

Editorial:

The Bishop of Gozo and the Gozitan Diaspora

Post-war migration affected both islands of Malta but had a particular dramatic effect on the population of Gozo, with whole villages being decimated as a result of the rush to escape the harsh economic realities of the time and seek greener pastures elsewhere.

Those who left in the 1950s and 60s, young energetic youths or families with young children have now grown to be euphemistically referred to as ‘senior citizens’, but they still consider themselves to be staunchly Maltese, or more accurately Gozitans. They still carry with them the culture they were born in and the dialect they spoke at the time. The highlight for many is to visit the island to meet with old friends and seek what’s left of their extended families.

Visits by Maltese bishops to Australia do not occur too frequently. As a matter of fact, on average, this occurs only once in every nine years or so. Since 1960, there have been three visits by Gozitan bishops, namely by the late Bishop Nikol Cauchi (in 1968 and again in 1995), and a few months ago, in October, by Bishop Mario Grech.

Social life for Gozitans in Australia is centred around established associations, or organisations, which were often set up to celebrate annually the feast of the saint of the village from which they originated. There are associations of Xaghra villagers, Qala, Nadur, Għarb, and others. Throughout the year they organise get-togethers, barbeques, dinner-dances and other activities with the sole aim of socialising and keeping in touch with their friends.

Bishop Grech was welcomed by all of these organisations, and he and members of his family who accompanied him had a busy time visiting them all, in Melbourne, Sydney as well as Adelaide.

During his visit to the Maltese Community Centre in Melbourne he had the occasion of attending

classes for students learning Maltese with whom he had opportunity to chat. He asked one of the mature students why was she learning Maltese and was surprised by her answer. She said: “My mother in Malta is getting old and started forgetting what English she had. I never learned Maltese and always communicated with her in English. I am worried that the time will soon come when we will not be able to communicate any more unless I learn Maltese.” This emphasizes the real risk of forgetting the second language as one grows older. It also characterises the situation current in Australia where second and subsequent generations of Maltese can rarely communicate effectively in Maltese.

At a reception given in his honour by the Maltese Community Council of Victoria, Bishop Grech emphasized the need to maintain one’s Maltese culture and tradition. He stressed the point that culture is an intrinsic heritage which we should do our utmost to transmit to the next generation. And this, he added, includes our religious beliefs which are being threatened everywhere.

In a country where it might take an hour to get to visit one’s friends, the definition of a place not being “too far” needs to be adjusted. It suffices to point out that the distance from one end of Melbourne to the other is more than 60 km. What is considered not ‘too far’ for the average Australian is often considered prohibitively distant for a Maltese coming from Malta.

Apart from this mental adjustment, one is sure that the scenery, the variety, the novelty of flora and fauna, not to mention the warmth of receptions he met with, will continue to be remembered by the Bishop for a long time to come.

Maurice Cauchi