

Foreword

This special issue of *Melita Theologica* brings together the proceedings of an interfaculty symposium organized by the Faculty of Theology of the University of Malta on “Mercy towards Immigrants: Gospel and Society in Dialogue” which took place on June 6, 2016 at Villa Francia, an eighteenth century palace in Lija which was kindly made available to the organizers by the Maltese Premier’s wife, Mrs Michelle Muscat. This Symposium was one of the research projects launched by the Faculty of Theology during the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy (2016) inaugurated by Pope Francis to celebrate God’s merciful and compassionate love.

The principal question at the heart of this one-day event was focused on: “To what extent does society reflect the value of mercy vis-à-vis immigrants?” The Symposium sought to address areas that are of immediate concern to immigrants: the identity issue, social welfare, health, justice, and education. It provided an excellent opportunity to *reflect* on mercy and immigrants within the Maltese context, to initiate a sincere *dialogue* between members of staff from various University faculties, and to *reach out* to society as an academic body. For this reason, the Archbishop of Malta, politicians and heads of institutions directly involved with immigrants were among the invitees.

To speak of mercy vis-à-vis immigrants means to recognize their dignity as human persons. It reminds those engaged in this dialogue of a collective responsibility to create an all-round system that respects everybody’s rights. Two basic notions immediately come to the fore: hospitality and responsibility. These are two necessary attitudes that make up a nation or a community of people, be they social or religious in nature. Uniform discourse on immigrants as “strangers” needs to be directed and enlightened by ethical principles. From time to time during his pontificate, Pope Francis has been urging all people to understand the “hopes” of migrants. He captures this idea very aptly in a discourse on immigration as a key challenge of current times: “From the beginning you have learned *their* languages, promoted *their* cause, made *their* contributions your

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own, defended *their* rights, helped *them* prosper, and kept alive the flame of *their* faith.”¹

The reason why the Faculty of Theology embarks on projects like this one related to mercy is precisely its readiness and competence to identify and present a pastoral and humanly-edifying approach. The very process of holding this Symposium and bringing together various experts, points to a learning curve for both Church and State, in their efforts to show respect and care towards “people from different worlds, with hearts often hardened by the trials of a lengthy journey.”² What is at stake is not simply a *social* response to such a challenge but, equally a pastoral “mission” to serve immigrants. The social and political initiatives do not merely demand a commitment to action, but also a “disposition” to create meaningful discourse among everyone concerned. To speak of mercy and immigrants in Malta means to find a common ground, a common language, that leads to mutual enrichment; a transition from a multicultural to an intercultural society. Pope Francis pioneers this kind of discourse, particularly when he uses innovative and intriguing phrases, such as “peripheries” of the world; “globalization of indifference”; “do not lose hope”; “forgive our indifference,” and “the Church is at your side.”

In line with its tradition, *Melita Theologica* extends its full support to any research concerning the understanding of human care and values. In this scenario of the so-called “mercy project,” the Faculty of Theology sees through this Symposium, the acknowledgement of (the presence of) strangers as an act of humanity. These proceedings are meant to lead the reader to become himself or herself responsible in the manner he or she looks at the immigrant. Different categories have been applied to immigrants in their relationship to society in general. They are referred to as a threat, an asset, members of society, alien to everyone, or even as guests. Theology enables us to ask further questions: How does God want the immigrant to be treated in a socio-political system? What is the responsibility of the Church to the poor in society? How can social welfare programmes reflect Christian or other faiths’ values? How can we change social structures in order to alleviate poverty?

In Scripture there are two questions that point towards the need for each other’s care and responsibility. In Gen 3:9, God asks: “Adam, where are you?,” and in Gen 4:9, we find: “Cain, where is your brother?” These two different scenarios reveal situations where harmony has been lost and show that error

¹ Pope Francis, Address to the American Bishops of the United States of America, Sept 23, 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150923_usa-vescovi.html.

² Ibid.

occurs over and over again also in relationships with others. What is meant by care is the overcoming of alienation. How strong are Pope Francis' words on the scandalous nature of alienation or indifference: "We are no longer attentive to the world in which we live; we don't care; we don't protect what God created for everyone, and we end up unable even to care for one another! And when humanity as a whole loses its bearings, it results in tragedies like the one we have witnessed."³

Human beings need to rediscover a sense of hospitality. In his book *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality*, Arthur Sutherland defines hospitality as "the *intentional, responsible, and caring* act of welcoming or visiting, in either public or private places, those who are strangers, enemies, or distressed, without regard for reciprocation."⁴ Attention should therefore be drawn to the stranger, the alienated, the marginalized and the imprisoned, as well as to the social and political conditions which cause ruptures in human rights and relations. In this light, we need to create hospitable spaces and practise hospitality.

