

Debate & Analysis

The politician who stood out



JULIE ZAHRA

A lot has already been said about Francis Zammit Dimech, a politician who stood out from the rest, in his unique way.

I wish to dedicate this article to his memory but also reflect on what he meant for many of us in the political as well as the artistic field. I am honoured to have known Francis for many years, having worked with him under completely different circumstances at the different stages of my career – getting to know the different sides of him. He will dearly be missed.

I met Francis for the first time when we had won the Song for Europe Contest back in 2004. Back then he was Minister for Tourism and Culture, and I was an aspiring singer. I recall attending meetings at Casa Gasperi ahead of our Eurovision



performance in Istanbul and getting to know Francis the patron of the arts. During those incredibly exciting and hectic months, I witnessed his unrivalled passion for the arts, and his drive to assist artists the best way possible.

Meeting the man, he always struck me as a jovial, good-spirited, incredibly erudite yet gentle soul who always had the perfect approach for everyone. From my point of view, I was drawn to his

style and saw how politics could be a force for good and could drive the necessary change even in the field of the arts.

Perhaps he was the politician who inspired me most. Certainly, he was one of those who encouraged me to take the plunge and put my hat in the ring. In fact, I always considered him my mentor in politics.

I feel I learnt a lot from him during my time in politics, as I always sought his counsel. We

would meet in Valletta in a coffee shop or other, and I would share with him my thoughts about upcoming legislation, research or any project I would be working on in the field of the arts and culture. I always sought advice from him, and in his inimitable way, he was always generous to dispense it freely.

Like he always did himself in his long political career, he would always advocate for fair debate, making arguments in an ethical

manner, and never attacking the person. I knew this was great advice, because I saw him practicing it in the first place. That is perhaps why his demise has unleashed such a flow of beautiful sentiments from both sides of the political divide – he was a truly respected and well-loved politician from all sides of the spectrum.

He was a deeply profound man. His thirst for knowledge about anything under the sun was immense. His interests were boundless, and very rarely could you approach him with a topic he would find himself unprepared for. Conversations with him were a font of knowledge like no other.

In the past months, we stayed in touch and exchanged greetings on the important occasions, though his health had started to show signs of distress. Last we spoke was last month. Brief messages of encouragement, from both sides for immensely different reasons, which I will cherish for ever.

I will miss Francis.

As politicians we ought to seek to honour his memory by striving to be politicians who are dedicated to being a force for good. That, after all, is what politics is all about.

I offer my deepest condolence to all of Francis' family and friends.

Julie Zahra is the Opposition's Shadow Minister for Cultural Heritage, Arts, and Culture



VALERIE VISANICH

Earlier this year, we witnessed how quickly viral trends can shape what we hear, see, and even eat.

Everything from toast creations to bouncing on gym balls became part of a cultural moment. One of them is the Minecraft mayhem. The latest trend gone viral, imitated physically in a number of cinemas worldwide.

Within the blocky world of Minecraft, danger can come in many forms. From zombies, skeletons and creepers, to now the risk of being kicked out of the cinema theatre. The online sensation of a viral meme, known as the chicken jockey, with a baby zombie riding a chicken, is creating chaos. The second it hits the

screen; the crowd goes wild. It's not just about what's happening in the film, it's the collective buzz, the laughter, the filming and the popcorn flying. One weird reaction. Total mayhem.

The multi-sensory experience of the cinema is already peculiar, engaging more than just the eye. Popcorn crunching, elbows jostling for armrest space, and an overwhelming soundscape – is taken to another level with a hyperactive youth audience. Eager to capture their antics on their phones, they film themselves stirring up a scene by flinging popcorn, tossing drinks, and even launching snacks at the screen in a chaotic blend of performance and out of control.

In response, cinema companies have implemented stricter security measures, with some going as far as prohibiting certain individuals from attending screenings in order to prevent disruptions and potential damage to the theatre.

One particular scene, and suddenly the whole theatre becomes the stage. So why are young audiences acting out? It's not just chaos, it's choreography. In a world where gaming, videos, and real-life blur together, the dis-

inction between watching and playing is equally blurred. Reality becomes a performance of media images. The laughter, the screaming, the snack-throwing becomes all part of a shared performance. They're not just reacting to the screen; they're reacting to each other. Filming TikToks, flinging popcorn, chasing likes – it's about being part of the moment and capturing it. This is crowd psychology in action. Impulsive behaviour fuelled by collective energy. The surreal arrival of the Chicken Jockey doesn't just surprise, it ignites.

But why is it so entertaining? Is it just young audiences? For me, it represents a form of pure absurdity. Yet, it is precisely this absurdity that fuels the viral nature of the moment, boosting online engagement and driving ticket sales. In the midst of it all, audiences find themselves on the edge of their seats, hoping to avoid becoming the target of airborne popcorn.

Now from the silly to the sacred. What's striking is the sheer power of the Internet to instantly reshape mindsets and cultural attitudes. It has permeated nearly every corner of daily life, so thoroughly, in fact, that even

the Catholic Church has stepped into the digital age. A powerful symbol of this shift is the pending canonisation of Carlo Acutis, a 15-year-old Italian teenager affectionately dubbed as "God's influencer."

Acutis, whose deep faith was expressed not from a pulpit but through a keyboard, stands as the first millennial to be recognised on the path to sainthood. His canonisation was set to take place today, but has been postponed following the death of Pope Francis.

I believe this marks the first time a Pope's passing has sparked such an overwhelming wave of digital content, from tribute reels and livestreamed vigils to AI-generated reflections and imagined messages in his voice. In the minutes following the news, social media feeds transformed into a kind of digital cathedral, flooded with curated memories, stylized homages, and algorithmically produced visuals. It's a striking display of how even sacred moments are now filtered, framed, and memorialized through the internet. It is a new kind of mourning shaped by technology.

Now from screen to smoke.

Equally relevant to the role of the screen is the upcoming selection of a new Pope in the days ahead. The conclave will no longer be solely defined by the plume of smoke rising from a chimney in Vatican City; it will also be a global media spectacle, amplified and reimagined through the lens of digital culture. This sacred ritual, once unfolding in quiet secrecy behind the doors of the Sistine Chapel, will now be mirrored and co-produced online. In fact, I'm certain that AI-generated papal predictions will flood our feeds long before the white smoke even clears the sky.

In a world shaped by algorithms and attention, reels on the late Pope and Acutis's digital evangelism offer a sharp contrast to the Minecraft mayhem, yet they run parallel to the affective role of spread material online. Both demonstrate how digital content, whether the sacred digital devotion or popcorn-throwing chaos, has the uncanny ability to shape behaviour, influence attitudes, and define what feels present, powerful, and now.

Prof. Valerie Visanich is an Associate Professor in Sociology