

19.

Employment as a Declaration of Dignity

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Going back to the past before the last war, in the beginning of the Thirties, the sight of someone begging at City Gate, or in the tunnel of Marsamxett before reaching the ferries, was arguably part of the landscape.

In the same times, on the bus headed for Sliema, a blind man with a violin, accompanied by a girl, used to get onboard and play some popular music, and then the girl would go round to smilingly accept their donations. That man wanted to live with dignity. He gave a service, and for that service he was paid. This man was part of the environment in which I lived. That completely blind man supported his family, made the passengers happy during a part of the voyage, and used to earn sufficiently enough. In today's terminology he was 'self-employed' - having no employer, and of course in those times he paid neither the income-tax nor the national insurance. His mind was at rest, all that he earned was for himself and his family.

Allow me to make a reflection on the word 'handicapped'. The English have a knack of finding suitable words which while giving the whole meaning, give satisfaction and win respect, and eventually find themselves in the vocabulary of other languages which recognise their worth. In our language we note with pleasure that the word 'handicapped' is taking the place of the hopelessly inadequate word 'incapacitated'. And this is how it should be. Beethoven composed his most beautiful symphonies when he was deaf. He was definitely **handicapped** and not 'incapacitated'. How many persons do you know in Malta and abroad, who have some 'handicap' but nonetheless they are employed in high posts and are looked upon with great respect! The Minister of Education in Egypt is blind. Handicapped yes - incapacitated no. The incapacitated cannot look forward to some employment. For this reason even our attitudes towards our handicapped brethren must change for the better. From the way we view and brand them we are building up their dignity.

I have said 'many handicapped'. It is said that in Malta practically every family has some emigrant relative. Some are related to cousins. Let those who are here think a bit to see if this is not true. Now I say that this relationship is also valid to 'handicapped' family members. If the relationship is not direct it may be indirect. But it is there. The handicapped is one of us, or we are a part of them. For this reason there is the obligation of solidarity, which means that one has to support another, that one must strive to see one's neighbours living with a dignity like that which one wants to live with himself/herself.

Work - employment is a need in everybody's life. How can an unemployed person earn his living? If living is 'fair', the means with which one lives must also be 'fair'. This is so true that today, the Christian concept calls on the State to provide employment. If you reflect a little about this you will realise how the poverty and the misery have not remained so evident in those countries where this concept of solidarity has established itself firmly in the beliefs of that and this nation. Consider our homeland, Malta. Naturally, when I say 'Malta' I am also including Gozo. This small Island which lacks resources, with a population of over 3,000 every square mile. Note the dignity of work of every type of employment as regards the standard of living, which may be the envy of nations whose countries are bigger than ours and whose resources are more plentiful. Work - by work I mean one who is gainfully employed, corresponds to an income which allows one to enjoy the good things in life in all aspects. It is the standard of living you live with that gives you that dignity. What dignity can a human, who is hungry, who is naked, whose body is bleeding, who has no roof on one's head, who has no security, whose only possessions are carried around in person, who sleeps in the open and prays that the elements would not be harsh possibly feel? This image which I am projecting is not fiction. Just in Calcutta (and in its surroundings) there are about one million persons like the ones I described above. Yes, one million persons. Ask Mother Theresa.

When one talks about Employment as a Declaration of Dignity, it is worthwhile also for one to consider that unemployment might mean a 'Declaration of Misery'. Most of the people in the world live in poverty. This is the reality of life. It is unbelievable, but that is the way it is. Let us consider the five continents, the southern half of America - most of the population lives in poverty. In Africa and Asia the situation is the same. Free Europe, with all its failings, is prosperous and affluent. That part of Europe which is not democratic, is dominated by spiritual, as well as material poverty meaning that we, the 348,000 who live on these two little rocks, should recognise our blessings while planning how to live better.

Today a handicapped person in Malta is truly one of us, with whom the State is showing solidarity. This is how it should be. In Maltese we say "To carry the cross of others". This is the right approach. Everyone of us, including the Government, should be like Simon from Cirena, carrying the cross of those who feel that it is too

heavy for them to carry it alone.

The Dignity of Employment for Handicapped Persons. I, who was reared with the handicapped and who lived for 30 years with the blind, cannot explain my joy when one of my students is given employment. Even though he or she already has a pension, because the blind in Malta qualify for a pension from the age of 14 years. One would do well to emphasize that this social benefit, which was introduced in our country nearly a quarter of a century ago paved the way for other social benefits. Employment not only gives the handicapped more money, but also puts him or her psychologically 'at par' with other workers classified 'not handicapped'. Employment gives a feeling of usefulness and one feels that satisfaction of doing something which is worth the money he or she is receiving. What a satisfaction this is, even the other family members feel this, when they feel their responsibilities getting lighter! Let us not forget that in many cases the parents of the handicapped or those closely related are suffering much more than the handicapped person himself/herself. 'The Sorrows of the cross' is what I have described. On the other hand, the smile on a handicapped's face spreads to the faces of all the family members and sometimes it transforms itself into joy.

Naturally, that employment which is conducive to dignity is nothing more than the fruits of the work he/she had done in the course of their education. The value of education is discovered in the fact that one's good is revealed while receiving a sound formation and builds up character, and at the same time prepares one to enter the sphere of work according to one's inclinations with regards to personal abilities. And it is in this very area that Specialised Teachers and Social Workers come in.

Don't try to make a blind person a designer, but this work may be very suited to someone who is deaf. On the other hand, there are a lot of blind people in our world who work as telephone operators. Experience has taught me that every handicap has its charisma. For example, as regards those suffering from paraplegia, I find that most of them take up an intellectual job. Repetitive work is well suited to those people who appear physically, totally normal but are mentally subnormal. Here the State comes in by offering the services of professional persons like Social Workers, Welfare Officers and Disablement Resettlement Officers. Here one should mention the fact that in 1968/69 a very progressive law was enacted in the Maltese Parliament to establish the obligation of big firms to employ a number of handicapped persons. As you can see Malta has a lot of those ingredients which can help the handicapped to attain a decent standard of living, and of feeling useful. One must always remember that some are born handicapped while others become like that in time. And the latter are far more numerous than the former. Hence the educational service for the handicapped does not end at 16 or 20 years old but it should be a service which encompasses a whole lifetime. In this sphere I think that there remains a lot to be done. What provisions are there in the educational sphere to cater for those who become

handicapped after being older than a certain age? When we plan for the future we need to take into consideration this large category of handicapped persons. Maybe the first question to which we have to find a suitable answer is: "Who is the handicapped?" To the best of my knowledge a precise definition of the handicapped is yet not found in the Maltese Legislation. Though we have progressed a lot as regards the welfare of the handicapped, one must at this point remember that the first idea of doing something in the sphere of Special Education in Malta was in 1954. Special Education in Malta is something very recent - we are still concerned, so to speak, with youth section. And unfortunately we have passed through a relatively long period where trained and qualified personnel instead of increasing began to dwindle, so much that today the first priority needs to be the professional training of people called to work in this specialised sphere.

Like you participants, I feel happy that I have taken part in this (historical) National Seminar on a subject that is so sensitive. I feel that the interest and the enthusiasm which has been shown in these two days will be like fertile seeds, which will germinate and grow and give delicious fruit - the quality of the fruit which is typical to the Maltese soil of which we are all brethren.