

# SYNTHESIS FOR THE SYNOD

## MALTESE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

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“THERE IS ONE BODY AND ONE SPIRIT, JUST AS YOU  
WERE CALLED TO THE ONE HOPE OF YOUR CALLING”  
(EPHESIANS 4:4)



For a synodal Church  
communion | participation | mission



CONFERENTIA  
EPISCOPALIS  
MELITENSIS

# **SYNTHESIS FOR THE SYNOD MALTESE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE**

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# INTRODUCTION TO THE SYNTHESIS

When Pope Francis called for a wider involvement of the People of God in the Synod on Synodality, he was not asking for a wish list to be later discussed by the bishops in October 2023. He explicitly said that the purpose of the Synod is not to produce documents, but “to plant dreams ... allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships”.

The synthesis presented by the Maltese Episcopal Conference does not merely include key aspects of the life of the Church in Malta and Gozo that need to be addressed but also captures the joys and resistances that the journeying together entails. The ability to “plant dreams” demands being grounded in reality with its lights and shadows, the changes in contemporary society, the wounds of the past and the present in the Church (and society), the opportunities and challenges of collaboration in a small island with sudden demographic shifts. However, this process, when carried out in a spirit of prayer, nourished a communal search for that kind of future God wants for his people. The synthesis gives a glimpse of what kind of future we can journey towards. Rather than dystopia accompanied by lethargy, cynicism or individual rebellion, reciprocal listening under the guidance of the Holy Spirit opens the way for bold decisions to be taken.

This journey of mutual listening saw a variety of initiatives both on a parish and diocesan level, in pastoral councils and lay movements, in schools (involving 14-year-olds and educators), in religious congregations, the Seminary, and with ecumenical partners. There was also an open invitation on social media, radio and TV where individuals and informal groups could send their feedback. In the Diocese of Gozo, the process was combined with the drafting of the pastoral plan for the diocese. In the Archdiocese of Malta, initiatives linked to the four year process of ecclesial renewal - *One Church, One Journey* – contributed to the synodal process.

A small team, made up of representatives from the two dioceses and the Council of Major Religious Superiors, met on 18 July 2022 at the Archbishop’s Seminary in Tal-Virtù, for a time of prayer and appreciation of both the process and of the material received. Key intuitions and questions were identified. The synthesis was drafted and eventually discussed and endorsed by the Maltese Episcopal Conference on 2 August. On 14 August it was formally presented and discussed with His Eminence Cardinal Mario Grech and on 15 August it was sent to the Vatican.

Building on more than 100 such syntheses from around the world, a team of experts at the Vatican will elaborate the document that will provide a common

text in preparation for the meeting of bishops in Rome October 2023. Before reaching that stage, this text that is to be published in November 2022, will be open for feedback locally and then discussed on a continental level in February 2023.

Termed as a spiritual process, this “historic consultation, unprecedented in the history of the Church” aims at renewing the way of life and mission of the Church, leading to a deeper sense of participation from all members of the People of God.



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# SYNTHESIS FOR THE SYNOD

## MALTESE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling” (Ephesians 4:4). As we discerned the various contributions of the synodal process that took place on our islands, this phrase addressed by Saint Paul to the people of God in Ephesus is an opportune way to understand, appreciate and contribute to this common journey.

In the Diocese of Gozo, Pope Francis’ invitation was addressed in the context of the process of drawing up the Pastoral Plan for the Diocese. The struggle with hope of the disciples of Emmaus – “we were hoping, but now we don’t” – resonated with the experience of many in the Church, especially while resuming pastoral activities following the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the Archdiocese of Malta, this process not only served as a reminder of the positive experience of the diocesan synod celebrated between 1999 and 2003 but it was also an opportunity to sustain the path undertaken by the Church in Malta in a four-year process of ecclesial renewal, *One Church, One Journey 2020-2024*. This experience brought to the fore the priority of facing the challenges, resistances and problems along the journey of becoming a truly synodal Church.

In the local sphere, the call to be a more synodal Church takes shape in our geographical and historical context. In his recent pastoral visit to our islands, Pope Francis not only highlighted the luminosity that marks our daily experience and vocation, but he also referred to our position in the middle of the Mediterranean as “crossroads” with “various winds that sweep across this country” (2 April 2022). The specific contours of our time include:

- Rapid demographic changes: Over the past decade, Malta’s population has grown by almost 25%, mainly due to policies attracting foreign workers. This had a vast impact on population density, and led to increased diversity, with 20% of the population born in other countries. The environment was also adversely affected by the rapid changes since construction activity also increased by 330% in the last 20 years.
- Social media: 87.5% of the population have access to the internet, 85% of which follow online social networks at least once a day. Together with an increased emphasis on the individual, this reality is shaping the way people access and share information, and the way they relate to and perceive “the other”. Paradoxically, the increased emphasis on inclusion is intertwined with signs of tribalism.
- A shift from a culture where one was “born into Catholicism” to a society that is multicultural and where personal choice is the point of departure: The 2017 Sunday Mass Attendance Census organised by the Archdiocese of Malta showed that the highest decrease in attendance was registered among people aged 49 or less with a decrease of 21% between 2005 and 2017.



# A JOURNEY THAT CALLS FOR DEEPER LISTENING

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*A **deep desire** for more unity in the Church, for a rediscovery of the centrality of Christ, for deeper experience of faith that would sustain evangelisation.*

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This process prompted a range of reactions, with many offering bold observations and instances where the response was more of a rational exercise or ideological stance than one that also involved a discerning heart. With more coordinated efforts at outreach, other voices would have enriched the journey together as ecclesial community.

