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# REFLECTIONS ON A DECADE OF EU MEMBERSHIP

EXPECTATIONS • ACHIEVEMENTS • DISAPPOINTMENTS • THE FUTURE

## The Catholic Identity of Malta after Ten Years of Membership in the European Union: Challenges and Prospects

by Joseph Ellul, O.P.



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## Contents

About the Author .....	2
Introduction .....	4
The point of departure.....	4
The attitude of the Church in Malta .....	10
The future role of the Catholic Church in Malta .....	13
Bibliography .....	21

# The Catholic Identity of Malta after Ten Years of Membership in the European Union: Challenges and Prospects

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## Introduction

Ten years have elapsed since Malta's accession in the European Union. One can still recall vividly the intense and acrimonious campaign prior to the membership referendum and the ensuing electoral victory that confirmed the *Nationalist Party* (PN) in power under the leadership of Edward Fenech Adami in 2003. In both cases the Maltese voted in favour of entry into the EU. During both exercises in democracy the Maltese were exposed to the rhetoric of both prophets of doom and prophets of plenty. For the former accession meant a loss of national and territorial independence, for the latter it meant the beginning of opportunity for all and, in some cases, the answer to all of Malta's woes.

Now, ten years later, a further appraisal of Malta's membership and place in the European Union is called for. The purpose of this paper, however, is to reflect upon how this membership has affected the Roman

Catholic Church in Malta and what prospects lie ahead for the Catholic community within Maltese society that remains in a state of constant flux on both the social and the religious level. It traces the major events that have accelerated the transformation of Malta into a secular society. The paper describes how these events, together with pressures that are being brought to bear by secular movements upon Maltese society, are profoundly affecting its Catholic identity and redrawing its moral landscape. It also discusses ways and means by which the Catholic Church in Malta can address these challenges and contribute towards the construction of a more humane Maltese society. In order to achieve this, it must first and foremost remain a coherent witness of a faith that is forever alive, dynamic and relevant.

## The point of departure

Five years ago, in an article that I had penned marking the fifth anniversary of Malta's accession to the European Union (and from which I intend to take my cue), I had written the following:

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 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.<sup>1</sup>

During the past five years Malta has experienced three major events that have redefined its social, cultural and moral landscapes. Being an integral part of Maltese

society, the Catholic Church has been particularly affected by these dramatic changes and has yet to come to terms with both their short- and long-term effects. The first major challenge was the issue of the introduction of divorce. Discussion on the issue had been going on for years, but matters came to a head in August 2010 when a Private Members Bill was proposed and tabled by a former Member of Parliament for the then governing *Nationalist Party* (PN). This triggered a heated debate in the local media, especially in the local newspapers and on local TV stations.

The issue of divorce was decided by a referendum on May 28, 2011 with 52.67% in favour and 46.4% against. A law introducing divorce was then approved by Parliament on July 25 of the same year and it came into effect as of October 1.

There were many Nationalist supporters, even some Nationalist members of parliament, who were in favour of divorce for many reasons, not least, perhaps, personal ones as well. In fact, today there is very little to choose between the two major parties on this and other issues which challenge Catholic doctrine. It must also be remembered that the governing Nationalist Party had been driven by internal dissent and had become extremely unpopular with the electorate. Another political party in Malta, the *Alternattiva Demokratika* (AD), was totally in favour of the introduction of divorce. However, the pro-divorce lobby was spearheaded mainly by the Labour Party (PL). There is little doubt that the majority in favour of divorce was more a result of unwavering adherence to Labour; its leader (then Leader of the Opposition) had openly declared his position on the matter and the overwhelming majority of his supporters followed suit.

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Ellul (2009), 'The Catholic Church in Malta and Membership in the European Union: Fears-Challenges-Hopes', in Peter G. Xuereb (ed.), *Civil Society Project Report 2009*, Malta: The European Documentation and Research Centre, University of Malta, p. 192.

The campaign that preceded the referendum has uncovered not only deep divisions within Maltese society but also an increasing hostility towards the Catholic Church and especially towards its hierarchy. The latter is being constantly branded as 'out of touch' with modern society, and as wanting to send Malta 'back to the Middle Ages' (whatever that means).

The entire campaign was transformed from one of reasoned debate and a grasp of the essentials to an exercise in mud-slinging that gave vent to anti-Catholic and anti-clerical sentiment. Articles in newspapers, especially those leaning towards the political left applied a tried and tested strategy against the Catholic Church in Malta; that of ridicule-demonise-destroy. In many ways it was a carbon copy of the second referendum on the same question that had taken place more than a decade earlier in Ireland. Issues such as child sex-abuse by clerics were brought out in the open in order to undermine the credibility of the Catholic hierarchy and neutralise (if not doing away with) its leadership role. At one point the spectre of the religious political crisis of the 1960s that saw the entire Executive of Labour Party placed under interdict in 1961 was resuscitated in order to instil fear of a possible return to those "dark days".

But this referendum has turned out to be the first step in an overall strategy that might eventually lead to Roman Catholicism being removed as the official religion of the state from the Constitution of the Republic of Malta.. Furthermore, the divorce campaign turned out to be a dress rehearsal for the ensuing electoral campaign which brought a revamped Labour Party to power with a

resounding victory at the polls on March 9, 2013.<sup>2</sup>

The second major event concerned the passing of the Embryo Protection Bill on November 26, 2012.<sup>3</sup> This took place after long months of debate and discussion inside and outside Parliament, as well as across the political divide, as would befit such a delicate matter. The Archbishop of Malta and the Bishop of Gozo issued a joint and detailed pastoral letter on the issue entitled *Celebrating Human Life*.<sup>4</sup> Its purpose, they wrote, was "to guide those Catholics (in the first place, married couples who are experiencing difficulty with procreation, as well as other persons who work in the field of science, politics and law), in order that they may form their consciences rightly on a subject such as human life, a subject which is so sacred and fundamental." It reaffirmed Church teaching "that the value of human life must remain untarnished and the Church defends it from the very moment of conception, always striving to bring to light the unique dignity of the human being." However, it also warned that "[t]he IVF process involves methods which at times consider the person, who is still at the embryonic stage, to be merely 'a mass of cells' which may be used, selected and dispensed with. Many times, a significant number of human embryos are sacrificed for the sake of the birth of the desired child." The Bishops therefore affirmed that "civil law in

<sup>2</sup> The Labour Party (PL) won 54.83% of the valid votes cast against 43.34% acquired by the Nationalist Party (PN).

