

***What kind of Society
would YOU like to live in?***

*Converse at Palazzo de Piro, Mdina
September, 2012*

1.0 Malta: a visionary process

- 1.1 *Converse at Palazzo de Piro* is an initiative of a group of individuals inspired by the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. The aim of the initiative was to open up dialogue among leaders in various sectors of Maltese society to reflect on the question: *What kind of society would we like to live in?* An initial paper was commissioned that acted as springboard for our conversations. Dialogue sessions were held with members of civil society and NGOs, media workers, politicians, professionals, businesspersons and industrialists, civil servants, trade unionists, artists, educationalists as well as the clergy and religious. The paper was revised after each dialogue session to reflect insights emerging from the conversations. In the process of being revised, the paper remained an ongoing invitation and instigation to open dialogue, as well as its step-by-step documentation.

This “final” document is being presented as the product of a yearlong reflection among members of *Converse* and the many individuals who participated in the dialogue sessions. The document is not “final” in the sense of being a “final word”, but simply because, like all good things, the itinerary of dialogue sessions inaugurated by *Converse* arrived at its end. Nonetheless, we believe that the spirit of the initiative witnessed in the document lives on. Hence, we present the document to the general public as an opportunity for further dialogue and reflection.

To echo the dialogic process of its composition, the document does not attempt to be exhaustive, or to offer a detailed reflection on every individual issue facing Maltese society. Nor does it reflect the individual opinion of any one person or group of persons. Rather, it weaves common emphases and concerns

of the leaders in our society who participated in the dialogue sessions. In this regard, its most important contribution is to highlight pivotal areas of concern, precisely because they were emphasised and discussed over and over by participants in our exchanges.

1.2 The guiding metaphor for our conversations was that of a journey: together we pondered where we are, where we want to go and how to get there. In the process, we gave voice to the laments and jubilations emerging from the complexity of our present context—the country’s accession to the European Union, the challenges of a new liberal economy, a global milieu mediated by new technologies, the reality of ecological destruction, the rising demands for a responsible global citizenship—in order to weave a rich narrative of the challenges and possibilities resulting from our new lifestyles. Through our evaluation of the risks and blessings of the present moment, we desired to gain enough insight to promote wise efforts for a common wholesome future.

1.3 The participants in our conversations unanimously noted that we are living in exciting times full of opportunities and challenges. Pluralistic trends in Maltese society reflect most dramatically the exciting possibilities and trials of change. As different value systems come to play a significant role in the public sphere, it is desirable that society avoids, or at least minimises as much as possible, policy-making methodologies based on power struggles or on the deliberate exclusion of different voices. For this reason, with this document we ardently promote the vision of *a society in dialogue*.

While a culture of dialogue is more demanding, it is surely more enriching and reflects a democratic and humane society. The very process of dialogue is an invitation for mutual listening and understanding, and thus, for building a society that is welcoming to the stranger and just and compassionate to all its members.

1.4 While the document does not seek to offer ready-made short-term solutions to specific issues raised during our conversations, it is our aspiration to share a vision of a flourishing Maltese society, where each citizen and visitor grows through fellowship with their neighbours, colleagues, family members and friends in a cultural milieu that stimulates wellbeing. However, in view of the current process of rapid cultural change that risks destabilising our society, equally essential is to create structures that can harness the potential of our novel cultural situation, to critically appropriate the emergent potential, tame the vortex of cultural upheaval and re-establish a space of balance that nurtures creativity and growth. This is especially relevant for the power of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the fresh talent pool rising from the increasing diversity of our people.

In our conversations it has been repeatedly emphasised that the fulfilment of a vision of growth requires the healing of broken relationships. Energetically combating such evils as corruption, manipulation, unjustified personal attacks and abuse of power, as well as making sure that our legal, economic and political institutions continue safeguarding citizens' rights and the common good through transparent administration, could achieve this. Equally necessary, however is modelling and practising in all private and public spheres a consistent ethic grounded in the dignity of all human beings and the universal destination of the common good, and in the practices of solidarity, subsidiarity and participation. These principles, rooted in authentic Christian values and Catholic Social Teaching, offer a basis for engagement within a more pluralistic social and cultural setting.¹

It is with reference to this appreciation of the basic human condition as oriented towards flourishing, but stifled by bias and injustice, that our activities, practices and *modus vivendi* can be judged, evaluated and where necessary, rectified. In this way, it will also be assured that now and in the future

governance and law, public policy and the economy are directed to their true end of serving, first and foremost, the interests and welfare of the “poor” and “marginalised”, the “weak” and “forgotten”, without whom a thriving Maltese society cannot be built or sustained.

A. Shifting Relationships — Shifting Horizons of Meaning

2.0 What characterises Maltese society?

2.1 *Identity* is something we construct as we evolve through constraints and challenges. Every generation struggles to define its identity. Over the years, the Maltese have reflected and struggled with a variety of issues through which we have developed a unique way of dealing with challenges. In our own times, we are facing radical shifts in values and lifestyles emerging from the recent accession to the European Union, extreme conurbation that has changed the landscape of the islands, to a new dependence on ICT that has erased most boundaries with other cultures. The effects of these new local and global environments have permeated every aspect of Maltese living—family, work, religion, leisure—and drastically altered our perception of ourselves as a unique people.

2.2 *Environment.* The size and location of our islands are a primary factor in defining our identity. The aridity and smallness of the land have always been a challenge that formed us. Till very recently, these two geographic conditions directly influenced our standard of living. Yet, our geographic location and pursuit of human abilities have contributed to overcome our limitations. We made use of what was given to us and changed our limitations into means of making a fair living.