A recent publication entitled *Cloistered Spaces: A Journey through Sacred Gardens in the Maltese Islands* implicitly affirms the need for a rediscovery or an appreciation of spaces where pilgrims, foreigners and immigrants could find rest, peace and fraternity.⁵ Somehow, the local scene points towards a correlation between hospitality and reconciliation that needs to be affirmed again and again in social welfare, and in the health, the judicial and the educational systems. We need to consolidate the social fabric through co-responsibility.

Being responsible means building the social community as one family. Being responsible implies fostering interaction irrespective of national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. In this sense, love our neighbour carries global dimensions. Being responsible also means putting solidarity in practice. In other words, immigrants are to have opportunities for a safe home, education for their children, and a decent life for their families. "Solidarity ... is not a feeling of a vague compassion (or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far); on the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and each

³ Pope Francis, Homily at "Arena" sports camp, Salina Quarter, Lampedusa, July 8, 2013, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html.

⁴ Arthur Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), xiii (emphasis added).

⁵ The President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, *Cloistered Spaces: A Journey through Sacred Gardens in the Maltese Islands* (Malta: BDL, 2016).

individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”⁶ Being responsible means promoting justice. As blessed Pope Paul VI taught: “If you want peace, work for justice.”⁷

In the first article of these proceedings, René Micallef SJ, a theological ethicist, writes on “Malta and its European Neighbours as Havens for Migrants. What Mercy? Whose Justice? Which Policies?” The four main words in the title - havens, mercy, justice, policies - indicate a reflection in four phases. Micallef starts with discussing the Maltese national identity using the concept of “haven.” In the second part, he links this to biblical mercy - as it applies to the phenomenon of migration - and then, in the third part of his article, he presents mercy as a true and excellent way of living out justice. Finally, he projects some rights and principles which are included in Catholic Social Teaching on migration and asylum and which should shape the concrete decisions taken by policymakers.

George Grima, professor of moral theology, in his article on “Immigrants at the Gate of Mercy and Justice” seeks to give an answer to a fundamental question: How can the theological vision of a merciful God, and the role of the individual and collective conscience, help us to respond sensitively and, at the same time, effectively to the plight of immigrants at our borders? This study focuses on one central point, namely, that our response to the immigrants knocking at our doors reflects not only the kind of society we would like to live in, but also the kind of persons we wish to be. Grima develops his thought in three steps: the immigration problem in the context of a just and merciful social environment; overcoming indifference through compassion; and lastly, justice as a disposition and norm.

Mark Sultana, a senior lecturer in philosophy, writes “On Being Both Host and Guest: Questions Posed by Migrants.” He explains that while migration has become a hot-button issue, nevertheless it has always existed and there are - even today - many different kinds of migrants. Sultana examines what to be at home, and what showing hospitality, could mean while seeking to articulate the ties between the two. He seeks to offer reflections, inspired mostly by Emmanuel Levinas, in the hope that they may provoke humans, faced with the issue of migration, some thought about these axial facets of self-consciousness. Sultana suggests that perhaps what we need is a purification of the imagination so that we may become aware that we are continuously, always, *both* host and guest.

⁶ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical on the Social Concern of the Church, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), no. 38.

⁷ Pope Paul VI, Message for the Celebration of the Day of Peace, 1972, https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_p-vi_mes_19711208_v-world-day-for-peace.html.

The next article is penned by Sue Vella, a senior lecturer from the Department of Social Policy & Social Work on “Welcoming the Stranger: Social Policy Perspectives on Asylum Seekers in Malta.” The author examines the situation of persons who have sought asylum in Malta. Vella explains that the findings emerging from national statistics and international reports suggest that the impact of arrivals of asylum seekers on Malta in recent years cannot be considered as having jeopardised social and economic wellbeing in Malta. Nonetheless, migration has proven to be a more divisive issue, as it is clearly a widespread preoccupation, and one that appears to derive from perceived threats to Maltese cultural identity. In the light of Pope Francis’ call for a shared response, Vella argues that more work is needed to transform hearts and minds by fostering inter-cultural contact and promoting mutual tolerance and respect.