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2012\\_1127/local/IVF-Bill-finally-approved-as-the-Opposition-withdraws-division.447025](http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2012_1127/local/IVF-Bill-finally-approved-as-the-Opposition-withdraws-division.447025)

<sup>4</sup> The full text of the pastoral Letter can be accessed from: <http://thechurchinmalta.org/en/posts/29119/pastoral-letter-celebrating-human-life/pastoral-letter-celebrating-human-life>

respect of assisted procreation should aim to safe-guard ... the value of life and physical integrity of every person, the value of the unitive aspect of marriage and the value of human sexuality in marriage." The letter came out strongly against the freezing of human embryos, the deliberate destruction of supernumerary human embryos, and the genetic selection of human embryos by pre-implantation diagnosis, manipulation or experimentation on human embryos. However, the wording in this context created some unease in certain circles. Some priests went so far as to refuse reading the letter in church during Sunday Mass.<sup>5</sup> No less a figure than the Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta commented that it was "unfortunate that the bishops' deep solidarity with infertile couples was articulated in a language that projected a tone and style that some have interpreted as lacking in sensitivity, compassion and empathy."<sup>6</sup> In its present form the law allows doctors to attempt to fertilise a maximum of two eggs while also allowing eggs to be frozen. But the debate has recently been rekindled with some doctors calling for

greater latitude concerning the freezing of eggs and embryos.<sup>7</sup>

With its landslide victory at the polls the new Labour government set out immediately to implement its intended programme towards a complete secularisation of Malta not only as a state, but even more so as a society.

The third challenge has been the introduction of a law on civil unions which also included the granting of legal recognition of homosexual and lesbian couples and placing them on a par with heterosexual ones. The wording of the law as it stands caters for the establishment of gay marriage in all but name. The law also gives such couples the right to apply for the adoption of children.<sup>8</sup> As in all the other countries that have introduced the right of child adoptions for homosexual and lesbian couples, what appears to be most disconcerting is not only the fact itself, but the reduction of child adoptions to the level of the right to private property. Where the wellbeing of children should have been (as it should always be) paramount to legislators, this has been overruled by the purported right of same-sex couples to attain what for obvious and natural reasons is unattainable. Such an approach to the issue had already been criticised in a press release issued in December 2013 by the Auxiliary Bishop and Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Malta Mgr. Charles Scicluna prior to its being debated in parliament.<sup>9</sup> This in turn brought a

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<sup>5</sup> Ivan Camilleri, 'Bishops' IVF letter snubbed by priests', *The Times of Malta*, Tuesday 7 August 2012:  
[http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2012\\_0807/local/Bishops-IVF-letter-snubbed-by-priests.431818](http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2012_0807/local/Bishops-IVF-letter-snubbed-by-priests.431818) (accessed 12 July 2014).

<sup>6</sup> See Fr. Emmanuel Agius, 'Public Policy in IVF issues', *The Times of Malta*, Tuesday 14 August 2012:  
[http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2012\\_0814/opinion/Public-policy-in-IVF-issues.432808](http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2012_0814/opinion/Public-policy-in-IVF-issues.432808)

See also a previous article on the same issue and penned by the same author entitled 'IVF, morality and public policy', *The Times of Malta*, Thursday 28 October 2010:  
[http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2010\\_1028/opinion/ivf-morality-and-public-policy.333443](http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2010_1028/opinion/ivf-morality-and-public-policy.333443)

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<sup>7</sup> See Kurt Sansone, 'Compromise over IVF law leaves doctors split', *The Times of Malta*, Thursday 10 July, 2014, p. 6; Kurt Sansone, "IVF success rate isn't comparable to before", *The Times of Malta*, Sunday 13 July 2014, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> The inclusion of this detail triggered the Nationalist Opposition's abstention from voting during the final reading of the Bill.

<sup>9</sup> See the official text on the website of the Archdiocese of Malta:

reaction on the part of the organisation Drachma Parents, a Catholic organisation which supports parents who are finding it difficult to accept the sexual orientation of their children. In reply to Bishop Scicluna's statement, the group voiced their disappointment with their spokesman saying, "We are very sad. We are sad that it had to come to this. Because we believe that all persons are children of God and we feel sad because we respect the Church."<sup>10</sup> Here mention must be made of the fact that the law as it now stands has gone far beyond what had been promised in the electoral programme of the Labour Party. It has also been enacted without any prior consultation with the Board on Adoptions.<sup>11</sup> The next step would be the employment of surrogate mothers and sperm donors for the same end. This, however, has already met several legal pitfalls in EU countries that have adopted such a measure.<sup>12</sup>

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<http://ms.maltadiocese.org/WEBSITE/2013/PRESS%20RELEASES/135%20STATEMENT%20ON%20GAY%20ADOPTIONS%20ENG.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> See Kristina Chetcuti, 'Gays' parents saddened by Bishop's words', *The Times of Malta*, Tuesday 7 January 2014

[http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2014\\_0107/local/Gays-parents-saddened-by-Bishop-s-words.501661](http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2014_0107/local/Gays-parents-saddened-by-Bishop-s-words.501661)

<sup>11</sup> In comments given to The Times of Malta the Chairman of the Adoptions Board, Ivan Grech Mintoff stated the following:

I can tell you outright that we were not consulted before gay adoptions became part of the Civil Unions Bill. We were taken totally by surprise to see these adoptions added to civil unions (...) If you ask me, I think it was introduced in the most disgusting way possible. Surreptitiously is not a good-enough term to use.

