppressive yoke as the Babylonians had exercised, he sought a system characterised by what we would today call 'subsidiarity.' Each region had its own specific autonomy, and each people was permitted to practise its religion.

The Jewish experience, however, was fraught with difficulties and setbacks of all kinds, both external and internal. The latter, in particular, is to be highlighted

⁹ Joe Inguanez, "Foreword," in *Malta Sunday Mass Attendance Census 2017* (Malta: Discern, 2018), 7-8.

¹⁰ Reference is here being made to the annual publications by the acclaimed Maltese sociologist and pastoral theologian Benjamin Tonna (1931-2001) in the *Malta Trends* series on the signs of the times, published by Discern, Malta: e.g. *The Signs of the Times: Adolescent Drug Use in Malta* (1993); *Poverty in Malta, I* (1994); *Signs, Trends, Values* (1995); *Sign Sense. Poverty in Malta, II* (1996); *The Sign of the Here and Now Criterion* (1997); *The Sign of the Stunned Society* (1998); *A Surge in Quality* (1999); *The Sign of the Civilization of Love* (2000); *Maintaining Momentum* (2001).

because those who were rebuilding the city-walls of Jerusalem experienced undermining tactics, ridicule and opposition:

The people of the country [the Samaritans] then set about demoralising the people of Judah and deterring them from building; they also bribed counsellors against them to frustrate their purpose throughout the lifetime of Cyrus king of Persia right on into the reign of Darius king of Persia (Ezr 4:4-5).

[Nehemiah] then said to them: 'You see what a sorry state we are in: Jerusalem is in ruins and its gates have been burnt down. Come on, we must rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and put an end to our humiliating position!' And I told them how the kindly hand of my God had been over me, and the words which the king had said to me. At this they said, 'Let us start building at once!' and they set their hands to the good work. When [their opponents] heard about this, they laughed at us and jeered (Neh 2:17-19).

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furiously angry. He ridiculed the Jews and in front of his kinsmen and the aristocracy of Samaria he exclaimed, 'What are these pathetic Jews doing ...? Are they going to give up? Or offer sacrifices? Or complete the work in a day? Can they put new life into stones taken from rubbish heaps and even charred?' And beside him Tobiah of Ammon remarked, 'If a jackal were to jump on what they are building, it would knock their stone wall down!' Listen, our God, for we are despised! Make their sneers fall back on their own heads!' (Neh 3:33-36).

A section of the People of God was determined to carry out the task of rebuilding the city-walls under the guidance of their leader Nehemiah, and the spiritual support of Ezra. Many individuals in the context of the ecclesial community experience the call to be co-builders *of* and *within* the community. Within the Church, different members among Christ's faithful are aware of their different charisms and talents which they desire to offer as they seek to serve the Lord and the Church.

There are situations when the members of the Church feel they are foreigners within the milieu to which they actually belong. There are many factors which have caused this sense of being 'exiles in one's own homeland,' for example, scandals which have tarnished the image of the Church, the undermining of the Church's credibility, cases of counter-testimony and the frustrating inability of the Church to engage itself in dialogue with a section of society. Another factor was the unfortunate and unnecessary politicisation of a number of ethical debates leading to legislation (between 2011 and 2021)¹¹ which condoned ways

¹¹ The list includes divorce, same-sex marriage and the use of so-called recreational drugs.

of life contrary to the Gospel values and the teaching of the Church. In the last fifty years, the position of the Church shifted from one where she exercised considerable influence and dominance to one where its members often feel they are ridiculed when they speak out, or, worse still think they have become the underdogs.

