



THE CHURCH IN MALTA

COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE
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PASTORAL CHALLENGES TO THE FAMILY IN THE CONTEXT OF EVANGELISATION

III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2014

The Situation in Malta and Gozo

Executive Summary

Introduction

Late last year, the Vatican had sent all Episcopal Conferences a questionnaire in preparation for the October 2014 Extraordinary Synod which will study the pastoral challenges facing the family today.

In line with the expressed desire of Pope Francis, that this questionnaire should reach as many people as possible, a copy of this questionnaire was distributed by Maltapost plc to every household in Malta and Gozo. Besides this, the questionnaire was posted on the internet and other copies were distributed to people involved in direct pastoral ministry.

Just over seven thousand questionnaires were filled and returned to DISCERN. Due to time constraints it was decided, in the first instance, to draw up a Preliminary Report based on a sub-sample of 1,590 respondents. This still gives a strong level of significance equal to 2.45, thus giving a good representation of what the Maltese think on the subject, though there is a slight bias in favour of the older population as can be seen in the tables published on www.thechurchinmalta.org.

Main conclusions

The majority of the respondents (72.5%) stated that they were not very familiar with the teaching on the family in the Bible and by the Church, while 17.4% have substantial knowledge of this teaching.

In 69.7% of cases, the Church's teaching on family life is selectively accepted. The teaching that marriage is a sacrament implying fidelity, exclusivity and indissolubility is accepted but



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18.8% find it difficult to follow particularly its teaching on contraception and birth control (15.8%).

Since at least 35.3% of the Maltese find the concept of natural law, so common in the Church's moral and anthropological thought, to be incomprehensible, this is a useless concept in any form of general catechesis.

However, 62.5% accept that the union between a man and a woman with the aim of setting up a family is based on natural law. One fourth of respondents refrained from answering this question.

One fourth (24.9%) of respondents do not agree that lapsed Catholics and declared non-believers should be allowed to celebrate a Church wedding. Those taking a more tolerant position amount in all to 44%. This group varies from 22.3% who are of the opinion that the Church should accept and support these, hoping that they will return to practice their faith, to 2.5% who said that the approach should not be "no" but "yes, with restrictions" (e.g. only bless the union).

Praying together as a family (62%) is still common in Malta although 20% said that they rarely pray together as a family.

Participation at Mass remains a priority for Maltese and Gozitan Catholics: 65.2% attend Mass on Sundays and 53.1% attend frequently; others, amounting to 8.5% said that sometimes they attend Mass. These figures contrast with results of the mass attendance censuses held by the Church. However, it is obvious that both human error, statistical, margin of error and the fact that answering a question may be considered too confidential, census results are always considered to be more accurate than those based on a sample. In this specific case, Mass Census was essentially a headcount of those present on a particular Sunday.

The rosary and the visit to the Blessed Sacrament remain a very common mode of individual prayer: 49.4% and 45.4% respectively, while 37.7% read the Bible.

The vast majority of parents (83.3%) feel that it is their vocation to transmit their faith to their children and relatives: only 2.8% do not feel that they have this calling. While 48.9% try to transmit their faith by example, especially by living characteristic Christian values (e.g. giving charity, by reciprocal love among the couple, by praying together and going to mass together as a family); 12.3% encourage their children to participate in Church activities.



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Only 6.2% “teach” religion to their children while 3.5% challenge them to live Christ's teaching.

Do people feel that the Maltese Church is doing enough to help couples who are facing crises in their married life? Almost half (47.2%) give a positive reply though 10.9% think that as an institution, the Church is not doing enough.

Most respondents know of couples living together though not married. In fact, 29.9% are aware of more than 6 couples living in this way, 36.7% are aware of 2 to 5 couples and 9.2% know of one couple. 28.7% of the Maltese said that cohabitating couples feel that, while God understands them, the Church does not and 9.2% think that the Church excludes them.

43.3% think that the fact that cohabitating couples are not allowed to receive communion is a cause of pain; though 14.7% think that they do feel such pain. A high percentage - 35.2% - said that they do not know how these couples feel about this. A high percentage of the Maltese are of the opinion that the Church is concerned about the fact that the divorced and remarried wish to receive Holy Communion.

This study indicated that 75% of respondents think that if the process of marriage annulment were to be faster, it will help persons whose first marriage has failed; while 10.9% that this will make the situation a bit better. 41.4% said that they do not know whether the Church is doing anything to help the divorced and remarried to remain close to God.

When asked about the attitude of the local Church towards both the State which legislates on Civil Union between persons of the same sex, more than a quarter of the respondent (26.6%) said that the Church has either a negative attitude or directly opposed to legislation, while 8.2% said the Church objects to a law equated equating Civil unions with marriage and the adoption of children by gay couples.

It is also evident that there is no clear understanding about the pastoral ministry which is to be undertaken to help those who enter a Civil Union to live in the love of God and the Christian Faith.

29.8% said that all children are equal and should be treated with equal love and respect; hence children adopted by gays in a civil union should be treated with the same respect as regards their Baptism and in catechism classes.



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On the other hand, 30.9% think that people living in an irregular marriage expect the Church to treat their children in a similar manner as the children of those married by the Church; and 19.2% of respondents expect the Church to forgive them and allow them to receive the Sacraments.

While 43.7% of the population said that they know what the encyclical "*Humanae Vitae*" teaches, an equal number (44.5%) admitted that they do not know. 81.1% of respondents think that the Church should study deeper the issue of responsible birth control. 7.9% say that the teaching of the Church about birth control is accepted by the Maltese.

On a personal level, 49.0% said that they accept and live according to the Church's teaching about responsible birth control, but find it difficult to follow, and 25.3% do not agree with the Church on this issue. 50.9% stated that the faithful still receive Holy Communion because according to their conscience, they are not doing anything wrong.

The majority (57.7%) think that the family is not always helping to give a Christian view of humanity and human vocation.

Among the critical circumstances in today's family life, which hinder a person's encounter with Christ, 29.3% think that materialism in its consumerist vestige together with a hectic life patterns hinder a person's encounter with Christ while 11.3% blame illness, disability, infidelity, separation, divorce, death and poverty. This study shows that 59.9% think that the many crises of faith which we are facing today have a "great" influence on family life.