

## Opening Address

On behalf of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta, I welcome you all to this Symposium on *Mercy Towards the Immigrant: Theology and Society in Dialogue* which is one of the research projects launched by our Faculty for the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy (2016) which was inaugurated by Pope Francis to celebrate God's merciful and compassionate love.

The word "immigrant" in this Symposium has been purposely chosen in order to accentuate the human identity and dignity of each and every immigrant who reaches our shores. We have deliberately avoided the generic term "immigration" because it conceals the pitfall of perceiving this contemporary phenomenon as a major problem and a burden which drives us to become oblivious to the human faces of so many vulnerable people. Behind every immigrant there is the face of a human being, a tragic story, a deep yearning for a better life, far away from poverty, hunger, exploitation and the unjust distribution of the planet's resources which are meant to be equitably shared by all.

As the French-Jewish thinker Emmanuel Levinas says, the face of the other vulnerable person is an ethical imperative to change the culture of indifference and exclusion into a culture of solidarity, of sharing, mercy and justice. The face of the immigrant should trouble our conscience, prevent us from taking the suffering of others for granted, and impel us to embrace and promote a culture of encounter and dignity.

The Faculty of Theology has embarked on this project at the advice of H.G. the Archbishop who had mooted this idea during an academic staff meeting held in July 2015. Mgr Scicluna encouraged us to focus on the local socio-economic, political, cultural and environmental challenges in order to help the local Church to contextualise the core message of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. The presentations in this Symposium will show how theology, defined traditionally as "faith seeking understanding," could be a source of great inspiration to one of the major challenges being faced by the European Union. In a liberal democratic society, open debates on the complex socio-political and economic issues of

migration stand to gain from the contribution of theological insights which seek to pose different questions and offer different perspectives.

For their help in the organization and co-ordination of this research project, I would like to thank Dr Pauline Dimech and Rev Dr Stefan Attard, especially for their endeavour in engaging academics from other faculties to discuss the dignity and rights of the immigrant in the context of Malta's welfare, education, health and legal systems; and propose concrete recommendations. Today's inter-faculty symposium is thus the outcome of fruitful discussion and collaborative efforts among academic staff members from various faculties of our University.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Ms Michelle Muscat for accepting our request to host our Symposium at this charming eighteenth century palace of Villa Francia.

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