Catholic apologists, writing in local newspapers and featuring on the media, often find themselves in the same situation as that described by Ezra and Nehemiah in the above-mentioned pericopes. The Christian is called to be a sign of contradiction. It is therefore within this context that the local Church is urgently called to re-image herself. This does not mean diluting or changing the content of her message which is Christ's Gospel. Rather, the situation calls the Church to remain prophetic in her attitude and in the way she proclaims the Gospel. Jesus' words are extremely important in this context: "Nobody puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins too. No! New wine into fresh skins!" (Mk 2:22) Addressing Church leaders, way back in 1991, Thomas J. Winning, the then Archbishop of Glasgow persuasively asserted:

We live in a world that is irreligious. The world is much more distanced than organised religion today than it was twenty [*sic*] years ago. Has Christianity been found wanting? Have the clergy failed in their ministry? ... or are we using yesterday's tools to build tomorrow's Church?¹²

A Decision-taking Church

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the members of the Church with their different responsibilities are called to embrace their Christian vocation within a very wide spectrum of different circumstances, and thus, a whole series of concomitant challenges. A vibrant Church does not hibernate or bury its head beneath the sand. The Church of Christ commits itself to a process of ongoing ecclesial discernment which leads to decision-taking and the subsequent implementation.

The decisions taken by Nehemiah can be taken as a paradigm for the action of the local Church. Undeterred by the obstacles strewn in his path, Nehemiah soldiered on and set himself to accomplish the task he committed himself to carry out:

¹² Archbishop Thomas J. Winning, "Reaching out to Nominal Christians," *Catholic International* 2, no.17 (1991): 832.

And so, I reached Jerusalem. After I had been there for three days, I got up during the night with a few other men—I had not told anyone what my God had inspired me to do for Jerusalem—taking no animal with me other than my own mount. Under cover of dark, I went through the Valley Gate towards the Dragon’s Fountain as far as the Dung Gate, and examined the wall of Jerusalem where it was broken down and its gates burnt out ...

I then said to them: ‘You see what a sorry state we are in: Jerusalem is in ruins and its gates have been burnt down. Come on, we must rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and put an end to our humiliating position!’ (Neh 2:11-17).

It is appropriate to focus on the leadership qualities of Nehemiah. Yamauchi portrays a number of features describing Nehemiah’s character. Undoubtedly, he was a trusted man, and thus, a man who shouldered responsibility in an exemplary way. This is already evident when the reader learns that he had been the king’s cupbearer (Neh 1:11; 2:1). This depicts in certain terms that he was a person whose allegiance to the king and fidelity to his duties were exemplary. His great responsibility featured again and again when he was entrusted with the rebuilding of the city walls. Alter comments that Nehemiah “makes his survey of the walls of Jerusalem in the dead of the night in order to keep it secret. In 2:16, Nehemiah elaborates the care he took to preserve the secrecy of his mission.”¹³ Prior to exhorting the people to engage themselves in manual labour, he wisely hides his intentions from the prefects. Commenting on the pericope above (Neh 2:11-17), the Venerable Bede (c.673-735) states that the leader

wanders around inspecting the various parts of the devastated city and examines carefully in his mind how each of these should be repaired. Similarly, it is fitting for spiritual teachers also to get up regularly at night and inspect with careful scrutiny the state of the holy Church while others are resting, so that they might vigilantly investigate how they might repair and rebuild ...¹⁴

Furthermore, Nehemiah was a man of great vision. Despite so many challenging situations and pitfalls, he did not let discouragement take its toll. Although the walls of Jerusalem had been in ruins for well over a century, and earlier attempts to restore them had proved useless, he nonetheless personally embraced the challenge. His vision of God is remarkable, and he was utterly convinced of the wonders God can work through the limited means of his faithful servants.

¹³ Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 3:834, note 12.

¹⁴ Bede, *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 3, 17, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament*, ed. Marco Conti (Downers Grove/IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 5:337.

Nehemiah was also a man of prayer. The text bears evidence to this (Neh 1:4-11; 2:4-5). He is not shy to pray in the presence of the king. In light of the features mentioned, it is not difficult to conclude that Nehemiah was

a man of action and of cooperation, one who would explain what needed to be done (Neh 2:16-17) and inspire others to join him (Neh 2:18). He knew how to organise the rebuilding work (Neh 3). In spite of opposition, the people responded so enthusiastically that they mended the wall in less than two months (Neh 6:15). He inspired the people with his own example (Neh 5:14,18).¹⁵

In his Commentary on Nehemiah 5:14-19, the Venerable Bede affirms that he “who has been promoted to be a ruler of God’s people nobly undertakes the work of the ruler by building the church but does not seek a reward for his work by asking for earthly goods”¹⁶ as recompense from those to whom he preaches.

