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**INTERDIOCESAN ENVIRONMENT COMMISSION REFLECTION ON
ENVIRONMENT DAY 2023**

On the occasion of World Environment Day 2023, the Interdiocesan Commission for the Environment (KA) pays tribute to environmental NGOs, mayors and individual councillors of local councils and hundreds of Maltese citizens who are actively involved in protecting the environment and the quality of life of all citizens in Malta and Gozo.

The power to promote the common good ultimately rests with politicians who currently have the power to change things. For politicians who have power and can exercise it, the time to improve the environment and consequently the wellbeing of the citizens of Malta and Gozo is now and not when they leave politics. Too many years have passed with politicians' concerns being more influenced by specific sectoral interests than by the general wellbeing of current and future generations.

In its reflection on World Town Planning Day 2022, the KA had stated that the publication of various environmental and agricultural strategies give the impression that a lot is being done in these areas. However, such strategies were being "undermined by a planning process that does not support them". The KA had insisted that "if we cannot see the impacts that such a planning process is having on the urban and natural environments including the future of agriculture then we would be running hoodwinked on the same spot. Then, the only hope for effective change would be the constant militancy in favour of a planning system that really serves the common good. The unwavering determination of such militancy is obvious in the case of the Hondoq Bay development application refusal". How are authorities going to respond to the disillusionment of the general public in the face of dragging of the feet to improve the environment through sound planning policies?

The coming August will mark three years since the end of the public consultation on the review of the Rural Policy and Design Guidance 2014. The length of time to review this policy can only mean that the authorities are unwilling to change the status quo. The result is buildings cropping up in place of ruins in the countryside and the valuation of agricultural land increasing because of the possibility of agritourism projects. The

integrity of Natura 2000 sites is under threat because of this policy and the planning applications awaiting approval under the current policy. Whose interests are the authorities continuing to protect? It is interesting that the original policy of 2014 was approved after eight months had passed from the end of the public consultation in Dec 2013. Environmental degradation is also being caused by the Development Control and Design Guidance 2015 which is the main cause of the devastation of Gozo's ridges with the consequent accelerated loss of Gozo's unique landscape. No action has yet been taken to amend this policy.

Authorities seem to be influenced by proponents of "legitimate expectation" who argue that a planning policy should not be changed when there are pending applications. What authorities seem to forget is that no rights emanate from existing planning policies. Such rights should emanate only from a valid development permit. This is expressly stated in the Development Planning Act. The argument of "legitimate expectation" has been promoted for many years by those who want to make such a concept a supreme maxim which fundamentally means the death knell for any planning process because it makes it close to impossible to change any planning policy. Under such maxim, people carry out transactions (without applying for a development permit) expecting that such a policy would still be in place when in later years they would apply for a development permit. One needs to remember that when one buys a property to develop it, wisdom dictates that such a contract of purchase should be subject to permits being issued. If somebody buys a property in order to speculate on a future increase in value then a risk is being taken and no planning policy, which serves the public interest, should be hijacked by the taking of such risk from the part of speculators, whether "small" or "big".

Since 2015, following the issue of Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the KA has been calling on the authorities at least on an annual basis, to carry out various measures such as:

- Carry out a national property study by an independent body with no vested interest and with terms of reference agreed to by all stakeholders which would feed into the review of the Strategic Plan for Environment and Development and the Local Plans. At the same time the authorities cannot continue to actively assist in promoting the sale of Maltese properties abroad which is helping in fuelling the continued building spree that is ruining the open natural spaces of Malta and Gozo.

- Carry out a review of the Strategic Plan for the Environment and Development (SPED) and local plans.
- Grant a veto to the Environment and Resources Authority and the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage on projects that affect sites or property which are protected by the laws that set up these two institutions.
- Discontinue the application of the flawed (if not deceitful) concepts of “precedent” and “legitimate expectation” in decision-making processes. These concepts have no basis in planning law and are anathema to proper planning practice.
- Introduce legislation that specifically addresses noise issues that affect residents and not just background noise that is required by the related EU Directive. It is perplexing to see that Valletta, a jewel that is enriched by the lives of its residents, is being turned into a nightmare for its own children through the playing of loud music late at night by catering establishments. When mental health has become an issue that is, fortunately, more openly discussed than it was before, it is incomprehensible that authorities are more intent on protecting the interests of loud-music makers than the wellbeing of residents.

At this stage of Malta’s development, the state of the environment has reached a stage where people, especially the younger generation, are feeling that their wellbeing is being eroded at a fast pace. The need for natural green spaces means just that: green spaces and not more concrete with some plants here and there. Wellbeing and mental health are inextricably linked to the environment. There is no more time to waste on the part of the authorities to turn their attention to protecting the environment for the sake of the common good instead of being more concerned with influential interests that work against the wellbeing and mental health of the general population. It is quite evident that there is a mismatch between what is being purveyed as progress and what citizens want their future to be. Once again, the common citizen’s plight is quite clear. Will it be heard?