

# Bishop Monsignor Scicluna: The Maltese Church's catalyst for change



MARTIN  
SCICLUNA

The arrival of Monsignor Charles Scicluna has come as a breath of fresh air to a Maltese Church sorely in need of succour and reinvigoration. The first test of any leader is his ability to raise morale, to inject a sense of hope, well being and energy in the people he leads. Bishop Charles Scicluna has passed that test with flying colours. There has been a national sense of euphoria about his arrival.

Why? It is a combination of personality and the knowledge of what he has already achieved.

Monsignor Scicluna comes hot from holding down one of the top posts in the Vatican as the Promoter of Justice, or chief prosecutor, in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Here he has been at the heart of probably the greatest crisis to hit the modern Catholic Church. For the last 10 years he has dealt with the worldwide sex abuse scandal with considerable effect. By all reports he met the challenges this presented with firmness (zero tolerance) and great humanity, summed up in his own words almost poetically: "The Church may have to amputate to heal... when the innocence of children is trampled upon, sullied, abused and destroyed, then the earth becomes arid and the whole world is sad".

It is not often that a Maltese priest

comes to Malta with the background, experience born in Canada, studied in Malta and Rome at the top canonical law college, and worked in one of the most testing jobs in the Vatican and deep knowledge of the politics of the Universal Church of Monsignor Scicluna.

Beyond what he has achieved, however, is the personality that comes with it. Here is a Monsignor who is jovial, almost a Friar Tuck character, rotund, short of stature and prepared to joke about it, friendly and clearly liked by everybody, who has a razor sharp mind. More. He has a razor sharp mind that is able, like the late greatly lamented Cardinal Martini, to express complex issues in such a simple way that ordinary people can understand them. He is open minded, down to earth and, in the words of a leading Maltese lawyer, "opens up options for the person he is speaking to without the need to impose... sowing a seed and letting the plant grow". Above all, he has proved in the turmoil and horror of the clerical abuse scandals that he possesses mental steel and power of decision, vital attributes for any leader in any field. Many see him as a future Cardinal.

Two statements he made encapsulated these qualities. The first came 20 years ago in an opinion piece he wrote entitled "The Priest's Duty Towards the Truth": "In today's world, different opinions abound... It is the duty of the priest to listen attentively to the voice of the world. He is bound to try to understand, to

weigh carefully, reflect intelligently and discern prayerfully." In another, more recent statement commenting on the Maltese Church's performance in the divorce referendum: "We need to be clear on our values, but should be respectful in how we propose them. And we need to tell people we are not here to impose, but that we are here to propose and this is why we are proposing them."

I have been severely critical of the Maltese Church over the last few years. Monsignor Scicluna's arrival as Auxiliary Bishop comes at a crucial juncture in its history. As the Archbishop's key supporter and adviser, he finds himself in the pivotal role of trying to turn back the tide of disaffection that has wracked the Maltese Church over the last three decades and which has accelerated alarmingly in the last 10 years.

Bishop Scicluna has a formidable task ahead of him. He has to spearhead an agenda for change in a notoriously conservative Maltese Church. For the first time ever, the Maltese Church has to deal with the first truly, seriously educated laity in Malta, one that has also manifestly been influenced by Malta's advances in its democracy and is therefore more questioning of authority. Clerical sex abuse and arguments over divorce have highlighted a massive loss of trust in the Church because its judgement has been found wanting and it cannot use the discipline of obedience any longer to dictate its ease.

As Monsignor Scicluna has wise-

ly warned, he has now entered into a honeymoon period with the Maltese faithful. We should not expect instant miracles. But he will be keen to foster greater collaboration with the laity to find solutions to the problems. The Times debate showed what educated laity would be willing to do to help.

Playing to one of his strengths, the Church must learn how to express itself effectively in a secular world if it is not further to alienate its diminishing flock. It currently comes across as authoritarian and lacking compassion for those who, in its eyes, stray. As he himself put it "We need to do better... We need to start using language that people can understand." Monsignor Gouder, the Pro-Vicar General highlighted how Monsignor Scicluna, when still only a young seminarian in Paola, "delivered beautiful and short homilies". For a start in the new era, why cannot all parish priests in Malta be compelled to attend a course in public speaking and to deliver brief homilies?

The Church must adopt a more intelligent, more rational, less dogmatic tone of voice. Let priests read the mood and appear tolerant, understanding and thoughtful, rather than judgmental and authoritarian. The Maltese Church's inability to articulate its doctrines in language that is meaningful and relevant to the faithful, and does not hurt and offend those whose conscience tells them otherwise has been the hallmark of the last few years. Steps should be taken to cor-

rect this communications gap, if nothing else then in the name of charity.