One could appreciate several voices that expressed:

- The joy of coming together, sometimes as a surprising gift in contrast with the initial resistance to the process.
- A sense of hope or renewed hope as people listened to each other in a context of faith, even when sharing on difficult matters.
- A sense of serenity/peace when contributing out of love for the Church.
- A deep desire for more unity in the Church, for a rediscovery of the centrality of Christ, for deeper experience of faith that would sustain evangelisation.
- A sense of gratitude for the good that is being done or that is received through others.
- Courage expressed by those whose life experience is marked by pain (either caused by the Church or because of the difficult situation they live in).

We also valued the voices that expressed:

- Uncertainty about the present state of the Church and the outcome of the listening process.
- Frustration from those who wish to be more involved in a co-responsible Church and who note the lack of progress or its slow pace and our inability to put our resources together.
- Inertia and blockage when trying to see the way forward.
- Excessive anxiety on whether “we are doing enough”; some spoke out of “a sense of guilt” or fear of becoming irrelevant especially when facing declining numbers (Church attendance, volunteers, vocations).

# A JOURNEY THAT CALLS FOR AN EVER WIDER LISTENING PROCESS

This process brought together many people from diverse backgrounds. The listening process also resulted in the creation of the pastoral plan in the diocese of Gozo and included all organisations that provided input within the Church (primarily in a parish setting). This also served as a catalyst instilling appreciation for the wealth available to us, raising awareness of an ecclesial spirit and recognising the factors that motivate a sense of belonging.

The involvement of ecumenical partners inspired gratitude for what is being shared (including property made available by the Catholic Church) and a desire for a depth that sustains evangelisation.

A process carried out with youth groups in Malta revealed their struggle with respect to a sense of belonging in the Church. By means of an online questionnaire or focus groups, 14-year-olds in Church, State and Independent schools expressed their desire to be recognised by the Church.

Parishes in Malta were also invited to carry out the listening process. Some involved parish groups or the parish pastoral council, others extended this to the people who attend Sunday



Mass, while other parishes chose to widen their process by including a more extensive range of people living within their parish territory. While the desire for inclusion and deeper formation for evangelisation was expressed, not everyone showed the same level of commitment to the process.

As part of the *One Church, One Journey* ecclesial renewal process, focus groups were organised around five priority areas identified in the local context: political reconciliation, integrating migrants, discerning priorities in Diakonia, Safeguarding, LGBTIQ. This process not only consolidated the synodal dimension but also provided an opportunity for participants to contribute to the



way the people of God can grow as a “Church that welcomes”. Moreover, a qualitative inquiry on representations of Catholicism in Malta in the third decade of the 21st century was carried out by DISCERN (Institute for Research on the Sign of the Times – Archdiocese of Malta). The findings of the study were presented to the Diocesan Pastoral Council in February 2022.

The contributions received from religious congregations were also appreciated. These revealed the serene joy of sharing by those who contributed generously during the past years and by those who are now facing the challenges of elderly life and lack of vocations. On the other hand, one notes a contrast between the desire

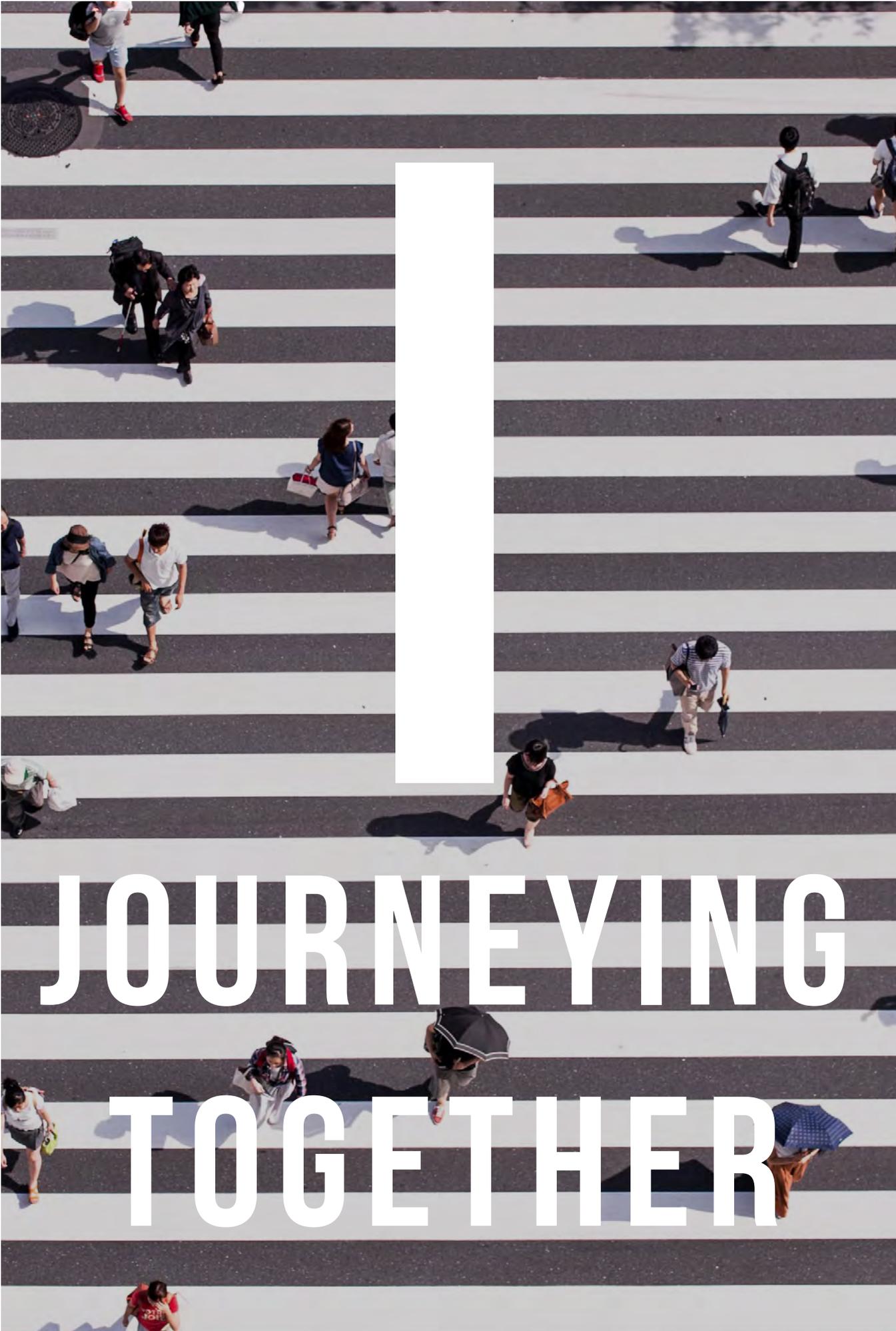
to feel part of and be involved in the wider Church, and the difficulty of participating in a common journey.

