

Editorial Note

The Church in Malta in 2030: Re-Imaging the Pastoral

I have the honour to present this monographic issue of *Melita Theologica* which has been entrusted to the Department of Pastoral Theology, Liturgy and Canon Law of the Faculty of Theology, University of Malta.

The theme which the Members of the Department decided is to focus on in this issue is, *The Church in Malta in 2030. Re-imagining the Pastoral*. Although 2030 may seem a date which is still quite distant, nonetheless in pastoral terms it can be considered as very near. If we as a Church want to remain relevant and incisive in our pastoral work and in our actions, then we need to start thinking about the future, and about our future actions now.

With the rapid pace with which our societies are constantly forging ahead, we need to be very careful about how we look at and consider the future in terms of our future pastoral work. It is for this specific reason that the choice of the words in the title do not speak of 'a re-imagining' but of 're-imagining'. Whilst re-imagining evokes the notion of an interpretation of the future and of creating a new identity, this can and usually be made using criteria from our present theological and pastoral circumstances, with the probability that we will be interpreting and reacting to a pastoral reality using tools which may have been good and effective in the past but which are no longer in tune with the contemporary socio-cultural, ecclesial and pastoral realities to which they will be applied in the near future. This leads to frustration and to erroneously concluding that contemporary society is no longer interested in our pastoral endeavours. On the other hand, re-imagining brings to mind the creation of a totally different idea and vision of something. In 're-imagining the pastoral', professionals in the field seek to give a totally fresh and new impulse to contemporary society, and not

simply re-adapt what was done in the past or what is being done in the present to new circumstances, contexts in future situations. In this respect, re-imaging the pastoral is a bolder step in the right direction, evoking good practices which are applicable to the contemporary human being. It is only in re-imaging the pastoral that we as a Church can remain relevant and in touch with a society in constant evolution.

Re-imaging the future commences from a study of the present. The famous phrase “the unexamined life is not worth living” is attributed to Socrates during his trial for impiety and for corrupting young people. This finally led to his death, rather than choosing to be exiled. Applying this to the current situation, one can truly say that if we do not examine our current reality and our state of affairs, we cannot truly appreciate the signs of the times, read these correctly and then plan from a pastoral point of view in such a way that we retain a strong communication with the contemporary human being in order to remain relevant. It is for this reason that the Department of Pastoral Theology, Liturgy and Canon Law embarked on a research study on the effects of COVID-19 in 2021. This research, entitled *The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Religion and Spirituality in these Challenging Times*¹ was the catalyst of the theme adopted for this special issue of *Melita Theologica*. Following this research it clearly transpires that there seems to be a mismatch between the way in which young people see and react to the Church and to faith, and the way in which the elder generations consider their faith and the Church. Moreover, throughout the study it was becoming ever more evident that there was a dissonance and an ever-growing disconnection between the Church and the younger generations. It was this which propelled the idea of a theme which was forward looking, and which would consider the Church in a contemporary situation for the future. The chosen theme: *The Church in Malta in 2030. Re-imaging the Pastoral* fits in a very precise way in this *status quaestionis* and seeks to give tentative images of the Church in Malta in the future.

All the authors contributing to this issue are Maltese since they are the best interpreters of the local situation, and at the same time they are also the persons best placed who can re-image the pastoral reality of the Church in Malta in 2030. Moreover, they will hopefully also be active agents in the implementation of these new pastoral images.

¹ The results of this study are being published in this issue. See pp. 127-147.

The five articles in this monographic issue look at different aspects of the Church in Malta from different points of view: liturgical, ecclesial, pastoral and ecological. Each and every one of these articles in its own particular way seeks to re-image the pastoral in the future of the Church in Malta. The term 'pastoral' itself can be given many different meanings and interpretations, all of which may be important in re-imagining future pastoral incentives and work. Matthew Pulis et al. sought to study the perspectives of priests in Malta with regards to what is meant by "pastoral work." From the empirical study which they conducted they were able to project what would help in re-imagining the pastoral in the Church in Malta in 2030. Amongst these, we find the need to establish a link between "spiritual and theological work." This can be done by having an evangelising outlook in all endeavours, thus 'reconciling the vocational and professional commitments inherent in being and doing the pastoral.' The second very important aspect is for the Church and its operatives to be totally open to the digital and to open the digital to the believing community. This ensures that all means to reach the faithful are fully put into action.

The liturgy is one of the main points of pastoral contact with the faithful. Considering the liturgy, Dorianne Buttigieg posits that 'the role of formation ... is crucial towards understanding, internalising and living the liturgy' leading to a transformation which is both personal and communal. It is through the liturgy that a renewed sense of community as opposed to individualism would help in re-imagining the future of pastoral theology in the Church in Malta.

The Word of God does not only bring about a change in the individual believer. It also instils change in the Church as a charismatic institution, making it a Church which is able to withstand the challenges of contemporary times. Hector Scerri postulates that "a vibrant Church does not hibernate or bury its head beneath the sand [but] commits itself to a process of ongoing ecclesial discernment which leads to decision-making and the subsequent implementation." Therefore, Scerri concludes that "re-imagining the Church signifies that the Christian community is called to shed all shackles which hinder its witness or undermine its credibility." Reading the signs of the times is vital to achieve this.

Respect to our natural home and to the earth in terms of a sustainable ecology is one of the items which is lately being given a lot of importance. This particular aspect has been brought to the forefront by Pope Francis himself in publishing *Laudato si* (2015). Mark Zammit takes it to task to develop this thrust towards an ecological church in Malta based on the priority of the evangelising mission of the Church which goes forth to meet and to serve humanity based on a covenant between God and his people. This is a task for everybody, and not only for a

small group of people. It is from this point of view of a covenant that “this whole framework of covenant could perhaps serve as a model for the Maltese Church in rethinking the ecological crisis and in being itself an eco-Church. An ecological Church implies one which remains faithful to the covenant with God.”

Seen in this way, each one of these articles is an enrichment to the Church in Malta and they can also be considered as an enlightenment to other Churches who, like the Church in Malta are seeking to re-image the pastoral in order to remain relevant.

A final word of thanks to the Editor-in-Chief Rev. Dr Martin Micallef for giving the Department of Pastoral Theology, Liturgy and Canon Law this opportunity to shed light on, and to make concrete proposals for the future of the Church in Malta.

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