In light of the above, it is obvious that the role of church leaders is fundamental, just as in any other institution. Together with charismatic qualities, leaders are called to be men and women talented with administrative qualities, or at least, closely supported by assistants who are strong in this regard. The text of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah sheds light on the contrasting characters of the two men. The lay person Nehemiah cooperated with Ezra who was a scribe and a priest. The different approach each had regarding the issue of mixed marriages is a noteworthy example (see Ezr 9:3 and Neh 13:25). Nehemiah was also a man of great compassion. He exercised such a degree of self-control and freedom that he was in a position to renounce his own privileges (Neh 5:18), while denouncing the wealthy echelons of society who exploited the poor Israelites (Neh 5:8). He was able to commit himself to take such a radical decision because of his love of God and the way he expressed his reverence to the divine (Neh 5:9,15).¹⁷ Admirably, Yamauchi compares Nehemiah to Solon of Athens (c.630-c.560 B.C.), the great statesman and lawgiver.¹⁸ Nehemiah is presented as a model leader who is sensitive in the face of economic exploitation and difficult social situations, such as unrest.

¹⁵ Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Ezra and Nehemiah, Book of,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Historical Books*, eds. Bill T. Arnold and H.G.M. Williamson (Downers Grove/IL – Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 294.

¹⁶ Bede, *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 3, 22, in Conti, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament*, 5:347.

¹⁷ Yamauchi, “Ezra and Nehemiah,” 294.

¹⁸ Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Two Reformers Compared: Solon of Athens and Nehemiah of Jerusalem,” in *The Bible World: Essays in Honour of Cyrus H. Gordon*, eds. Gary Rendsburg et al. (New York: KTAV, 1980), 269-292.

As mentioned above, the returned exiles who committed themselves to the rebuilding of Jerusalem were subjected to ridicule and all kinds of obstacles. Despite his opponents' attempts to intimidate and slander him, Nehemiah demonstrated that he was a determined leader in the face of opposition (Neh 2:19; 4:2-3; 6:5-7). It is amazing to what lengths his opponents went to disrupt his efforts: they went to the extent of hiring false prophets who gave him misleading advice (Neh 6:10-14). In such trying circumstances, Nehemiah showed a prayerful disposition (Neh 4:4), while showing vigilance (Neh 4:9), resilience (Neh 4:6) and great trust in God (Neh 4:14). He was a man tested with the right intention and exercised the proper motivation when faced with many challenging situations.

Guided – at all levels – by leaders who are men and women of discernment, servant leaders,¹⁹ prophetic community-builders in their choices and proactive when they attentively read the signs of the times, the Church will not shy away from all the tough decisions to be taken. Re-imaging the Church signifies that the Christian community is called to shed all shackles which hinder its witness or undermine its credibility. The Church will not be afraid to ask pardon where she has erred, both as an institution, as well as in her members. The example given by Nehemiah serves as a source of inspiration to all leaders in the Church, whatever their role and their responsibility. At the time of writing, as well as in the years to come, the exemplary resilience shown by Nehemiah serves as a driving force to all leaders in the local Church, whether bishops, episcopal delegates, parish priests, clergy, lay leaders of church movements, parish councils, etc.

Shared decision-taking is part and parcel of a collaborative style within the Church. A document, in 1995, by the Bishops of England and Wales affirms that “shared decision-making in collaborative ministry is effective because it arises out of shared responsibility and vision, and mutual trust and recognition. It is these foundations which make it possible.”²⁰ In the years to come, it is hoped that the local Church will strengthen all the fora where decisions are to be taken. It is encouraging to note that several parishes and pastoral teams are in the process of developing a decision-taking style which is consultative. One hopes that this style is strengthened and supported. In order for this kind of consensus decision-taking to take place, members of the parish – clergy, religious and laity alike – are to converge onto a common vision while embracing clear goals and

¹⁹ Regarding the experience of ‘a Servant Church,’ see, Gustavo Gutiérrez, “*Koinonia* in the Church,” *Doctrine & Life* 57, no.6 (July-August 2007): 30-34.