Others contributions came through personal initiatives as a response to a social media advert or radio programme.

As some have highlighted: “this process needs to be continued and strengthened. The synod of bishops gives us a privileged opportunity and it would be a pity if it is lost”. Moreover, the depth of the contributions of those not involved within the structures of the Church (some Catholic, others not) illustrate the value of widening the circle of the listening/dialogue process. Not enough was done on this level and more concerted attention to communication is necessary. Nonetheless, where it was done, it proved to be a blessing.

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*The involvement of ecumenical partners inspired gratitude for what is being shared (including property made available by the Catholic Church) and a desire for a depth that sustains evangelisation.*



# 1. STUCK TOGETHER OR JOURNEYING ALONE?

Our reflection on this theme enables us to celebrate and strengthen spaces where this 'journeying together' is already happening but also opens our eyes to areas of ambiguity or utter resistance.

The listening process enabled us to identify not only the gifts but also the areas of ambiguity in the diverse ecclesial experiences:

- Positive experiences: the synod celebrated in Malta (1999-2003) – a process that enabled people to be together/take responsibility, shape documents that keep inspiring the priorities and attitudes of the Church and establishing initiatives that are still bearing fruit; spaces where the process of pastoral discernment is done together, involving various stakeholders, working in partnership with people outside the group/parish/Church (e.g. some pastoral councils, dialogue sessions in society); lay ecclesial groups/movements undertook a journey together to appreciate their different charisms and discern together their commitment to build up the Church.
  - Small groups offer a privileged environment for a greater sense of belonging, sharing the Word of God, and deepening of the faith,
- but there is also the risk of an “inward looking”, self-referential mentality, lack of readiness to be open to other groups and the wider Church; a struggle to appreciate the ecclesial dimension. Groups that understand mission as part and parcel of their identity experienced the joy of a sense of belonging that is more ecclesial.
- At times, the commitment in groups to reach out and attract new members is motivated by an anxious desire to increase one's numbers. This often leads to competition with other ecclesial groups and, when this happens, “mission suffers”. Others want “new members but not new blood” and resist the gifts that new or younger members bring to the group.
  - The experience of coming together to discuss the question on journeying together brought a clearer awareness of its value and urgency. A group of catechists said that such a process is necessary as it gives them the right perspective to understand their ministry within the mission of the Church: very often we “understand our ministry as helping the parish priest rather than ministry with its specific charisma”; “we feel left on our own in the difficult mission of catechesis today”; “Are we giving our service as part of our deepening relationship with Jesus or simply to serve someone who asked us to provide this service?”
  - The need to address realities faced by clergy not only from an individual

perspective (motivation, spirituality, etc) but also on a systemic level: “clergy, on their own, have to find ways of fulfilling their mission and at the same time find ways to support themselves and their vocation”.

- Village feasts: this deep expression of the people that is rooted and revolves around the life of the Church provides a strong experience of togetherness, sustains a sense of belonging and retains the roots and identity of the village community. It also provides space for the young and the old to collaborate. However, these are often tainted by pique, an identity forged on the desire of superiority over and against others, where excess and consumerism rob this experience from an evangelical depth.

of division that we are seeking to transcend. These are some of the wounds that stood out in the listening process (the document *One Church, One Journey* includes a special section on this theme):

- The Catholic community today constantly journeys in a society marked by the traumas of the past, especially the events and decisions on a social/political level taken during the 1960s and 1980s. Moreover, the Church is directly connected to these sad chapters in the story of our nation. This listening process enabled us to recognise the extent to which people within the Church have a different view of the “same story”. The events and their meaning are shrouded by partisan leanings, specific experiences lived through and family background, whilst young people can “feel angry and don’t know why”. This constitutes one of the key challenges for our journeying together as authentic witnesses. Although “we can’t

## 2. CAN WE JOURNEY WITH OUR WOUNDS?

The listening process provided a space where we could move beyond numbness, touch the pain, recognise wounds; to struggle not to bury the pain once again, recognise the trauma and be open to grace that leads to healing. Nonetheless, we were also conscious of the challenge that such situations present to us as a Church on our islands, given that we are also implicated in the very wounds





control healing as it is the work of grace, we are called to make the necessary steps to facilitate the encounter”.

- Attention to LGBTIQ+ community implies listening well to the pain of the persons themselves: “because I say who I am, I end up being rejected”; “It’s not an easy journey for them, they feel ostracised from those around them”. It also entails listening to parents and their hurts when, as committed Christians, they see that their children’s “coming out” automatically entails “leaving the Church”. This process helps us to identify a key challenge that needs to be addressed: how to develop the right kind of language to communicate the Good News. To quote the report of the focus group on this theme: “the most ‘offensive’ and ‘deeply-hurtful’ part has nothing to do with ‘acts’ per se – after all, we all struggle with chastity! – but rather with

something deeper: ‘this inclination, which is objectively disordered’ hence making the person feel ‘disordered’”.

- The challenge of journeying together has to address the deep wounds caused by the sexual abuse scandals in the Church: “Many people are scandalised by the abuses and their cover-up”.