See Matthew Xuereb, 'Same-sex adoptions in by stealth – board head', *The Times of Malta*, Monday 12 May 2014, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/relationships/10>

The introduction of all three legislations has been hailed by some local NGOs and pressure groups as being decisive steps toward "bringing Malta out of the Dark Ages" and offering all citizens equal opportunities, with the Prime Minister being quoted as having stated that "Malta is now more liberal and more European and it has given equality to all its people."<sup>13</sup> It goes without saying that these laws also run counter to the moral teachings of the Roman Catholic Church; therefore the role of Roman Catholicism as the official religion of the Republic of Malta as enshrined in its Constitution will be increasingly branded as contradictory and its removal therefrom would be a matter of 'when' rather than 'if'. Opposition to such laws, whether on the part of the Catholic Church or from other religious denominations,<sup>14</sup> has been constantly labelled as a sign of obscurantism and moral discourse as imposition. Such attitudes have been a common characteristic of secularism

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<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/14/us-malta-gays-idUSBREA3D10S20140414>

<sup>13</sup> See

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/14/us-malta-gays-idUSBREA3D10S20140414>

<sup>14</sup> In an opinion piece in *The Times of Malta* dated July 30, 2013 the head of the Muslim community in Malta, Imam Muhammad Elsadi voiced his disagreement on the then Civil Unions Bill which was about to be tabled before Parliament. He also proposed that the issue be put to a national referendum. His words obviously provoked outrage within the gay community in Malta. The same applied to a recent call for a referendum to abrogate this law by Pastor Gordon John Manchè, leader of a Christian Evangelical Fellowship known as 'River of Love'. A few days before the third and final reading of the Bill, he presented a petition allegedly signed by 10.000 people against the adoption of children by gay couples. See [http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2014\\_0402/local/updated-manche-presents-petition-against-gay-adoptions.513298](http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2014_0402/local/updated-manche-presents-petition-against-gay-adoptions.513298). This move caused a furore in the social media and in the local press. See, for instance [http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2014\\_0404/timestalk/watch-pastor-manches-petition-against-gay-adoption.513560](http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2014_0404/timestalk/watch-pastor-manches-petition-against-gay-adoption.513560)

throughout the European Union for decades. At this point it would be interesting to note the following comments by Jonathan Sacks, at the time Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and the Commonwealth (now Lord Sacks of Aldgate) almost twenty years ago, since they refer to an all-too familiar attitude that is steadily growing within Maltese society:

Future historians will find one of the most remarkable features of our culture the use of the word 'judgemental' to rule out in advance the offering of moral judgement. This is not a superficial feature of our language but part of the deep structure of modern morality. Today almost any public pronouncement on personal morality will be greeted by a chorus of disapproval. When a Church leader recently criticized adultery on the part of figures in public life, he was subject to a torrent of abuse, in some cases by other religious leaders. Adultery was acceptable; judgement was not. The stand taken by politicians and academics of different shades in defence of the family has been routinely greeted as a group libel against single mothers and working wives. When the age of homosexual consent was recently lowered, a journalist on *The Times* – himself a homosexual – lamented that the victory had been won without a fight. Where, he asked, was the voice of reasoned opposition? The answer is obvious: it had been intimidated into silence. Nietzsche, the anti-moralist, has won and we have undergone what he called the 'transvaluation of values'. What other ages saw as the supreme virtue, we see as a vice. Judgement has become taboo, and to believe otherwise is, as Michael Novak puts it, to 'risk excommunication from the

mainstream'.<sup>15</sup>

During these past few months it has become patently clear that the strategy being applied by the present Labour government in the enactment of laws (especially those that are bound to court controversy) is that of raising as many issues as possible in the public forum, thereby fragmenting public opinion, in order to steamroll its policies and, supposedly, bringing Malta in line with other EU countries. It is a strategy that had already been applied by the Zapatero government in Spain with disastrous results to the social (to say nothing of the economic) fabric of that country.<sup>16</sup> It is

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Sacks (1995), *Faith in the Future*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, pp. 37-38

<sup>16</sup> This scenario has been vividly contemplated in an Editorial of *The Malta Independent on Sunday* wherein it was stated:

It would appear as if this government is following in the footsteps of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the Socialist prime minister of Spain some years back who led the country into the modern world by exactly the same forced marches. On the one hand, he also introduced abortion but on the other hand this was done with a smile, with popular celebrations and amid popular exhilaration.

We all know how it ended. By focusing on this liberalisation, the government lost track of the economy which then crashed. The government was removed and Spain ended up just short of a bailout and with millions unemployed.

Many will undoubtedly pooh-pooh this and ask what the connection between liberalisation and economic crisis is.

The fact is that Malta faced up to economic challenges when its moral basis with all its defects and flaws was different to what it is today and emerged relatively unscathed and thriving. It is yet to be seen if the country in its present liberalised stance will be strong enough to face up to the economic challenges of the future. And whether tomorrow's citizens will replace the lost religious convictions with adequate substitutes.

Editorial: 'In Zapatero's footsteps', *The Malta Independent on Sunday*, Sunday 20 April 2014, p.

true that the present Labour government has an unprecedented nine-seat majority in parliament, but it would be well advised to consider the fact that one would be able to speak of real democracy only if free and fair elections become *the point of departure for*, rather than the *final destination of*, the democratic process.<sup>17</sup>

Many local opinion leaders have vehemently denied that the above-mentioned dramatic and rapid changes in Maltese society originated directly from our country's entry in the European Union. However, it is patently clear that there do exist lobbies within the European Union and especially inside the European Parliament, whose role is that of applying constant pressure on all member states to conform on certain issues especially those perceived as touching upon so-called 'civil rights'. As the Prime Minister's speech quoted above indicates, the perceived idea is that in not following other EU countries who have introduced divorce, gay marriage, etc., Malta would be somehow lagging behind other member states that in turn are portrayed as liberal and progressive. The message is clear: Malta must bring itself in line with similar legislations in order to prove her European credentials.

