

**PASTORAL LETTER FOR ADVENT 2009
BY THE ARCHBISHOP OF MALTA
AND THE BISHOP OF GOZO**

THEY WERE CALLED CHRISTIANS (Acts 11,26)

Beloved Sons and Daughters,

We would like to send this Pastoral Letter for Advent, the season that leads us Christians to celebrate the nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ among us.

This year's Advent is tied to two other events that are thought to help us welcome this message.

During next year, in 2010, we commemorate our Father Saint Paul and the shipwreck that led him onto our island. At that time, the people welcomed Saint Paul as an act of charity, when they helped him after the wreckage. However, with the help of the miracles performed by Saint Paul on the island, they embraced his message: the farewell they gave him on his departure from the island shows us that he left a christian community behind him. Paul's meeting with the local governor, Publius, is shown in a miraculous context, that is always linked with the proclamation of the Word.

This year, the visit of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI on our island was announced. Like Jesus, and like Saint Paul, he too will bring us the Good News for our current times.

Our Reply

In this light, we would like to address the whole population through this Pastoral Letter, especially all those who are truly committed to be full active members within the Catholic Church in our country. In asserting so, we do not want to disrespect anyone who has made a different choice or to negatively exclude anybody. Our intention is to encourage every person to realise what God's call for him or her is, which will then help the individual to find the proper place within God's church. Nonbelievers should see that there is a particular faith and attitude taught and shown by our Lord Jesus Christ in the Church Community. If then this nurtures a spiritual sentiment in their minds and hearts, this should lead them to actively join the Church.

Our Lord Jesus has already told us that He came to the world to bring division (see: Lk 12, 51). However, for Jesus, this is a temporary division in order to shed light on His message brought by those who live it. This division instills a wish within believers

to see others joining them in faith. Every Christian community along the years will experience this division while bringing Jesus's message to all.

How are we going to apply it?

Sometimes, we hear people talking about freedom in the Catholic Church. They talk about it in the same way they talk about the the right of freedom of opinion within the State. Reality is totally different. The rights reserved to the State's members lie on the fact that they are citizens of a democratic state through birth or a requested and given citizenship by the State. There is no choice made by these citizens: that is why the State has to accept the freedom of opinion of all citizens unless it goes against common good and that is also why we speak about a pluralistic and liberal society with all its positive connotations.

A person, however, enters the Catholic Church through the sacrament of Baptism. In Baptism, the christian goes through and receives the grace that comes out of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is a grace that is offered to all human beings. Since it is offered, there is a free choice made by the person to receive this proposal. In the case of the newborn, it is the parents who accept the offer and baptise their children because they want to pass on to their children their faith in Christ within the Church. When a person matures, meaning when the individual can make his own choices, there should be a confirmation of the previous decision in total freedom, or else the individual will not be letting grace work in him. These decisions imply that one adheres to Christ's life and teachings. Baptism and its confirmation correspond to Jesus's calling to his disciples: "Follow me". This is the "collective consciousness" that christians embrace.

Likewise, when a person choses to adhere to, for instance, an environmental group or a sport association. Every member knows the "collective consciousness", the philosophy and targets of the group joined: that is the reason why it was chosen in the first place. The choice was taken the moment the individual joined the group and from that choice, all decisions are determined and measured according to this "collective consciousness".

This is the logical conclusion that members of the Catholic Church have to bear in mind to sense their full membership in the Church. As time goes by, there is a thirst for this decision. Jesus made a clear distinction among those listening to Him through His offer: "Follow me" (Lk 9,59). Only those who sincerely answered "Yes" truly became "His"! In fact, "the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch". (At 11,26).

Most of us received our faith within a culture that passed on the Christian Religion and Faith: along our Faith there was a culture that protected us. Today's culture embraces different ideas that sometimes distance us from God. This means that there are some individuals who do not make a conscious choice, as adults, to follow Christ, but still call themselves Christians. They are so driven by the culture of these times that they reflect more this culture than Christ.

Our Choices

People, who have let themselves be led by culture alone, have nowadays decided not to be part of the Catholic Church and left her. Although such a decision hurts us and we yearn to see them come back to the Church, we respect the decision they took.

Some feel comfortable choosing elements within our Faith to accommodate our culture. Some still call themselves Catholic yet haven't accepted the "collective consciousness" of the Church. We wish to encourage these people to decide where to place their fundamental decisions. We know that this is not easy! We believe that when these individuals internally feel uncomfortable, torn between faith and culture, they should realise that this is already a positive sign that should help them take a decision.

Then there are others who have taken the fundamental choice in their life that has confirmed the faith they received in Baptism. Cultural religion is transformed into a choice of Faith that enlightens their vision of the world around them: they stepped into the "collective consciousness" of the Church and can be recognised as they form part of this "collective consciousness".

Jesus, who knew human nature, made our choice clear: "You cannot serve both God and Money". (Mt 6,24). With the term "Money", Jesus refers to anything that hinders humans from serving God. He doesn't want us to cheat ourselves. Whoever chooses to serve money is quite clear in his thoughts: he can someday choose otherwise. Whoever chooses to serve Jesus is likewise clear: he wants to get closer to Jesus. The greatest tragedy of all, which Jesus knew very well, is that there is a number who do not take a decision and remain in between. They think they can avoid choosing Jesus and still call themselves "christians" just because they were baptised, but in fact serve today's culture.

Here a contradiction is met. I consider myself to be a christian and I avoid the Church, the Word of God and the Eucharist. This takes place only when we speak about our Faith. When we take a commitment in our social life, usually we accept

whatever our choice entails. However, we proclaim that we are Christians without practising Faith and thus we start drifting away from Faith and live it only at face value.

It is this challenge, this division, that we wish to propose for this Year of Saint Paul. We want this year to be a time of renewal for all those who have chosen to follow Christ. We also want to show our love to those who have chosen not to follow Christ within the Church. Above all, we wish this year to be a time of grace and decision to those who still feel Christian but do not respond to Jesus's call to follow Him.

Conclusion

We are at an important stage in our local Church. We have been brought up and lived in a culture full of Catholic signs. Today's reality is very different. Our culture doesn't reflect Faith and Christ's teachings anymore. In order to live this Faith, one has to first seek it in his heart and find it there through his choice of following Jesus. Only then we can call ourselves "Christians" in today's culture.

Church Community has to be witnessed by the actions of its members and not by words or registers of Baptism. Jesus is clear: they have to recognise us by our actions.

We wish to state this message with urgent love and not to scare anyone. All is said with great love even to those who decided to leave the Church, and those who maybe hold grudges against the Church on particular issues. We want to be aware of this process and be part of it instead of letting it rest in silence.

Throughout this year, the Lord wants to put you face to face with this offer through us. The answer is up to you. We pray that many will answer like Saint Peter did: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." (Jn 6, 68.69). You will certainly not regret choosing Jesus!

We give you our pastoral blessing

**Today, 22 November 2009,
Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of Creation.**

✠ **PAUL CREMONA O.P.**
Archbishop of Malta

✠ **MARIO GRECH**
Bishop of Gozo