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### 3. JOURNEYING HUMBLY: “WALK THE TALK”

The listening process revealed several challenges that hinder a synodal Church:

- A false sense of righteousness: far from being rooted in the courage to proclaim the Word of God with a readiness to meet the other on the basis of equal dignity, it is grounded in self-sufficiency, arrogance and a sense of superiority; “I rarely have a discussion with a Catholic and don’t feel judged”; “presenting the teaching of Jesus more as a show of force and power than a proposal of a dignified life”.
- Clericalism defined as “power becoming an end in itself”, “giving a sense of comfort to the clergy who thus feel a sense of control and the lay who prefer comfort to carrying

their responsibility”; “bullying” by certain leaders in groups (be it lay, clergy, or religious).

- When pastoral workers, whether ordained or not, act with a sense of entitlement and as though the Church is their property or when they become mired in trivial disputes or power struggles that stifle the essential spirit required for synodality.
- A sense of fatalism: in the context of “a change of epoch”- including the rapid shifts in Maltese society becoming more multicultural, more pluralist - some involved in an active way in the Church view the world as hostile or adopt a “siege mentality”. Others feel at a loss as to how to communicate the faith to their adolescent children, while others feel a lack of competence in how to give a reason for their hope, opting for “giving a good example” out of lack of confidence in how to speak out.

Together with an invitation to conversion, this process elicited the following recommendations:

- Strengthening the bonds of friendship, learning to trust, rejoicing in each other’s flourishing.
- Young people (and others) voiced their desire for a Church that “walks the talk” and addresses “incongruency: as we praise Jesus and proclaim the Gospel, we live a contradiction. We preach Jesus who came in poverty and yet we don’t care for people in their misery

... the way feasts are celebrated ... the cry of the earth is disregarded”.

- To journey in humility: “This journey that we have been engaging in, of listening to people, exchanging their insights on being ‘a church that welcomes’ has made me conclude one thing: people will encounter Christ in a humble Church, not in one that is proud”. “I dream of a Church that, when it assists others, be it the other members of the People of God or society in general, does not do this as if pretending that everything belongs to her but with a desire to give her best to care for all that God has entrusted to her”.

“*Young people (and others) voiced their desire for a Church that “walks the talk” and addresses “incongruency: as we praise Jesus and proclaim the Gospel, we live a contradiction. We preach Jesus who came in poverty and yet we don’t care for people in their misery ... the way feasts are celebrated ... the cry of the earth is disregarded”*



# THEMATIC

# 1. COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

“Allow me, brothers and sisters, to express a dream of my own: that you, who are migrants, after having received a welcome, rich in human kindness and fraternity, will become in turn witnesses and agents of welcome and fraternity.” (Pope Francis, 3 April 2022)

There are several signs from the local context that need to be taken into consideration to discern the way forward on this theme:

- Migrants: Between 2010 and 2020 the percentage of non-Maltese living on the island increased by 20%. Very often this brought to the fore the issue of fear: “our towns

and villages have changed so much and so quickly that locals ‘feel like strangers’ in their own communities and women especially ‘feel afraid to go out alone at night’”. While some identified the risk of ghettos, others pointed out that Church environments (especially Catholic schools and parishes) are becoming even less representative of the diversity that exists. In some contexts, even Maltese who shift from one village to another do not integrate in their parish. “Today we have many people living amongst us but do not feel the need to participate in our community. Is it a lack of desire from their end? Was there no one who invited them?” Many state



that we “are not doing enough to welcome”, but where it happens, it brings joy: “we feel that through what we share, we communicate God’s love and this fills us with a lot of joy”.

- Shaped by our limits: living in a small geographical space can either be an opportunity for more collaboration or the contrary, that is, everyone defending their own turf/ niche.
- Ecumenical partners expressed their appreciation for the sharing of resources (including churches offered by the Catholic Church), as well as their desire to contribute directly: “it is important to meet these people (migrants) in an eye-to-eye relationship, so that they feel that they are accepted as human beings, created in the image of God”.

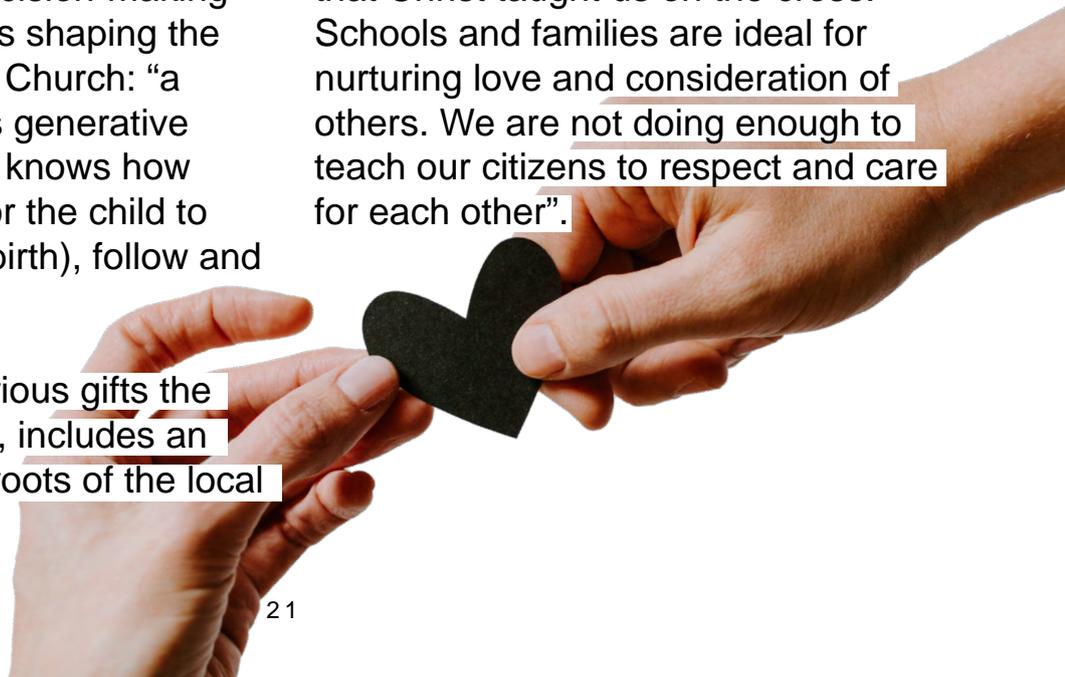
The call to be companions on the journey includes the following suggestions:

- A Church that gratefully appreciates the gift of women means that they share in the decision-making processes as well as shaping the pastoral style of the Church: “a pastoral work that is generative – like a mother who knows how to wait, give time (for the child to grow before giving birth), follow and accompany”.
- Recognising the various gifts the people of God have, includes an appreciation of the roots of the local

Church, as well as the gifts of the elderly, including priests.

- Attentive use of language: on the one hand, some lament that by the way we make reference to “inside” and “outside” the Church, “we create walls” that prevent us from encountering people who are already walking with Jesus although we are not perceiving it. On the other hand, others stated that “while we show concern for those on the outside, many within feel estranged”.
- In this context the Church is being called to be at the forefront in education by investing in community development and peacebuilding efforts. Those who work in schools - through sharing their struggles and good practices to welcome people from diverse backgrounds, including migrants – have a lot to offer to the wider Church.

“Nurturing fraternity and friendship is a skill that needs to be learned and developed. It requires genuine love and generosity. It requires the love that Christ taught us on the cross. Schools and families are ideal for nurturing love and consideration of others. We are not doing enough to teach our citizens to respect and care for each other”.



## 2. LISTENING

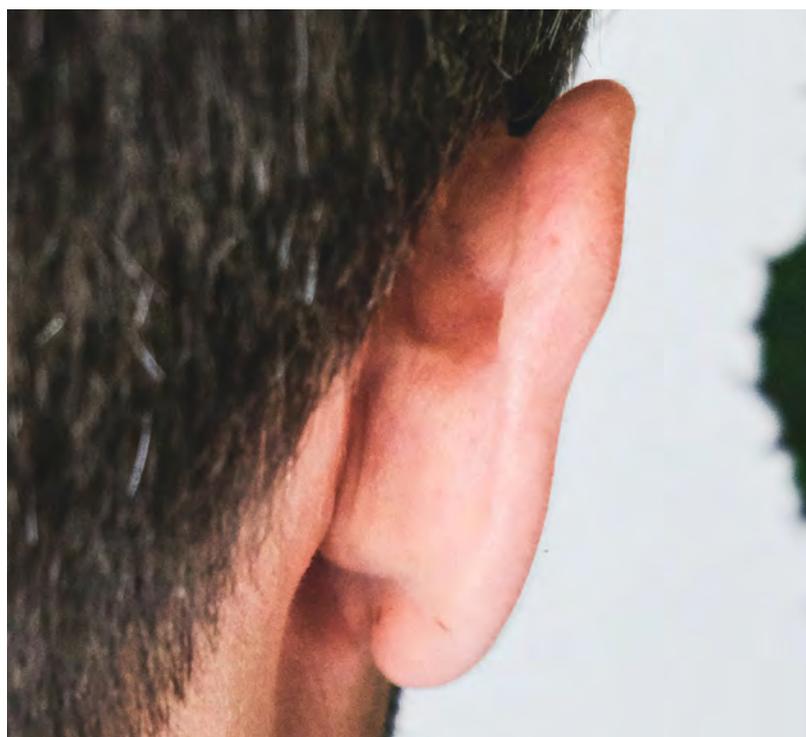
“Welcoming others mainly requires humility, in saying, ‘I don’t understand exactly what is going on, but I will be here for you no matter what, because I love you. And I want to listen intently and learn from your experience’.”

Many spoke of the need for a listening Church that includes all, especially minorities, the young, and infertile couples. Others highlighted important aspects that can strengthen the process and also address the root causes where it is lacking:

- Listening to each other, especially sharing nourished by the Word of God, leads to deeper and more authentic communion between people. It is essential in order “to understand where people are” and “how best to proclaim the hope of the Gospel”, “to be better equipped to speak the truth with gentleness and respect”.
- There are several stumbling blocks for our listening. A “siege mentality” leads to a concern of how to “reply back”, rather than deep listening. Fear also gets in the way, especially with respect to people who live in very complex realities. One parish pointed out that when faced with families struggling with the issues of drugs or prison, the attitude of many churchgoers can be avoidance: “I am afraid of you, I don’t know you, and the less I see you the better”. Moreover, in an individualistic society, many remain unheard as listening becomes more difficult.

- The desire expressed by young people to “be given more say” calls for creative initiatives for this to be met. This openness is also necessary in order to look out for people’s hidden gifts, to capture the signs of goodness hope and encouragement, to be attuned to the spiritual thirst of contemporaries, to move beyond superficiality: “while all seek some kind of anchor in a fast-moving world, it is our responsibility to see that these anchors are in the Gospel”. The ability to listen and discern together is crucial in a fast-changing world.

This journey is necessary but demanding. As one parish expressed it, “As a Church we need to learn to be comfortable in discomfort”.