²⁰ Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, *The Sign We Give* (Chelmsford: Matthew James Publishing, 1995), 31.

outcomes. It is deemed imperative that varied contributions are evaluated. Those voices which are, at times, marginalised or perhaps missed out are to be heard attentively. All members of the parish community are to be somehow involved in those decisions which affect them. Ecclesial discernment and prayer are the lifeblood of collaborative ministry.²¹

A Reassembling Church under the Transforming Impetus of the Word of God

This study has so far highlighted the complex scenario of a remnant of God's People after the Exile and its application to the local Church in contemporary times. In many challenging situations, including those characterised by disillusionment, disenchantment, turmoil and disorientation, the study has highlighted the key role of church leaders. This research will now proceed to highlight the proposal of a new model, namely a reassembling Church under the transforming impetus of the word of God. One of the key texts is that which describes the welding effect of God's word on the community:

Now when the seventh month came round—the Israelites being in their towns—all the people gathered as one man in the square in front of the Water Gate, and asked the scribe Ezra to bring the Book of the Law of Moses which Yahweh had prescribed for Israel. Accordingly, on the first day of the seventh month, the priest Ezra brought the Law before the assembly, consisting of men, women and all those old enough to understand. In the square in front of the Water Gate, in the presence of the men and women, and of those old enough to understand, he read from the book from dawn till noon; all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden dais erected for this purpose. [...] In full view of all the people—since he stood higher than them all—Ezra opened the book; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed Yahweh, the great God, and all the people raised their hands and answered, 'Amen! Amen!'; and they bowed down and, face to the ground, prostrated themselves before Yahweh. [...] Ezra read from the book of the Law of God, translating and giving the sense; so the reading was understood.

Then His Excellency Nehemiah and the priest-scribe Ezra and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all the people, 'Today is sacred to Yahweh your God. Do not be mournful, do not weep.' For the people were all in tears as they listened to the words of the Law (Neh 8:1-9).

This is a moving text because it portrays the transformation experienced by God's people as they reassemble to listen to the proclamation of the word of

²¹ Ibid., 32.

the Lord. Alter asserts in clear terms that the reader is able to witness “the all-important project of the restoration of the cult and the canonisation of the newly redacted Torah through the institution of its public reading.”²² Reading the full text of the eighth chapter of the book of Nehemiah, it is clear that a previously disoriented and disenchanted population becomes *an assembly*. In fact, a careful examination of the chapter reveals the use of the term ‘assembly’ – “The whole assembly, all who had returned from the captivity, put up shelters and lived in them” (Neh 8:17), and “They celebrated the feast for seven days; on the eighth day, as prescribed, they held a solemn assembly” (Neh 8:18). An assembly is not some kind of loose gathering of people who happen to meet coincidentally. An assembly is constituted because the participants have been summoned to a venue which becomes the place of a sacred encounter with God and with each other. The worshipping assembly becomes *a community*. Alter claims that “if rebuilding the walls and the Temple consolidates the physical security and the cultic viability of the people returned to its land, the public reading of the Torah—essentially, a confirmation of its newly minted canonicity—consolidates the spiritual coherence”²³ of the community. Commenting upon the passage above (verses 1 to 9), the Venerable Bede affirms:

The point to note here is the devotion and also the like-mindedness of the people who as one person (that is, with one and the same faith and love) came together at the Lord’s temple; and they themselves asked their [priest] to bring the book and recount for them the commandments of the Law that they must observe, so that along with the rebuilt city, a structure of good works pleasing to God might spring up in case, just as before, neglect of religion should lead to the ruin[...] of the city as well.²⁴

In light of the biblical text above, as well as Alter’s opinion and the commentary by Bede, one is led to underline the following: the urgency of an ongoing commitment to consolidate the community. The scope of such a strengthening process is not solely sociological or for marketing and recruiting purposes. The scope of reassembling the ecclesial community lies in coming together around the word of God, and allowing this word to mould hearts, minds and consciences.²⁵

²² Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 3:804.

²³ *Ibid.*, 847, note 1.

²⁴ Bede, *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 3, 26, in Conti, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament*, 5:354.