These prospects appear to be mounting given that shortly after the law on civil unions was passed through parliament the Civil Liberties Minister was reported to have stated during a press conference that the legalisation of abortion is a "categorical no at *this point in*

*time*".<sup>18</sup> Later the Department of Information of the Government issued a press release denying the claim that this implied its eventual introduction.<sup>19</sup> However, the fact that both the Ministry for Civil Liberties and the Prime Minister himself were obliged to categorically deny that a Labour government was considering legislation on abortion (or even being in favour of it) speaks volumes.<sup>20</sup> As the Leader of the Opposition was quick to remark, "we will rely on the Prime Minister's assurances that abortion will not be introduced" recalling what the latter had stated some years back when he had voiced his opposition to the possibility of adoptions by same-sex couples and then went on to have it enshrined in law. Former Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi has highlighted this situation when he predicted that, after the above-mentioned comment by the Civil Liberties Minister, the introduction of abortion was getting dangerously close:

After the arguments put forward to justify the right to adoption by gay couples (liberalism, minority rights, modern society, and winds of change) will resonate also in this future abortion debate. They will be the same arguments we will hear regarding surrogacy, IVF etc.<sup>21</sup>

### **The attitude of the Church in Malta**

These issues have brought to light a lack of preparedness on the part of both hierarchy and clergy for the onslaught that has taken

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15. See also *The Times of Malta*, 24 April 2014, Letters to the Editor: "Historic Indeed", by Alfred Griscti.

<sup>17</sup> The Editorial of *The Times of Malta* dated 24 January 2014 (p. 15) stated that "the government is now giving the impression that, with the kind of majority it enjoys, it can practically do whatever it likes."

<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEso06LLe14>. See also *The Malta Independent*, 22 April 2014, p.

<sup>19</sup> See <https://www.gov.mt/en/Government/Press%20Releases/Pages/2014/April/21/pr140832.aspx>

<sup>20</sup> See *The Malta Independent*, 23 April 2014, p. 5

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence Gonzi, 'After gay adoption, what's next?', *The Times of Malta*, Tuesday 22 April 2014, p. 40.

place. The above-mentioned Private Member's Bill on Divorce had apparently taken the Church authorities unawares. When in August 2010 news broke out of the proposed bill, the Archbishop (today Archbishop Emeritus) himself described it as 'a bolt out of the blue'. However, as stated above, the debate in the local media (especially in the local newspapers) concerning its introduction or otherwise had been going on for years and there had been ample time for the Catholic Church in Malta to prepare itself for such an eventuality. The Curia's handling of the issue and its participation in the campaign against divorce has left many sincere Catholics somewhat bemused. There was also much to be desired in the way it dealt with the onslaught of the local media regarding statements issued by some of its senior members. Right from the start of the campaign people were receiving mixed messages from Church authorities. For example, while addressing members of the Judiciary in a homily marking the opening of the Forensic Year 2010/2011, the Judicial Vicar of the Metropolitan Tribunal called on members of the Judiciary and lawyers to desist from taking part in divorce proceedings and be conscientious objectors. Invoking Church teaching he also stated that whoever cooperated in any way in the introduction of divorce, who applied the law and who sought recourse to it, though not the innocent party, would be breaking God's law and so would be committing a grave sin.<sup>22</sup> A few months later,

<sup>22</sup> The original text relevant to the issue states the following:

Jekk nanalizzaw is-sitwazzjoni f'pajjiżna naraw li kull ma jmur qed niddakkru minn dak li qed jiġri f'pajjiżi oħra, principally fl-Ewropa, fejn is-sitwazzjoni ta' l-amministrazzjoni tal-Ġustizzja qed issib ruħha f'posizjoni li jkollha tikser il-Liġi ta' Alla minħabba li l-pajjiż, bil-liġijiet tiegħu, qed jivvijola l-baži fundamentali tal-Liġi Divina Naturali

on the eve of the referendum on divorce, one of the leaders of the 'Yes' campaign was barred from assisting her clients during annulment proceedings at the Metropolitan Tribunal since her position was considered as running counter to the Church's teaching on marital indissolubility.<sup>23</sup> Needless to say this measure was given wide coverage in the local

permezz ta' l-applikazzjonijiet tal-liġijiet tad-divorżu, ta' l-abort, ta' żwigijiet ta' persuni ta' l-istess sess, tal-ewtnasija ecc. Dan qed isir f'isem it-tolleranza u l-hekk imsejha drittijiet fundamentali.

Huwa proprju dan li qed jiġri fis-socjetà tagħna meta reġgħet saħnet id-diskusjoni dwar id-dħul tad-divorżu f'pajjiżna. Hija sitwazzjoni li tolqot mill-qrib l-amministrazzjoni tal-ġustizzja f'pajjiżna. Huwa ż-żmien meta l-Amministraturi tal-Ġustizzja huma obbligati li jsemmgħu leħinhom b'mod ċar u jaslu biex jinvokaw wkoll, jekk ikun il-kas, l-ogħejżjoni tal-kuxjenja tagħhom... [...] l-Knisja ma għandha xejn x'tiddiskuti dwar id-divorżu u l-introduzzjoni tiegħu. Hija biss għandha tgħallem li min jikkopera b'xi mod għall-introduzzjoni tiegħu fil-liġijiet tal-pajjiż, minn jaapplika li ġi tħalli u minn jirrikorri għalihi, sakemm ma jkun il-parti innoċenti, jkun qed jikser il-Liġi ta' Alla u għalhekk jkun qed jidneb b'mod gravi.

*Judicial Vicar's homily on the opening of the Forensic Year, 4 October 2010.* The full text is to be found on the website of the Archdiocese of Malta:

<http://thechurchinmalta.org/en/posts/12804/judicial-vicars-homily-at-the-opening-of-the-forensic-yearl-omelija-tal-vigarju-gudizzjali-fil-ftugh-tas-sena-forensi> Accessed 18.06.2014

See also Kurt Sansone, "Judicial Vicar warns judges who rule for divorce: 'God being put aside'" in *The Times of Malta*, Friday, October 8, 2010, [http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2010\\_1008/local/judicial-vicar-warns-judges-who-rule-for-divorce.330364](http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2010_1008/local/judicial-vicar-warns-judges-who-rule-for-divorce.330364) (accessed 18 June 2010).