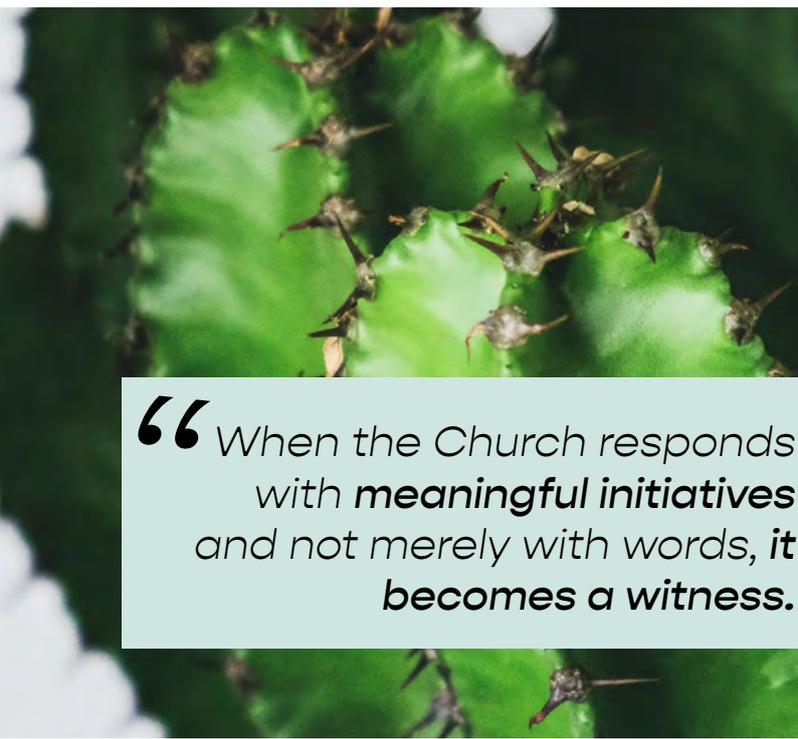
### 3. SPEAKING OUT

“We cannot undo history, but we can learn from it to avoid repeating the same mistakes. The Church cannot stop being prophetic.”

Feedback related to this theme brings to light key challenges that need to be dealt with:

- The need for honest communication that fosters cooperation and co-responsibility while addressing attitudes that lead to demotivation: “Some are filled with a sense of self-importance due to their long years in a group and look down on others.”
- Catechists stated love for the Word of God sustained them to share faith with enthusiasm, yet they often feel unequipped to fulfil this ministry within an everchanging environment.

- When the Church responds with meaningful initiatives and not merely with words, it becomes a witness.
- The key challenges in terms of the prophetic witness of the Church in Malta are related to the trauma of the past (which calls for reconciliation) and the contemporary shifts in society (where a number of complex issues need to be faced and the voice of the Church is one among many). It is within this context that one can understand the following requests: “we need to tackle big issues with more clarity”; “we need a common vision regarding the Church’s message to be shared in society”; “The Church needs a ‘stand up to be counted’ attitude”; “Many priests are good people but either are afraid, shy and seek to please people, or else are not in tune with the message of the Gospel and the Catechism of the Catholic Church and don’t know how to communicate it. This leads to a mediocre level of Christian life.” “Sunday homilies very often offer sweet reflections, but they are shallow, vague, not respecting people’s knowledge, always politically correct and lacking that incisive power of the words of Jesus and his apostles”.



“When the Church responds with **meaningful initiatives** and not merely with words, it becomes a witness.

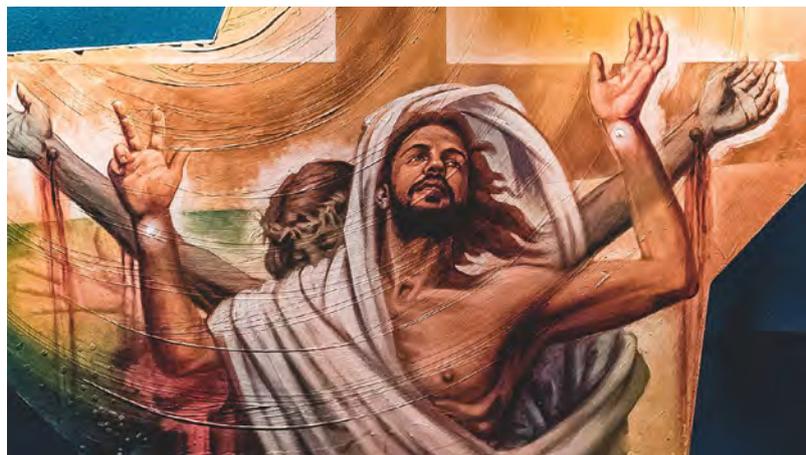
## 4. CELEBRATION

- There is an expressed thirst for celebrations that fill the community with joy and courage to share the gospel and reach out in diakonia. Many lament shortcomings on this level. Contributions related to this area include the appreciation of “the structure of the liturgy, the wisdom of patterns, the strength of having a structure with generations of truths”, yet pointing out the “danger of having arid structures where we become mere spectators”.
- The homily has a potential for inclusion. Listening to young people made us aware of the great potential and responsibility of priests as they preach the Word of God: “It is our desire that priests, through the language and means that they use to proclaim the Word of God, especially during Mass, do not forget adolescents and youth. This enables them to feel part of the Church”. Moreover, journeying together and listening to people from diverse backgrounds is a necessary style to respond to the deep desire of people to listen to homilies that nourish their faith and enlighten their daily lives.
- The relation between celebration and community needs to be addressed. For some, it is clear that this is not happening as they state that, “Surely the Church is not journeying together through Mass”. Even the desire to hear the Word of God is often expressed in

individualistic terms, such as, to nourish “my” spiritual life or to grow “spiritually”, but rarely in relation to building the ecclesial community. Some recommendations brought forward were: the need to involve more people to celebrate the diversity that exists within the Church (rather than some people filling multiple roles); enabling the whole community to welcome parents with young children; the value of good music to forge a praying community.

“*The greatest hindrance is that many Christians have not really accepted Christ...*”

A key challenge on this level is celebration that leads to evangelisation: “The greatest hindrance is that many Christians have not really accepted Christ and if they have accepted him, are not speaking about him to those whom they encounter in the street. They do not resonate, they do not create an impact. Is Jesus the joy of their life? Does Jesus affect their life?”