Colin Calleja, a lecturer in differentiated pedagogies, writes on “Mercy in the Maltese Educational System: Education Practices to Foster Respect for Diversity Towards the Migrant Population.” This article is the fruit of a group-study involving other academics, viz. Michelle Attard Tonna, Simone Galea, Michael Grech and Maria Pisani. The study asserts that difference among people turns out to be a tool for educability. It presents ethical and philosophical traditions that may underpin the virtue of mercy in the context of immigration, with particular emphasis on the education of migrant learners. It gives a description of the local educational scenario in relation to the migrant student population in Maltese schools, and presents proposals for an inclusive education policy. Moreover, it affirms that a “reaching out” gives one the possibility of giving the “Other” the entitlement to live within a community. This research affirms that, notwithstanding the differences, we share a common humanity and therefore we can live together and enrich one another.

In the article which follows, Frances Camilleri-Cassar, professor of social policy and equality laws, addresses some of the difficulties faced by migrant women in Malta. In an article entitled “Trapped at Periphery? Interdisciplinary Perspectives on African Migrant Women,” the author brings to discussion different areas of concern: reception legislation, the asylum procedure and judicial process, the integration policy, economic activity, and the prevalence of multiple discrimination. Camilleri-Cassar presents her research through various stages: the reception legislation vis-à-vis the asylum procedure and the judicial process; Malta’s integration policy and women’s employability and their place in the labour market; multiple discrimination among Malta’s forcibly displaced women; and a critical analysis of the study findings and their implications for the legal and social rights of African migrant women.

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Kevin Schembri, lecturer in canon law and defender of the bond at the Archdiocesan Ecclesiastical Tribunal, writes on “The Dignity and Rights of Migrants in Catholic Canon Law.” His study investigates the role of canonical norms in the mission of the Catholic Church, which is to promote, protect and ensure respect for the dignity and rights of refugees and migrants. Schembri argues that the Church, in recognizing her call to be “a vigilant advocate,” always seeks to define and guarantee the rights of individual persons as well as to respond to a powerful echo in her heart caused by migrants who often undergo violation or loss of their proper dignity and rights. Schembri’s article starts with a brief introduction to Catholic canon law; it moves on to outline the canonical norms that deal with the dignity and rights of refugees and migrants at large; and lastly it presents the rights of Christian migrants, that is, the individual rights that arise from the sacrament of baptism.

Pauline Dimech, a lecturer in systematic theology and catechetics, offers another interesting topic concerning “A Theology of Migration: Mercy and Education.” Her article presents mercy as a hermeneutic for interpreting some of the most foundational dimensions of the education of (im)migrants, as well as a different vantage point for making educational choices in their regard. Dimech discusses three main points: the impact of the ethico-cultural values and the anthropological vision of education; the theological religious and spiritual values which ought to inform decisions and policies, including the concept of mercy which Pope Francis strongly invokes; and lastly, the view that immigration and the (im)migrant, including the (im)migrant child and young person, are a *locus theologicus*, a source of reflection on God and his mercy, or a demand made upon others for mercy.

The Symposium organized by the Faculty of Theology was particularly fruitful for having raised so many pertinent questions and for having attempted to seek valid answers. Systems that make life hard for others, be they related to social welfare, health, justice, and education, need to be addressed once and for all. Political thinking and economic decisions too must be authentic in a way that truly respects everyone’s human dignity. The vibrant message which this Symposium managed to convey is the need of universal concern towards the immigrants themselves and the situations that have caused them to leave their homes in the first place. As the Somali poet, Warsan Shire says: “No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land... no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled mean something more than the journey.”⁸

⁸ Alan Hilliard, “Welcoming the Stranger,” *The Furrow* 66, no. 10 (2015): 501.

Our final comment is that we need to be agents of change. To the question of mercy and the immigrant, what needs to be emphasized is, above all, justice and true love as revealed through the Father's mercy, Christ's compassion, and the dignity bestowed by the Holy Spirit. This, however, calls for *a change in mentality*. The Church and the State are to look at the poor no longer as a burden, or as intruders trying to profit from others, but as people seeking to share the goods of the world, so that together we can create a just and prosperous world for all.⁹ Mercy in this sense means openness and communion that transcends boundaries and prejudices. Perhaps Socrates' famous maxim helps us understand this truth: "I am not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world."¹⁰

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⁹ See John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, no. 28.

¹⁰ See Plutarch, *Moralia*, vol. 3, "Of Banishment, or Flying one's Country," ed. Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).