<sup>23</sup> See David Schembri, 'Divorce lobbyist barred from Church tribunal: 'Divorce is not a civil issue... it's an issue of God'', *The Times of Malta*, Thursday 28 April 2011: [http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2011\\_0428/local/Divorce-lobbyist-barred-from-Church-tribunal.362575](http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2011_0428/local/Divorce-lobbyist-barred-from-Church-tribunal.362575) (accessed 18 June 2011).

press and again the Curia bore the brunt of the attacks levelled against it by mainly left-leaning newspapers. The response from the ecclesiastical authorities was a constant reference to and quotes from official Church documents which, although useful, are not the best way of communicating with the man in the street. She was reinstated in August of that same year, a move that was interpreted as a U-turn of the part of the Curia.<sup>24</sup> In addition to these two incidents, mention must be made of quite a few local priests who had voiced their dissent publicly on the issue of divorce by way of letters or opinion pieces in newspapers and even through interviews. Such initiatives have allowed their opinions, well-meaning though they perhaps might have been, to be manipulated in certain quarters of the local media circuit.<sup>25</sup>

One very popular position concerning the perceived role of the Catholic Church in Maltese society following the above-mentioned legislations and recently highlighted by a regular opinion leader is that the bishops “know the Church has grown weaker than ever before and that direct or perceived meddling in politics will not help reverse the situation, but will make it worse (...) They gently remind Catholics of the teachings of the Church on key issues and leave it to them to decide without threatening hellfire and brimstone. Much less do the

bishops presume that they can dictate to those who do not follow the Church’s teachings.”<sup>26</sup> Without resorting to threats of eternal punishment and damnation it takes more than just a “gentle reminder” to drive home the message that what is at stake is the future moral landscape of Maltese society irrespective of confessional and/or political leanings. Furthermore, the Church’s stand on certain doctrinal and moral issues cannot be equated with the marketing policy of some multinational company. The moral teachings of the Catholic Church cannot be considered in the same way as some product that is put on the market and then withdrawn when sales take a nose-dive. Nor can the Catholic Church be considered a competitor among others in the “market of ideas”. It is not a question of “adapt or face extinction”. The Catholic Church has a message to proclaim, and that message is Jesus Christ, his teachings and his deeds. The way it *communicates* the message needs to develop according to time, place, circumstances and cultures; but the *content* remains unchanged. And even if one were to argue from the viewpoint of Church attendance, it is a time-proven fact that a religion attracts most attention not when it is more accommodating but when it is more *challenging*. A religion that demands much from its adherents offers multiple challenges; a religion that seeks to accommodate does not. A religion that is accommodating is not worth bearing witness to, let alone dying for. It is most unfortunate that words such as “dictate” and “impose” are all too often being levelled at the Catholic Church’s position on moral issues in order to thwart any attempts on its part to speak out forcefully. This is nothing short of psychological bullying. Nor can the Catholic Church be expected to keep silent just because a political party happens to

<sup>24</sup> See Matthew Vella, ‘Archbishop reinstates divorce campaign figurehead to Ecclesiastical Tribunal’, *MaltaToday*, Friday 26 August 2011: <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/12306/archbishop-reinstates-divorce-campaign-figurehead-to-ecclesiastical-tribunal#.U6FS3v-KC01> (accessed 18 June 2014).

<sup>25</sup> See the interview with Mgr. Charles Scicluna, Auxiliary Bishop of Malta entitled “The Church is here to propose... not impose” in *The Times of Malta*, 23 November 2012: <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20120807/local/Bishops-IVF-letter-snubbed-by-priests.431818> (accessed 12 July 2014).

<sup>26</sup> Lino Spiteri, ‘Dragging religion into Politics’, *The Times of Malta*, Monday 21 April 2014, p. 40.

agree with its teachings or shares its preoccupations on certain issues of national interest.<sup>27</sup>

### **The future role of the Catholic Church in Malta**

If I were to propose a point of departure for any discussion about the future role of Catholicism in Malta, I would opt for the address delivered by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI during his visit to the Grotto of St Paul at Rabat, Malta, on 17 April 2010. It was in many ways a programmatic speech that outlined the mission of the Church in Malta in the light of the challenges that await her in the years to come within a society that is in constant flux:

I invite you to hear God's word afresh, as your ancestors did, and to let it challenge your ways of thinking and the way you live your lives.

From this holy place where the apostolic preaching first spread throughout these islands, I call upon each of you to take up the exciting challenge of the new evangelization. Live out your faith ever more fully with the members of your families,

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<sup>27</sup> In an interview given to the newspaper *Maltatoday*, the Leader of the Opposition, Dr. Simon Busuttil stated that:

It is wrong to allow the government to bully society, including the church into silence over such matters (Civil Unions Bill which included the possibility of gay adoptions)... The church did not say much, despite having a clear position which is known by all. There's something missing in our democracy. Something is undermining democracy and I attribute this to government's attitude and way of doing politics, especially the Prime Minister, who neutralizes whoever does not agree with him.

See article "Muscat has silenced the Church – Simon Busuttil interviewed" in *MaltaToday*, 20 April 2014, p. 1. Watch the full interview on <http://vimeo.com/92405877>

with your friends, in your neighbourhoods, in the workplace and in the whole fabric of Maltese society. In a particular way I urge parents, teachers and catechists to speak of your own living encounter with the Risen Jesus to others, especially the young people who are Malta's future. "Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!" (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 2). Believe that your moments of faith assure an encounter with God, who in his mighty power touches human hearts. In this way, you will introduce the young to the beauty and richness of the Catholic faith, and offer them a sound catechesis, inviting them to ever more active participation in the sacramental life of the Church.

The world needs this witness! In the face of so many threats to the sacredness of human life, and to the dignity of marriage and the family, do not our contemporaries need to be constantly reminded of the grandeur of our dignity as God's children and the sublime vocation we have received in Christ? Does not society need to re-appropriate and defend those fundamental moral truths which remain the foundation of authentic freedom and genuine progress?<sup>28</sup>

In the light of the above, one may draw a few conclusions and suggestions as to the identity and the role of Maltese Catholics in an increasingly pluralist and secular society.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See *Visit to the Grotto of Saint Paul – Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI*, at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2010/april/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20100417\\_grotta-malta\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2010/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100417_grotta-malta_en.html)

<sup>29</sup> An appraisal of the present situation of Maltese society has been undertaken by Auxiliary Bishop Charles Scicluna in an interview that he gave to the Editor of the local newspaper *Maltatoday*. See article "Bishop: Malta witnessing 'development of

The Catholic Church in Malta should take heart that it is not alone in this situation, even if at times its attitude has been more one of reaction than one of foresight, which is a constant handicap, and especially typical of insular societies. Surprisingly, the role of the Christian faith, which for years has been placed outside the public forum, is once again taking centre stage. One may cite here the recent declarations of the British Prime Minister David Cameron, such as when he stated that “what we both (churches and political institutions) need more of is evangelism. More belief that we can get out there and actually change people’s lives and make a difference and improve both the spiritual, physical and moral state of our country, and we should be unashamed and clear about wanting to do that.”<sup>30</sup> He also urged the British to be “proud of the fact that we are a Christian country, and I am proud of the fact we’re a Christian country and we shouldn’t be ashamed to say so.”<sup>31</sup> Like many European Union countries Maltese society has become increasingly mired in a Babel of political correctness gone awry.