## 5. SHARING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR COMMON MISSION

Participants identified one of the key challenges to be addressed and possible avenues to explore:

- A key challenge is that, in general, decisions with regards to mission are taken by priests. While there is a desire for synodality and collaboration, the question of what type of work is done is dependent on the priest or the person in charge. The quote put forward – A Church which is not a Church for others is not a Church (Bonhoeffer) – calls for participation from all members of the People of God.
- Avenues to explore: the burden of administrative work diverts from commitments on the pastoral level. There is a call for urgent adaptation both with respect to the ordained (especially parish priests) and pastoral workers, and the support they need. We need to rediscover

the value of discerning emerging or hidden gifts and promoting them for the building of a missionary Church: gifts of those who can minister to those “wounded and broken”; care for the environment and creating spaces where people can flourish on the local level; those who are good at fostering togetherness; parents as co-responsible in catechesis; intercessors; training of those involved in the public sphere to understand their profession as participation in the Church’s mission; how religious congregations can reinterpret their charism within a society that is different from the past and continue to find renewed ways of making their presence a truly authentic witness of togetherness.

One of the summaries pointed out that the “failure to encourage and promote the proper role of the pastor and laity is the primary reason God’s people have not matured and our churches are riddled with conflict.”



## 6. DIALOGUE IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

While there were calls for more collaboration between the two dioceses and between different lay ecclesial movements, others zoomed in on the fact that lay people have a special gift to share, that is, to “give witness of an authentic Christian life wherever they go, including their social and civic circles”. Different voices brought to the fore dynamics that need to be addressed:

- Anxiety about dwindling numbers often blocks many Christians from entering into dialogue with others. Moreover, fear can block sharing one’s faith: “I am afraid of being ridiculed. When you talk of faith or Jesus others think you are weird”.
- The fear of conflict needs to be superseded by the need to value conflict as a pathway in the search for God’s will. Some suggested the need to create spaces where this process can be done, as “If we truly want to walk together like a family that inevitably faces conflict or dies, we must all be willing to engage and to engage deeply.”
- Rather than being a Church “on the attack, all the time”, some acknowledge the need for an invitation to “cooperation and dialogue with people of other religions and non-believers on social issues where there is common ground” and a readiness to learn as, very often, in the context of a pluralist society, “we are not ready to hear what these people are opting for with these changes. What is their deeper desire?”
- Catholic schools have a specific call to contribute on this level if they develop their ethos and adapt the curriculum “inspired by *Laudato si*, *Fratelli tutti* and *Amoris laetitia*”.

“ lay people have a special gift to share, that is, to **“give witness of an authentic Christian life wherever they go, including their social and civic circles”**”



## 7. ECUMENISM

While naming the fruits of walking together through prayer, dialogue and cooperation on social projects – “opened up important areas of conversation”, “strengthened core convictions”, sharing of resources – the conversation between ecumenical partners pointed out some challenges for dialogue:

- When those participating in dialogue have divergent motivations for entering into the process of dialogue and encounter.
- When people outside the dialogue process “do not understand why such dialogue is taking place, why certain people are involved, or assume that such dialogue leads to compromising their beliefs”.



## 8. AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATION

There is a thirst for authentic leadership, one that inspires, is authoritative and lifegiving. Hypocrisy and not “walking the talk” is a key stumbling block. Some lights, shadows and possibilities for renewal were mentioned:

- While some lamented the fact that people are not adequately consulted on decisions that have an impact on the community (both on a parish and diocesan level), others mentioned positive experiences where consultation is taking place. Yet it is not always clear (i) how far listening is shaping decisions (ii) how far decisions are truly the fruit of discernment.
- The challenge of clericalism especially where it is taken for granted: “priests comfortable with it as it provides a certain sense of control and laity comfortable in not carrying their responsibility”. There have been positive experiences with priests instilling trust. This “encourages co-responsibility”. Yet, in certain experiences of “consultative” bodies, lay people do not feel empowered or have a sense of ownership. Some identified the fear experienced by parish priests “that eventually everything falls on their lap” and challenged the “top down, control and command committee structure of the last 50 years”. Some affirmed the priest’s mission as enabler and promoter of discernment of charisms.
- One parish positively praised the course on communal discernment they are undertaking as members of the parish pastoral council. It addresses a key question that came up in this process: “What are our goals? Is it clear that Christ is at the centre of our work?”
- Other areas that need to be addressed are: the overload of administrative work that most priests carry and the question whether positions of governance in the Church necessarily need to be linked with ordination; the challenge of leaders to find time to come together given the increasing number of commitments of most members (this includes the reality of religious congregations); the value of studying the demographic changes of parishes/diocese for better pastoral planning.

## 9. DISCERNING AND DECIDING

This theme not only brought to the fore the desire of people to contribute in an active way in the life of the Church - to be able to contribute to decisions that directly affect young people and the parish - but also its relevance: “to enter the will of God and not our own”; to move beyond a Church as “service provider” and be “proactive rather than reactive”. This entails:

- Growth in interior freedom among the participating members: “It may be that we need to give space to new people to stir up the water that we are used to living in without realising it is stinking. This would require a strong determination and divine help”.
- Training in the discernment of priorities: “we need to take stock of what we’re doing, decide and focus”.

- The need to gather the necessary data on the challenging issues that shape our contexts – reality testing – and discern priorities rather than expect to do everything: to see where to sow seeds and trust the Lord in the process.

## 10. FORMING OURSELVES IN SYNODALITY

A recurrent theme that emerged was the call for a deepening in the life of faith expressed in terms of a “personal relationship with Christ”, the proclamation of the Kerygma within the Christian community itself, a deeper appreciation of the action of the Holy Spirit in the Liturgy that shapes the ecclesial community, and a commitment to listening to the “wisdom” of Christ (beyond an intellectual engagement). Some specific suggestions related to formation for synodality include:

- Formation of those working in Church institutions in the Catholic ethos;
- Formation in listening, spiritual conversation, group discernment;
- Formation for the priesthood: “develop pastoral skills necessary to minister to people in need but also empower the laity to take ownership in their community”.



