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MESSAGE BY ARCHBISHOP PAUL CREMONA O.P.

DURING PONTIFICAL MASS ON THE OCCASION OF INDEPENDENCE DAY

Your Excellency, President of Malta and Mrs Abela,

Today we are celebrating Independence Day which our country acquired on 21st September 1964. Yet, the Maltese people, led by its political leaders, felt the need to go one step further than this event and, as a result, we also commemorate two other occasions: Republic Day on December 13th and Freedom Day on March 31st. During these years, our people strived hard to further achieve their own political identity.

Today, as we commemorate these occasions in the light of our faith, I would like to share a spiritual reflection with the Maltese people. I wish to stress how important it is to make a spiritual reflection upon the events of our lives: whether those of the past or the present. By this, I mean to say that as we live through the historical events of our lives, we are to view them in the light of those fundamental values which lie at the core of our social and political life. The human being is this fundamental value; every human being.

As part of our spiritual formation, we were taught that if a person does not grow in spirit, not only would his development be arrested, but rather it would regress. Unless a person takes time to reflect upon his fundamental values, in the course of his personal life, he will come to realize that he is gradually neglecting them more and more. This is because the number of experiences which he lives through accumulate, without seeing them in the light of fundamental values, until he distances himself from them to be led solely by a purely utilitarian way of reasoning.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his address to the Representatives of British Society at Westminster Hall on 17 September 2010, highlighted one example of this great divide: "Where human lives are concerned, time is always short: yet the world has witnessed the vast resources that governments can draw upon to rescue financial institutions deemed "too big to fail". Surely the integral human development of the world's peoples is no less important: here is an enterprise, worthy of the world's attention that is truly "too

big to fail". This is an indication of how the world of politics and finance has distanced itself from the fundamental value that is the human being, every human being.

The question which I wish to put forward today is precisely this: what kind of reflection is being made, if such a reflection does not have the human being at its centre; could it be that other considerations have taken the place of the human being? It could be appropriate to recommend some form of reflection within the ambit of our present political, economic, financial and social situation, in order to discern whether the human being – every human being in his personal dignity – remains at the centre within the world of technology, finance, economics and politics. Unfortunately, there are those who are led by many other interests, among them, those which are of a financial nature. In order to keep the human being at the centre of our lives and for all this to be considered within the context of a spiritual journey, a political decision needs to be made by society at large. Clearly this cannot happen alone – it needs to be demonstrated and promoted.

At this point, I wish to propose two Christian reflections as a means of encouraging you to reflect upon our society.

Gospel (Mt 9, 9-13)

In today's Gospel, we read how Jesus chooses Matthew as one of his apostles. This was an important step on Jesus' part. By choosing Matthew, who was a publican, Jesus wished to teach his disciples how to disregard any prejudices they might have and appreciate the person in his own right, created in the image of God, rather than taking into consideration his economic, social, religious status. Our Lord Jesus Christ slowly helped his disciples to distance themselves from any form of prejudice because they would be unable to preach and live the Gospel if they remained influenced by such prejudices.

Jesus' first priority was to free the wealthy from any prejudices regarding the poor. He himself was the son of a carpenter and his disciples and apostles – with the exception of Matthew – were all chosen from among fishermen. He was a victim of prejudice: when he returned to Nazareth, no one believed him because he was the carpenter's son: "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked. "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" (Mt 13, 54-56).

Yet Jesus knew well that the people around him were prejudiced against those who were considered to be "publicans and sinners" (Mt 9, 9-13). They used to feel superior to those who were viewed as sinners, especially since their sins were made public. Among these were the publicans who used to collect taxes on behalf of the Romans and others, like Mary Magdalene. Jesus restored to these people their dignity by drawing close to them. He showed just how much he loved them by sharing with them his message of love and he selected them to help him carry out his mission. Jesus also knew that there were many prejudices against those who were not born Jews – the outsiders. He broke

down all prejudices when he spoke to the centurion, praising him for his faith (Mt 8, 5-10) and the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7, 24ss) who asked him to cure her daughter.

The early Christian community was also prejudiced against the Pharisees, since many of them had turned against Jesus. Jesus eliminated these prejudices by allowing himself to be buried by two members of the Sanhedrin – Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea (Jn 19, 38-42). Furthermore, he chose Paul – “I am a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee” (Acts 23,6) and named him Apostle of the Nations.

The Christian message is not conducive in that any reflections regarding mankind should have as their starting point anything less than his intrinsic value as a person.

Realization of Jesus’ plan

Even in today’s Gospel, Jesus gives us some insight as to how this is possible: to start from those aspects where human dignity is less evident. “It is not those who are healthy that need the doctor, but the sick....I have not come to call the righteous, but those who are sinners” (Mt 9, 12-13).

Life shows us that while great matters tend to look after themselves, it is the smaller ones that are usually forgotten. It is the lesser things in life – and here I refer to those vulnerable people – who need most help. In order for this to be possible, any form of social reflection must keep these vulnerable people at the starting point of such reflection, in order that they may be given centre stage in the whole reflection process. It was Jesus’ wish to invest in these people because he could discern their hidden potential, and so he drew very close to them. We too should follow Jesus’s example in order that every person will gain his proper dignity.

I wish to propose that our reflections in the light of the Gospel will centre around these questions: Who are those who are being left out because of any prejudices which we may hold? What changes need to be made especially by those who serve others, in order that our behaviour may be akin to that of Jesus?

Ephesians (Ep 4, 1-7. 11. 13)

In today’s first reading, we hear about St Paul, who as a disciple of the Lord Jesus, shows us the road we must follow if we choose to live out the values of the Gospel. He speaks as a “prisoner for the Lord”. One must be ready to pay a price, sometimes even in society, in order to live out these values. Paul encourages us “to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (4,1). One must return to those ideals which help us to be faithful to these values, in every aspect of one’s life – in the Church, in political life, in one’s profession, at work.

Besides this, St Paul speaks of the greatest journey which one must embark upon in order to live out these values: it is not an outward journey, or a journey in the company of others, or by words, however it is an interior journey which reflects on the exterior, all that which we have borne within us. Paul makes particular reference to humility, which is a reflection of the truth, and which has at its core, the fundamental value that man's dignity arises from the fact that he was created in the image and likeness of God. All other considerations – honour, money, power, which could possibly lead to pride – are too flimsy for us to allow them to be the measure by which we live our lives and affect those of others.

Kindness is that inner power that enables us to make others more joyful and more human.

Patience enables us to recognise the differences between you and others. Those who are less wealthy, less talented. These differences offer us the opportunity to reach out to our fellow men. On our part we can do this by moving more cautiously, in order that we may entreat the other to come closer to us.

All of this makes it possible for the teaching of St Paul to the members of the Church at Ephesus to be firmly at the core of social life: to “be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (4,2.3).

Conclusion

On the 8 September, I spoke of how the Church upholds an ideal and of how it expects those who are inspired by the teachings of Jesus to work towards those ideals in order that they may become a reality. Human and social development in society is not only engendered by institutions in themselves, but by the people who make up these institutions. I urge everybody – members of the Church and all men of good will – to speak the same language as promoted by the Word of God and as presented to us today.