The way the present Government in Malta, and particularly some members of the Cabinet, sometimes refer to the Catholic Church also needs to change. Catholics, be they members of the hierarchy or laity, should not be considered as if they were oddities, minorities and foreigners in their own country. The much used (and abused) dictum “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”<sup>32</sup> should

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pluralist society” in *Maltatoday*, Wednesday 23 April 2014, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> See the British Prime Minister’s opening speech at his Easter reception at Downing Street, 9 April 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/easter-reception-at-downing-street-2014>

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Mt. 22:21.

not be taken to mean that the Church has no right to speak against legislation and political measures that it considers as morally wrong and harmful to society. As the Promoter of Justice at the Ecclesiastical Tribunal of Malta has rightly stated in a recent article:

(The Catholic Church in Malta) ask[s] to be treated with respect due to any organization working for the good of society, particularly one that has contributed so much and for so long to the social and cultural development of our nation.

Similarly, although the Holy See (...) is obviously no China in terms of size and economic clout, neither does it deserve to be treated with contempt; out of regard for the spiritual sensibility of many Maltese – including politicians from both sides of the House – if for no other reason.<sup>33</sup>

The bishops of Malta are conscious that they are pastors and not feudal lords and useful lessons have been learnt from the tragic events of the political-religious struggle of the 1960s. To borrow a phrase coined by former U.S. President Bill Clinton and apply it to the present situation, the Catholic hierarchy is aware that it would be more likely to win over people to its message by the power of its example rather than by the example of its power.<sup>34</sup> Pope Francis has already given many a lesson in this area and so has the Extraordinary General Synod of Bishops that

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<sup>33</sup> Fr. Brendan Gatt, ‘Church’s legal obligations’, *The Times of Malta*, Friday 2 May 2014, p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> The phrase refers to a part of a speech delivered by Bill Clinton on August 27, 2008 during the Democratic Party Convention held in Denver, Colorado. His exact words were: “People the world over have been more impressed by the power of our example than by the example of our power.” See [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/27/us/politics/27text-clinton.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/27/us/politics/27text-clinton.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

has just taken place in Rome. Nevertheless, as pastors it is also their duty to “preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching.”<sup>35</sup> As one local newspaper columnist who is himself totally in favour of gay marriage has emphatically stated some time ago in an op-ed:

The least I expect is the Church to engage in active debate on these important matters (civil unions)... I would have loved to see the Church engage in a healthy debate on the matter, expressing its views, and putting forward suggestions.

Clean politics does not and should not exclude the Maltese Catholic Church from expressing its views with prudence and respect. It has an important role to play in Maltese society. The Maltese Church has a lot of soul searching to do. I am not happy with a defunct Church.<sup>36</sup>

However, such debate can only be possible and indeed fruitful if one does away with the usual format in which TV and Radio talk shows are being currently held. At this level, clean politics is almost nonexistent. At present issues of national interest discussed in these public fora are simply degenerating into shouting matches in which the winner is not the one providing the best argument but the one who has the loudest voice. It is also a pity that the aim of such events is that of boosting audiences and cashing on advertisements in the process.

Another worrying factor is that the objective truth is being construed as lying with the opinion of the majority; in other words, the truth is measured according to public opinion. Here it would be interesting to note the words

of Pope Francis in an address to members of the International Theological Commission in December of last year:

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the members of the Church possess the *“sense of the faith”*. It is a kind of “spiritual instinct” which allows them to *sentire cum Ecclesia*<sup>37</sup> and to discern what conforms to the Apostolic faith and to the spirit of the Gospel. Of course, it is clear that the *sensus fidelium*<sup>38</sup> must not be confused with the sociological reality of majority opinion. It is something else.<sup>39</sup>

There exists an urgent need to strengthen the ties between the Catholic hierarchy and the laity. The reason for stating this is the fact that the word ‘Church’ is much too often mistakenly identified with the former (especially on the part of the media), whereas it should be identified with all members: hierarchy, clergy, religious, consecrated persons, and the laity. Their common vocation stems from the one baptism that all have received. All must experience a sense of belonging.<sup>40</sup> The Catholic laity, and especially

<sup>37</sup> The term *sentire cum Ecclesia* carries the meaning of ‘being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind,’ an attitude that Paul urges the Philippians to take (Phil. 2:2).

<sup>38</sup> The term *sensus fidelium* means literally ‘the sense of the faithful’. It conveys the concept of ‘common understanding’ ‘or common perception’ among the faithful.

<sup>39</sup> *Address of Pope Francis to Members of the International Theological Commission*, 6 December 2013, at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/december/documents/papa-francesco\\_20131206\\_commissione-teologica.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/december/documents/papa-francesco_20131206_commissione-teologica.html) (accessed 17 June 2013).

<sup>40</sup> This concept is in line with the Petrine and Pauline vision of the Church as “living stones” (1 Pt. 2:5), “God’s people” (1 Pt. 2:9-10), “body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27-31; Ef. 4:11-13), “fellow

<sup>35</sup> 2 Tim. 4:2.

