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Church of Saint Paul
Visit to the Grotto of Saint Paul

Original text

**Dear Archbishop Cremona,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,**

My pilgrimage to Malta has begun with a moment of silent prayer at the Grotto of Saint Paul, who first brought the faith to these islands. I have come in the footsteps of those countless pilgrims down the centuries who have prayed in this holy place, entrusting themselves, their families and the welfare of this nation to the intercession of the Apostle of the Gentiles. I rejoice to be at last in your midst and I greet all of you with great affection in the Lord!

Paul's shipwreck and his three-month stay in Malta left an indelible mark upon the history of your country. His words to his companions prior to his arrival in Malta are recorded for us in the *Acts of the Apostles* and have been a special theme in your preparation for my visit. Those words – "Je fteġ iżda li naslu fi gżira" [*"But we are to be stranded on some island"*] (Acts 27:26). – in their original context are a summons to courage in the face of the unknown and to unfailing confidence in God's mysterious providence. The castaways were, in fact, warmly welcomed by the Maltese people, following the lead given by Saint Publius. In God's plan, Saint Paul thus became your father in the Christian faith. Thanks to his presence among you, the Gospel of Jesus Christ took deep root and bore fruit not only in the lives of individuals, families and communities, but also in the formation of Malta's national identity and its vibrant and distinctive culture.

Paul's apostolic labours also bore a rich harvest in the generations of preachers who followed in his footsteps, and particularly in the great number of priests and religious who imitated his missionary zeal by leaving Malta in order to bring the Gospel to distant shores. I am happy to have had the opportunity to meet so many of them today in this Church of Saint Paul, and to encourage them in their challenging and often heroic vocation. Dear missionaries: I thank all of you, in the name of the whole Church, for your witness to the Risen Lord and for your lives spent in the service of others. Your presence and activity in so many countries of the world brings honour to your country and testifies to an evangelical impulse deeply embedded in the Church in Malta. Let us ask the Lord to raise up many more men and women to carry forward the noble mission of proclaiming the Gospel and working for the advancement of Christ's Kingdom in every land and people!

Saint Paul's arrival in Malta was not planned. As we know, he was travelling to Rome when a violent storm arose and his ship ran aground on this island. Sailors can map a journey, but God, in his wisdom and providence, charts a course of his own. Paul, who dramatically encountered the Risen Lord while on the road to Damascus, knew this well. The course of his life was suddenly changed; henceforth, for him, to live was Christ (cf. *Phil* 1:21); his every thought and action was directed to proclaiming the mystery of the Cross and its message of God's reconciling love.

That same word, the word of the Gospel, still has the power to break into our lives and to change their course. Today the same Gospel which Paul preached continues to summon the people of these islands to conversion, new life and a future of hope. Standing in your midst as the Successor of the Apostle Peter, I invite you to hear God's word afresh, as your ancestors did, and to let it challenge your ways of thinking and the way you live your lives.

From this holy place where the apostolic preaching first spread throughout these islands, I call upon each of you to take up the exciting challenge of the new evangelization. Live out your faith ever more fully with the members of your families, with your friends, in your neighbourhoods, in the workplace and in the whole fabric of Maltese society. In a particular way I urge parents, teachers and catechists to speak of your own living encounter with the Risen Jesus to others, especially the young people who are Malta's future. "Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!" (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 2). Believe that your moments of faith assure an encounter with God, who in his mighty power touches human hearts. In this way, you will introduce the young to the beauty and richness of the Catholic faith, and offer them a sound catechesis, inviting them to ever more active participation in the sacramental life of the Church.

The world needs this witness! In the face of so many threats to the sacredness of human life, and to the dignity of marriage and the family, do not our contemporaries need to be constantly reminded of the grandeur of our dignity as God's

children and the sublime vocation we have received in Christ? Does not society need to reappropriate and defend those fundamental moral truths which remain the foundation of authentic freedom and genuine progress?

Just now, as I stood before this Grotto, I reflected on the great spiritual gift (cf. *Rom 1:11*) which Paul gave to Malta, and I prayed that you might keep unblemished the heritage bequeathed to you by the great Apostle. May the Lord confirm you and your families in the faith which works through love (cf. *Gal 5:6*), and make you joyful witnesses to the hope which never disappoints (cf. *Rom 5:5*). Christ is risen! He is truly risen! Alleluia!