²⁵ Walter Kasper, “The Council’s Vision of a Renewal of the Church,” *Communio* 17 (Winter 1990): 482-483; Carlos Mesters, *Bible Reading and the Formation of Ecclesial Basic Communities*, Occasional Paper 6 (Malta: Discern, 2005).

This is an ongoing transforming and transformative experience. The word of God—always “alive and active [and cutting] more incisively than any two-edged sword” (Heb 4:12)—has the power to build the community, nurture it and to lead it to be a Church which listens, welcomes, accompanies and goes forth.²⁶ Elaborating on these four important verbs which characterise the mission of the Church,

it will be a Church which listens, and when we refer to the Church, we all listen to each other. It will be a welcoming Church, always open to everyone even during reconciliation processes, a Church which accompanies as this is a voyage we will travel together, and more importantly, it will be a Church which always goes out of itself.²⁷

Listening is an all-important dimension in the life and mission of the Church on both a macro-level as well as on a micro-level. It is the duty of Church leaders to listen also to the voice of the People of God:

The faithful are together on this journey and just like a shepherd with his flock, sometimes one needs to trust the flock that they know the way. It is important for the shepherd to listen to his flock and not limit himself to ordering it about.²⁸

Reflecting on the local Church as it approaches the threshold of the year 2030, one is duty-bound to continue reading the signs of the times within the context of Maltese society. Rather than resorting to pastoral plans (even if these have clear objectives and outcomes), the rapidly evolving changes within society ask for an emphasis on pastoral processes animated by ongoing ecclesial discernment. These pastoral processes are to be engaged within an authentic spirit of synodality. Synodality in the light of the ecclesiology generated by the Second Vatican Council and the post-conciliar Church is the key to the model of a reassembling Church.²⁹

A reassembling local Church is a Church bubbling with vitality. It is not afraid of looking at its past and evaluating it. It is ready to ask pardon for its

²⁶ Archdiocese of Malta, *One Church, One Journey: A Process of Ecclesial Renewal (2020-2024)*. <https://journey.church.mt/> (accessed on 10 January 2022).

²⁷ Nadia Delicata, Presentation of the document *One Church, One Journey*, St Paul's Grotto, Rabat, Malta (June 7, 2020). <https://tvmnews.mt/en/news/archbishop-celebrates-mass-from-st-pauls-grotto/> (accessed on 31 January 2022).

²⁸ Archbishop Charles J. Scicluna, Homily at the Opening of the Diocesan Phase of the Synod of Bishops, Shrine of our Lady, Mellieħa, Malta, October 17, 2021. <https://newsbook.com.mt/en/you-have-to-be-silent-to-be-able-to-listen-archbishop-sciocluna/> (accessed on 31 January 2022).

²⁹ Kasper, “The Council’s Vision of a Renewal of the Church,” 486-488.

shortcomings as it has done several times in the recent past.³⁰ Ezra, and the Jewish community too, had begged God for forgiveness:

While Ezra, weeping and prostrating himself in front of the Temple of God, was praying and making confession, a very large crowd of men, women and children of Israel gathered round him, the people weeping bitterly. Then Shechaniah son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, ‘We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the people of the country’ (Ezr 10:1-3).

In his reflections on this text, the Venerable Bede states that “they were weeping either because those who had sinned were doing penance for their sin or because those who had remained pure were sorrowing over the transgression and downfall of their brothers.”³¹ Although this may seem to have been a case of a communal outpouring of emotions, it is probable that the sincere and docile encounter with God’s word led those present to support each other in a scene of mass contrition for their public transgressions.

A reassembling Church looks at the present as a special *kairos* which requires discerning minds and hearts. It also places great emphasis on evangelisation and catechesis, indeed ‘a pedagogy of formation’ addressed to all categories,³² and within different contexts, whether parish or within lay movements. The re-shaping of parishes is focused on the nurturing of strong and viable ecclesial communities committed to evangelisation and *diakonia*. The ongoing training and supervision of the laity who respond to the call to embrace new ministries and responsibilities will be the hallmark of the Church of the future.³³

³⁰ In the recent past, the Archbishop of Malta, Mgr Charles J. Scicluna has asked pardon regarding certain shortcomings by the local Church or its members, for example: the burial in unconsecrated ground (in the early 1960s) of six interdicted members of the Malta Labour Party (2 November 2019); the use of homophobic language in the comments made by a Maltese priest (6 January 2022).