<sup>36</sup> Frank Psaila, ‘Not happy with a defunct Church’, *The Times of Malta*, Wednesday 23 April 2014, p. 44.

the Catholic *intelligentsia*, in Malta must be nurtured, encouraged and supported by the Church authorities especially when they courageously voice their concerns as Catholics on matters of legislation and public policy and are at times subjected to a torrent of abuse for taking their stand on the recent moral and political issues. Within the next few years they will have to take upon themselves a more direct role in the public forum. This calls not only for an authentic witness but also for a solid formation in the light of the Gospel and of Church teaching. Maltese society is also in dire need of a healthy debate such as that which took place between the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, philosopher and Neo-Marxist social critic, wherein they discussed some aspects of secularisation, and the role of reason and religion in a free society.<sup>41</sup>

The Catholic Church in Malta must also embark upon a thorough overhaul on the manner the Gospel message is being transmitted, beginning with the catechesis of the young, the teaching of the subject of religion in schools and theological reflection both on the academic and on the parish levels. Furthermore, it must seek to reinforce its dialogue with society, both local and European, in order to continue conveying its message that human dignity and human rights are grounded in the Christian faith and in the Biblical teaching that the human being is cast in the image of God. The “new evangelisation” must go hand in hand with “dialogue within the Courtyard of the Gentiles”. It must also distance itself from the militant approach adopted by some well-meaning Catholics (as well as non-Catholic Christians), thereby

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citizens... members of the household of God” (Ef. 2:19).

<sup>41</sup> See Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger (2007), *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

unwittingly undermining the Christian message. As the renowned Mediaeval Muslim scholar al-Ghazālī once wrote of his own co-religionists:

The harm inflicted on religion by those who defend it in a way not proper to it is greater than [the harm caused by] those who attack it in a way proper to it. As it has been said: “A rational foe is better than an ignorant friend.”<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, the Church in Malta has yet to learn how to side-step the political landmines that lie in its path. Its pastoral programme must be addressed directly to the people, while studiously avoiding devious machinations of party politics that seek either to put its bishops in a bad light or to manipulate their message beyond recognition. The backlash of the divorce issue and the law on Civil Unions should serve as a stark warning of things to come. Furthermore, the message of the Church authorities needs to be clear and unambiguous. It is the duty of the bishops to provide both priests and laity with clear guidelines in order to avoid confusion among them concerning sensitive issues. Its approach must be “*veritas in caritate*” (truth in charity) as well as “*caritas in veritate*” (charity in truth).

The future role of the Catholic Church in Malta depends in no small measure upon the solidity of marriage and the family and the nurture and education of the young. In the wake of the introduction of divorce and civil unions this issue has become a grave pastoral challenge that requires constant study and effort in order to strengthen relationships between married couples themselves and

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<sup>42</sup> Al-Ghazālī (2000), *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, translated, introduced and annotated by Michael E. Marmura, Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, Introduction (18), p. 6.

their children. Late last year the Holy See sent to all Episcopal Conferences a questionnaire in preparation for the Extraordinary General Synod that has just been celebrated. Here in Malta this project was entrusted to the Institute *Discern*.<sup>43</sup> In late May of this year this institute drew up and published a Preliminary Report<sup>44</sup> based on a sub-sample of 1,590 respondents.<sup>45</sup> In some cases the results made for some sober reading. 69.7% of respondents admitted that they selectively accepted the Church's teaching on family life. For example, whereas the vast majority accepted that marriage is a sacrament implying fidelity, exclusivity and indissolubility, 15.8% find it difficult to follow particularly the Church's teaching on contraception and birth control. Only 47.2% believe that the Catholic Church in Malta is doing enough to help couples who are facing a crisis in their married life. While 83.3% of parents who responded consider it their vocation to transmit their faith to their children and relatives, only 6.2% "teach" religion to their children. 57.7% of respondents thought that the family is not always helping to give a Christian view of

<sup>43</sup> According to its website *Discern* (Institute for Research on the Signs of the Times) "is a non-profit organization funded primarily by the Archdiocese of Malta without the exclusion of other sources of funding. The Institute for Research on the Signs of the Times organizes a number of think tanks, each of which provides expertise and technical support in important areas of pastoral concern. It seeks to promote collaboration with similar bodies both national and international, especially with the University of Malta. It adheres to a policy of equal opportunity and affirmative action." See <http://www.discern-malta.org/index.html>

<sup>44</sup> This *Preliminary Report* was published in, among other media sources, the weekly Catholic newspaper *Leħen is-Sewwa* on 25 May 2014 on page 28. The results quoted above are taken from this publication. See also Fr Joe Borg, "A second coming for Malta *Cattolicissima*?" in *The Times of Malta*, 25 May 2014.

<sup>45</sup> The population of Malta is currently that of around 425,000.

humanity and the human vocation and 59.9% believe that the many crises of faith which we are facing today have a "great" influence on family life. 62% still pray together as a family and 65.2% attend Mass on Sundays whereas 53.1% replied that they attend frequently.

The Catholic Church in Malta must also give the necessary attention and pastoral care to those among its members who have divorced and remarried or have opted in favour of a civil union.<sup>46</sup> Most of those concerned consider themselves rejected by the Church since they are not allowed to frequent the sacraments. Here one also has to state that for many people, membership in the Church is comparable to membership in a club, the bottom line being that if one does not follow the rules one is ejected and membership is terminated. The above-mentioned Preliminary Report states that among the respondents "there is no clear understanding about the pastoral ministry which is to be undertaken to help those who enter a Civil Union to live in the love of God and the Christian faith." 43.3% believe that the fact

<sup>46</sup> On this subject the Final Document of the recent Bishops' Synod on the Family states the following:

**25.** In ordine ad un approccio pastorale verso le persone che hanno contratto matrimonio civile, che sono divorziati e risposati, o che semplicemente convivono, compete alla Chiesa rivelare loro la divina pedagogia della grazia nelle loro vite e aiutarle a raggiungere la pienezza del piano di Dio in loro. Seguendo lo sguardo di Cristo, la cui luce rischiara ogni uomo (cf. Gv 1,9; *Gaudium et Spes*, 22) la Chiesa si volge con amore a coloro che partecipano alla sua vita in modo incompiuto, riconoscendo che la grazia di Dio opera anche nelle loro vite dando loro il coraggio per compiere il bene, per prendersi cura con amore l'uno dell'altro ed essere a servizio della comunità nella quale vivono e lavorano.