# CONCLUDING REMARKS

This process of the synodal journey has already proven to be a spiritual gift. It was an opportunity to appreciate the journey undertaken so far, express gratitude for our rich heritage, and face our limitations and sins while asking for healing and reconciliation. It also gave us a glimpse of the signs of the future that call for our discernment to take the next steps with humility and boldness.

The following are key themes that need follow-up:

- Priority of evangelisation and formation within the ecclesial community.
- A clear call for inclusion entailing taking stock of our reality, purifying our attitudes, prioritising.
- Deepening our understanding on how to accompany our communities especially where we may be called to a change in mindset. What processes enable our congregations to be transformed from ‘consumers of services’ to ‘missionary communities’?
- Formation in group discernment. How can the existing structures within the Church (including parish pastoral councils and diocesan structures) express synodality in a more effective way?
- Language: if we wish to communicate the richness of the Gospel in the contemporary setting, where are we required to review our language and our way of conversing in a pluralist world?

Further discernment of what ‘the Spirit is saying to the Church’ (cf. Rev 2:7) should lead us to concrete decisions, small but bold steps that strengthen us in communion, participation and mission.





# **APPENDIX**

# THE MALTESE CASE - THREE POLITICAL-RELIGIOUS STRUGGLES THAT MARK THE CONSCIENCE OF AN EMERGING NATION

The Maltese people trace the origins of their Catholic faith to Saint Paul's shipwreck on their island and, therefore, Catholicism and their language have been construed as the formative, indeed unifying, factors of their very identity. In 1921, Malta, then a British colony, was given a constitution granting it its first self-government. Independence was only gained in 1964. Throughout the twentieth century, an otherwise close relationship between Church and State was tried through the crucible of three political-religious struggles.

The granting of the self-government constitution consolidated a growing nationalistic consciousness. Unfortunately, this also coincided with a straining of the Church-State relationship, specifically the struggle between Gerald Strickland (1861-1940) and his vision for a more secularised Malta, and a Church seeking to maintain its hegemony among the Maltese. The painful dispute between Church and State in 1928-1932 gradually turned into a bitter diplomatic confrontation between the United Kingdom and the Holy See. A pastoral letter, dated 27 April 1930, was to mark indelibly the history of our nation. Issued in the thick of the struggle in preparation for the general elections, it reminded the faithful that the Church had no business to interfere in politics, other than to defend the rights of Religion. In this pastoral letter, Bishops Caruana and Gonzi condemned Lord Strickland and his party.

For Malta, the post-Second World War recovery period was a determinative one during which the colonial power, Maltese politicians, and their respective parties, as well as the Church, particularly through its local leaders, sought to forge the constitutional future of this people. This period coincided with a new political-religious struggle which extended from the proposal for integration with Britain in 1955 to the peace agreement between the Malta Labour Party (MLP) and the Church in 1969. The Gonzi-Mintoff struggle did irreparable damage to the spiritual climate in Malta since it necessarily brought about a growing alienation from the Church of a significant part of the population and fuelled the spread of anticlericalism. In the grips of the need of Constitutional reform, the 1955 electoral campaign centred on the issue of integration with the United Kingdom. The anti-integration political propaganda, created a "religious issue", with the Catholic hierarchy demanding guarantees that would defend the traditional Catholic morality from legislation on matters such as the introduction of civil marriage, divorce and birth control.

Both Mintoff and Gonzi were motivated by a strong sense of mission, coupled with equally strong temperaments, that were not conducive towards reaching a compromise. Mintoff was committed to the rapid social and economic development of Malta and the creation of a Welfare state. Gonzi was equally

devoted to his God-given mission as the Bishop, to shield his people from a materialistic wind of change imbued with secularist mentalities. For him, materialism had communist undertones and what this meant for the Church was evidently manifested for all to see in the persecution it was suffering under such regimes as in the USSR and its satellite states. Confronted by the MLP policy statement of March 1961, which the Church newspaper *Leĥen is-Sewwa (The Voice of Truth)* denounced as a 'collection of anti-clerical and anti-Catholic attacks made by Mintoff during the previous years' (Pirota 2001: 779), Gonzi, along with the Bishop of Gozo, issued an interdiction against the entire MLP National Executive. They also declared it a sin to print, write for, sell, buy, distribute, or even read Labour Party newspapers. In the drawing up of the Independence Constitution, the MLP proposed six points which it regarded as necessary constitutional changes marking the relationship between Church and State. This included the introduction of civil marriage and divorce.

A mellowing of the papacy's attitude towards socialism as a result of the Second Vatican Council led to pressure being brought to bear on the Catholic Church in Malta in general, and Archbishop Gonzi in particular, to moderate their stance towards Mintoff's MLP. This culminated in the so-called peace agreement announced on 4 April 1969 between the Church and the MLP. The action of the Church in Malta, under Gonzi's leadership, evidences a strong social conscience manifested in concrete deeds for the good of our people.

A third political-religious struggle took place in the 1970's and 80's. This concerned four issues, namely, hospitals run by religious orders, religious public holidays, Church schools and Church property. Once again, the MLP's determination in implementing certain socialist policies pushed the Church back into the political fray. Notwithstanding Mgr Mercieca's conciliatory efforts, matters came to a head on 28 September 1984, when a demonstration by the Dockyard workers turned into an attack on the Archbishop's Curia.

These three political-religious struggles mark different moments in Malta's struggle for self-understanding. In its journey from dependence to independence, it was perhaps necessary to determine what role the Catholic Church, in itself a formative element of this national identity, would continue to play in the ever-changing public sphere.

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