

PASTORAL LETTER ON THE OCCASSION OF THE FIRST VISIT TO MALTA OF POPE BENEDICT XVI

“Nevertheless we must run aground on some island” (Acts 27,26)

Beloved Sons and Daughters,

It has always been our firm conviction that the shipwreck which caused the apostle Paul to be washed ashore on our islands did not happen merely by coincidence. In much the same way, today, we feel that it is indeed providential that His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI has chosen to make this pastoral visit to our country.

Two thousand years ago, during his short stay among us, and through his preaching of the Gospel, Paul introduced the Maltese and Gozitan people to Jesus Christ; as they came to know Him, Christian hope was instilled in their hearts. In anticipation of the visit of His Holiness the Pope, and in order that this visit will not simply be a matter of ceremony, it would be appropriate to pause for a moment and ask: Where do we stand at present with respect to our faith and what are the fruits of the Gospel which we received so many years ago and which has shaped our identity and traditions? We have no doubt that if we open up our hearts to embrace this occasion, it could be for us a moment of grace which will serve to encourage and fortify us in our faith.

The choices that stand before us

Lately, as your Bishops, we have asked you to take a moment to discern the choices which today lie ahead of us, both as a society and as a Church. Peter asked that the first Christians would be “always ready to give an answer to every man who asks for the reason for the hope” that is to be found in them (1Peter 3,15). There is no doubt that the successor of Peter, during his forthcoming visit, will ask of us something similar, more so in this day and age, when we live in a world which often demands that we substantiate our beliefs by practical reasoning.

We are convinced that the Pope, not only by the words which he will express to us, but also through his spirituality, will raise many questions about Christ and his message. We encourage everyone – not only those who are walking in the path of faith, but also those who feel burdened by the doubts of faith – to heed the Pope’s message. We are not to be fearful of the challenges he will present us with; rather we should continue to seek and to raise questions regarding Christ’s message.

A Pauline Church

Embedded in the culture of our people are the foundations of the Church of Jesus Christ, as laid down by Paul. Our ancestors continued to build upon those foundations. The history of our people is a testimonial to the fact that this Pauline Church has rendered great services for the benefit of Maltese society. Nobody can deny that by conveying the Gospel to us, the Church has greatly enriched our culture. Today, at a time when we feel we are at crossroads in so many areas of our life and our faith, we are all called upon to renew and rejuvenate our Church in order that it may be as God ordained it: a Church which bears resemblance to the first Christian communities; a Church built, first and foremost, upon the Word of God and the Eucharist, particularly the Sunday Eucharist. We do not wish to be a fearful Church, a Church behind closed doors. In spite of what some may think, neither do we wish to be a Church

which imposes itself upon society and upon others. We wish to be a Church which acquires its strength through the Word of God and through the testimony of those who are thoroughly convinced of their faith. We wish to be a Church that is not reluctant to enter into dialogue with the world and with all human beings, irrespective of their beliefs.

A Moment of Grace

We reiterate that this is a moment of grace for us all. Just as Paul's visit gave new life to the social set-up of that time, so too, this short stay of Pope Benedict among us, can provide the impetus required for us to focus once again upon the core of our faith, which in spite of having always been close to our hearts, is certainly in need of renewal. The Pope's profound personality, as well as his prophetic knowledge of our times – traits which emerge clearly upon reading his first Encyclicals – will enable us to open our eyes to our current situation. We may expect the Pope to guide us in the proper direction in order that our country may continue to have a vision for the future which is not misleading, but rather to continue to embrace the Christian faith as a treasure which enhances, and not lowers, the dignity of the human person and its nation.

In the face of the tragedy of the shipwreck, the Maltese people welcomed Paul, supported him in his time of need and loved him. Today the Church – and most especially, the Pope, is also in troubled waters. There are those who are trying to silence his prophetic voice. We feel that, like our forefathers, we are called upon to show our love for the Pope and ally ourselves with him. In this respect, during the forthcoming weekend, we invite the people of Malta and Gozo to welcome warmly the Pope, who will be visiting us in the name of the Lord! We encourage you to participate in all the encounters which are being organized to celebrate the two days during which His Holiness will be among us.

This visit is indeed a moment of grace, and we entrust it to Our Mother Mary and the Apostle Paul.

We impart upon you our Apostolic Blessing.

PAUL CREMONA O.P.
Archbishop of Malta

MARIO GRECH
Bishop of Gozo