<http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2014/10/18/0770/03044.html> (accessed 20 October 2014).

that cohabiting couples are not allowed to receive communion is a cause of pain. 30.9% think that people living in an irregular marriage expect the Church to treat their children in a similar manner as the children of those whose marriage has been blessed by the Church and 19.2% expect the Church to forgive them and to allow them to receive the sacraments. The Catholic Church must also be prepared to address those psychological problems that will eventually emerge among children belonging to divorced couples and who will be undoubtedly traumatised by this bitter experience.

Also, due attention should be given towards homosexuals and lesbians as well as to same-sex couples. In a statement issued immediately after the Civil Unions Bill was passed through Parliament, the Bishops of Malta and Gozo had expressed their wish that the discussion on these issues “continues with due respect to every person, irrespective of his/her sexual orientation and choices made,” while continuing to affirm that “our society should strive to keep cherishing and giving preference to the natural family, built upon marriage between a man and a woman.”<sup>47</sup> In this connection, the acceptance of Bishop Charles Scicluna to preside over an Eucharistic celebration on May 17 of this year on the occasion of the International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO) and the tenth anniversary of Drachma LGBTI<sup>48</sup> was highly commendable and a step in the right direction. It went a long way towards showing

<sup>47</sup> *A Statement by the Bishops on the Civil Unions Law* issued on April 16, 2014: <http://ms.maltadiocese.org/WEBSITE/2014/PRESS%20RELEASES/41%20STQARRJA%20TAL-ISQFIJET%20ENG.pdf> Accessed 14.07.2014.

<sup>48</sup> See ‘Bishop celebrates thanksgiving ceremony of gay Catholics,’ *MaltaToday*, Monday 19 May 2014. [http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/39156/bishop\\_celebrates\\_thanksgiving\\_ceremony\\_for\\_gay\\_catholics#.VESfxMlcRMs](http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/39156/bishop_celebrates_thanksgiving_ceremony_for_gay_catholics#.VESfxMlcRMs) (accessed 20 October 2014).

what the recent Extraordinary Synod of Bishops has stated in its final statement.<sup>49</sup>

Another challenge that needs to be addressed in the context of Malta’s membership in the European Union is the one concerning ecumenism and interreligious 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. The phenomenon of irregular migration has resulted during these past few years in a dramatic increase in the number of people hailing from various ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Here one must also consider the fact that among these irregular migrants one finds a substantial number of Christians belonging to various denominations. Inter-marriage between Maltese and people hailing from other countries, cultures and religions has become an ever more common feature in Maltese society. Here again, the Church in Malta is called upon to address the issue with sober

<sup>49</sup> The text relevant to the issue states:

**55.** Alcune famiglie vivono l’esperienza di avere al loro interno persone con orientamento omosessuale. Al riguardo ci si è interrogati su quale attenzione pastorale sia opportuna di fronte a questa situazione riferendosi a quanto insegna la Chiesa: «Non esiste fondamento alcuno per assimilare o stabilire analogie, neppure remote, tra le unioni omosessuali e il disegno di Dio sul matrimonio e la famiglia». Nondimeno, gli uomini e le donne con tendenze omosessuali devono essere accolti con rispetto e delicatezza. «A loro riguardo si eviterà ogni marchio di ingiusta discriminazione» (Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede, *Considerazioni circa i progetti di riconoscimento legale delle unioni tra persone omosessuali*, 4).

<http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2014/10/18/0770/03044.html> (accessed 20 October 2014).

realism and with fidelity to its identity and role as a Catholic community. The Catholic hierarchy, especially through the sterling work carried out by the Refugee Service which is run by the Secretariat for Emigration and Tourism, has continued to demonstrate its solicitude and care for those who are fleeing from war zones or from countries where torture and unlawful detention are an everyday occurrence.

The Archdiocese of Malta already enjoys cordial relations with representatives of the main Christian denominations in the country as well as with the Muslim community, which has the largest single non-Christian presence in the country. However, this dialogue should also extend to other non-Christian communities. It is also important that the Catholic community receive adequate formation in ecumenical and interreligious 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 interreligious 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. In their latest Pastoral Letter for the Lenten Season the Bishops of Malta and Gozo have addressed these issues when stating that,

Many contemporary Maltese and Gozitan citizens, as well as some who lived before us, have toiled so that our country may retain the dignity and the position which it deserves, equivalent to that enjoyed by other peoples. We should express sincere feelings of gratitude towards our brethren who have laboured on our behalf throughout history in order that this may come to fruition... Besides feeling grateful for all we have received, we should also hold a great sense of responsibility and duty

towards both present and future generations, so that we too may be able to pass on to our descendants our living traditions of belief, virtues and values.

As a Church – in our projects, in our judgments on the realities of life - it is necessary for us to become more and more a Church which is capable of serving the people, accompanying and guiding them gently, no matter who they are and from where they hail. In order to be authentic, our faith must be translated into practical choices which we make on a day to day basis: in the parishes, in families, at the workplace, in our institutions and in our interpersonal relations. This is the only way in which we can announce the Gospel with joy, the only way in which we can inspire hope in the hearts of more people and in the core of our present day history.<sup>50</sup>

Throughout the centuries the Catholic Church in Malta has faced innumerable challenges both from within and from without. It has also witnessed and given its contribution in the most decisive moments of our nation's identity and history. The above-mentioned events have left an indelible mark on Maltese society and a sign that pluralism, with both its positive and its negative effects, is here to stay. They should be considered as yet another instance in which Maltese Catholics are called upon to continue to live and to bear witness to the Christian message while reaching out towards all those who, although do not embrace the Christian faith or any faith at all, sincerely believe in partnership for the sake of our country's development and the common good. The results of above-

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<sup>50</sup> Joint Pastoral Letter entitled *Our Share in Building Society*, issued on 01 March 2014, at <http://thechurchinmalta.org/en/posts/38269/ittra-pastorali-randan-2014.38269> (accessed 14 July 2014).

mentioned Preliminary Report by *Discern* show clearly that the Catholic Church in Malta is not only still relevant but also that it is still loved and respected, albeit with a few

reservations. Its relevance and contribution to Maltese society greatly depends upon its response to these social changes as well as to the consequences that they carry.

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