³¹ Bede, *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 2, 13, in Conti, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament*, 5:330.

³² Brendan Leahy, “A Theology of Community Revisited,” in *Ecclesia Tertii Millennii Advenientis. Omaggio al P. Angel Antón*, eds. Fernando Chica, Sandro Panizzolo and Harald Wagner (Roma: Piemme, 1997), 214.

³³ Paul Hypher, “The Future of the Parish,” *The Pastoral Review* 3, no.1 (2007): 28-33; Cormac Murphy O’Connor, “White Paper on Five Pastoral Priorities,” *Origins* 35, no.36 (February 23, 2006): 595. Here, it is worth referring to the five pastoral priorities outlined by the then Archbishop of Westminster (UK), Cardinal Murphy O’Connor: 1. The call to holiness, prayer and the Eucharist; 2. Formation of adults and young people; 3. Small communities; 4. Priesthood and vocations; 5. Structures for participation, change and accountability.

A reassembling Church also seeks to be a Church which is not afraid to engage in dialogue, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*. The ‘Courtyard of the Gentiles’³⁴ initiative may be applied locally, as the Church dialogues with members of other religions, as well as with individuals who do not adhere to any religion. A reassembling Church looks to the future with hope, while seeking to be able to respond adequately to the spiritual needs of the local society and its evolving needs.

Conclusion

The scope of this study has not been some kind of speculative exercise which looks at the local Church in its present situation, while dreaming about some future ecclesial utopia. The Church of tomorrow depends on foundations laid by the contemporary Church. Tomorrow’s strengths are the result of the workings of divine grace in the hearts, minds and initiatives of today’s ecclesial community. Responding to the needed pastoral strategies of his time, Archbishop Winning affirmed that pastoral programmes and processes call for “a vision of the ideal, knowledge of the present reality, and in the light of the ideal, planning the way towards it from the reality.”³⁵ Indeed, this remains valid today.

It is hoped that the proposed pericopes from the books of Nehemiah and Ezra were instrumental in identifying the current *kairoi* of the local Church, as well as in presenting a new model for the Church of 2023, 2030 and the future, namely the paradigm of the reassembling Church. Although the study has sought to suggest some pathways towards the Church of the future, it is highly probable that the People of God is already journeying on these paths. As we mature in building mutual trust and recognising the many talents within the community, we are together called to embrace a common vision and to grow in accountability. The narratives in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra are marked by these leitmotifs. Learning to deal with conflicts, reading the signs of the times and not being hesitant in decision-taking are aspects of the DNA of the contemporary Church which is called to be a reassembling Church.

³⁴ The Courtyard of the Gentiles is an initiative by Pope Benedict XVI, and promoted since 2011 by the Pontifical Council for Culture. This ongoing project seeks to dialogue with all men and women of good will coming from all religious affiliations, or no religion at all. Ultimate existential questions are explored through frank discussion, while appreciating the contribution of the arts and the sciences.

³⁵ Winning, “Reaching out to Nominal Christians,” 836.

Both Nehemiah and Ezra encountered many prophets of doom as they sought to rebuild the city and the faith community. The history of the Church reveals the mushrooming of many such prophets in many different contexts. Re-imagining the pastoral in 2030 and beyond requires perseverance, prayer and hope. Walter Kasper's words, over thirty years ago, remain a source of inspiration and courage:

If you ask me where I get the courage for this hope and for refuting the prophets of doom, then I insist that it is not simply a cheap kind of egoism that I direct against the widespread pessimism. Optimism and pessimism are both human dispositions and moods. The source of my hope is the promise that Christ, the Lord, and his Holy Spirit, are and will always remain, with the Church. Our time is also their time. In this is the source of our courage.³⁶

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³⁶ Kasper, "The Council's Vision of a Renewal of the Church," 493.