Monsignor Scicluna will have grasped immediately that the key lessons to come out of the combined impacts of the botched divorce referendum, the TVF pastoral letter and the clerical sex abuse incidents, as well as discussions about the "traditional" family, are to shine a searchlight on the Maltese Church's governance.

These recent major public issues, including the handling of the Maltese clerical sex abuse scandal, have exposed a Church that is monolithic, poorly organised, badly led and divided. As Monsignor Scicluna so perceptively said: "When we are not united under the Archbishop, we will create confusion." It will be his job to ensure the Maltese Church's structure, leadership, organisation and method of communication are modernised and improved.

The heartfelt appeal from all quarters of the priesthood and the laity for the resurgence of a relevant Maltese Church - a Church that makes a difference to the everyday lives of people - has found an echo in what Cardinal Martini said in his deathbed interview. Monsignor Scicluna too will have grasped that the key lesson for the Maltese Church is that it needs to take a hard look at itself and to heed the warning signs of decay and alienation to which many of the Church's friends have drawn attention.

Happy Christmas! →

## Is it time for a reform of the ballot vote paper?

SIMON MERECIECA

Election time in Malta is fast approaching as the date for both the local council elections and the central government one has been set for 9 March. It is going to be another harsh election campaign, where both parties will seek to hit below the belt. With the fairly recent divorce campaign, Malta has had a taste of what any future election campaigns hold since the former was a testing ground for new propaganda tactics. Most probably, the role that ITC and the social media will play in the forthcoming elections will make prospective voters forget other basic issues regarding our electoral system, which, despite its deficiencies, none of the major parties has ever seriously considered resolving. One of the acknowledged deficiencies is the name roll in our ballot vote paper.

There is general consensus on both sides of the political spectrum that the way the list of candidates is compiled gives unfair advantage to those candidates whose surname begins with the first letters of the alphabet starting from 'A'. In theory, this should not be the case, as the electorate is expected to base its preference on the candidates' political abilities irrespective of how they are listed on the ballot sheet. In reality the situation is totally different, creating a distinct disadvantage for those whose surname starts with the last letters of the alphabet! This disadvantage becomes even more acute when a party presents a good number of candidates on a district. The electorate tends to give first, second and perhaps third preference to their candidate of choice but then continue voting in descending order according to the list headed by an A and its subsequent letters gaining an unfair advantage. It is a statistical reality that our representatives whose surnames begin with A up to

F outnumber all the rest. This is having a ripple effect on the formation of our Parliament.

This statistical observation was made by a politician of high repute, our former President of the Republic, Ċensu Tabone. Tabone believed that our electoral system gave an unfair head start to certain candidates. His views have been aired by Henry Frendo in *Ċensu Tabone, The Man and the Century*. In page 301, Frendo records Tabone as saying, "If one looked at the names of the Maltese MPs since 1921 (when internal self-government had been introduced), one would realise that more than three-fourths of their surnames only reached the letter F. Even if one considered that there were more surnames starting with certain letters, it could not be denied that 'certain politicians' had made a career because of their surnames."

Other systems exist that operate in foreign electoral systems. One such system could be that the list and order of positioning the candidates is left in the hands of the respective political parties. This would now be feasible in Malta since amendments made to the Constitution in 1987 include political parties. However, I believe that many voters would not be in agreement as this method could lead to abuse by the parties who could give unfair advantage to a party acolyte. Another system is to have the candidate names listed at random.

This can happen in various ways, for example, on a first come first served basis. However, whenever this system was adopted abroad fights broke out among candidates and sometimes even among their respective canvassers. In some cases, canvassers or candidates themselves slept overnight outside the registration office to be the first to register so that the candidate's

name would be at top of the ballot list.

In my view the fairer solution that could well work in Malta is to be found in Ċensu Tabone's explanation. Since Tabone clearly shows that the present system favours those whose surname is among the first quarter of the alphabetical list, this shortcoming could be addressed by alternating the alphabetical order on the ballot paper. Elections here are held every five years, therefore

listing could alternate by having one election where the ballot list begins with the names of the candidates starting from A downwards, and the following election the list would be headed by those beginning from Z backwards. If the parties agreed to adopt such a system all candidates would be given an equitable chance.

Mathematically, this discrepancy is only affecting negatively half of the candidates. Should the parties concerned agree to adopt such a

proposal, the alphabetical incongruity will be fairly addressed and none of the candidates would feel at a disadvantage for this element of bias would be finally addressed.

All that is needed is flexibility from all the stakeholders concerned and the good will to actually implement such a system.

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