Nevertheless, while cognizant that our land mass is very small, our arable land is scarce and our fauna and flora are fragile, the recent trend to greater conurbation and industrialisation has continued to stretch these natural resources to breaking point. Rarely do we stop to reflect that our quality of life depends on this fragile ecosystem—the quality of the air we breathe, the clean sea around us, the viability of the water table, the availability of open spaces—and not only on the amount of wealth we manage to accumulate. It is imperative to protect

and nurture the very “household” we inhabit, to safeguard our environmental resources, not only for our sake, but especially for that of our children.

2.3 *Demography.* A direct consequence of our economic strengths has been the constant increase in population. From the first official census under the British government in 1842 to the last one in 2005 the population increased by 3.5 times² and continued to increase by 3.1% over the past five years.³ Recently, the sustained increase in population is mostly due to net migration. The percentage of foreigners residing in Malta has risen to 5%.⁴ In 2010, net migration was estimated to 2247, reflecting a total of 0.5% increase in the population.⁵ Contrary to popular belief, the vast majority of foreigners residing in Malta are Europeans.⁶ At the end of 2011 there were 1289 asylum seekers and irregular migrants, mainly from African countries, residing in open centres or other institutional households.⁷

Contrary to migration trends, births are dramatically decreasing. The decline in birth rate has been noted since 1960, yet in these past 15 years the fertility rate has gone well below the replacement benchmark of 2.1, standing at 1.4. Furthermore, one notes that an increasing number of births are out of wedlock: from 1.8% in 1990 to 12.7% in 2001 and 25% in 2010.⁸ This might partially explain the opposite trend in the rate of unknown fathers from 49.1% in 2001 to 29.6% in 2009.⁹ Similarly, it reveals why family configurations have altered so significantly. Together with the traditional extended family and the modern nuclear family, today we have more single-parent households; more couples who choose not to have children; and the public emergence of same-sex partnerships.

In these past 50 years life expectancy has gone up from 65.7 to 78.9 for males and 68.9 to 83.1 for females.¹⁰ Even though the NSO estimates that by 2050, the total population will be of 378,000¹¹ the balance between the younger and older generations will be seriously compromised.

2.4 *Language.* Like most of the Mediterranean, Maltese culture remained strongly oral in its fabric up to our times. Until recently, the ethos of literacy that shaped the modern West remained the privilege of the elite and thus did not shake the traditional worldview and *modus operandi* of the mostly illiterate or semi-literate masses. In fact, until 1911, 73.65% of the population was illiterate and even today the literacy rate remains relatively low at 92.4%.¹² It could be argued that a “residual orality” typical of Mediterranean cultures continues to coexist with an increasingly “modern” literate one stemming from compulsory formal education.¹³

However, these trends might become even more complex as new ICT technologies accelerate the global retrieval of “orality”, which compounds the effects of traditional orality in the Maltese context. Not only might some traditional oral cultural *mores* become more accentuated, but attention to the way we speak could give us important clues to how values are and will continue changing.

Language, and in particular “spoken language”, is a prime mover in the reconstitution of reality, for it enables the subtlety and suppleness of thought to make sense of new social situations. Hence, as in our times we reconfigure language to deal with novel cultural conditions, not only is our taught bilingualism becoming more of a linguistic melange, but the Maltese language as “mother tongue” is undergoing a pronounced metamorphosis where old words are taking on new meanings and new “foreign” words are expanding—or replacing—previous constructs or modes of interpreting the world. This rapid change in the way people speak and think is intensified through the way traditional mass media and new social media flood the Maltese landscape. As we shape our language(s) and negotiate a new communication environment, Maltese culture reconfigures its character and values through all community-building initiatives: from politics, to the economy, to education and religion.

At the same time, however, while bilingualism, together with fluency in a third or more languages, often has been considered as one of Malta's greatest assets, the Maltese would be well advised to take stock of the real state of bilingualism in our islands. As language education flourishes in other EU countries, it is imperative that we ensure that this asset is not taken for granted, at risk of being lost or jeopardised.

2.5 *Art.* The artist's unique gift to society is to purify their distinctive appreciation and expression of beauty to the extent of transforming it to an accomplished, universally recognisable, "outring" of the human spirit. Artistic endeavours of all kinds—from the manifold plastic arts, to the performing arts, to literature—offer the essential symbols that carry and redefine Maltese identity from one generation to the next. Art does not only measure the pulse of the people in the here and now—through such populist expressions like the *Eurovision Song Contest*, shifting architectural styles, cultural festivals or radio and television productions—but it also has a culturally transcending function through it being an essential manifestation of the spirit of the people whose expression changes through the times. Art is the symbols of our relentless and communal desire for beauty, even as we learn to convey it in ever-novel ways. Investing in art is a concrete way of nurturing the spirit of Maltese people.

Hence, the task of our institutions, from Government to University, is not only to preserve the many significant artistic accomplishments of the past, but even more crucially, to be wise in discerning, appreciating and nurturing the artistic spirit in the present, wherever it may be found. Accessible exhibiting of artwork, and adequate performance spaces are a necessary first step to continue guaranteeing that our Maltese identity is formed in this most essential "aesthetic" dimension that reflects (and nourishes) our Maltese "character". Likewise, the ongoing collaboration and exchange of ideas between local artists and their colleagues from all-over the world should be strongly

promoted and financially sustained to guarantee that Maltese art continues to grow.

Moreover, in these times of cultural transition, it is just as crucial to recognise, harness and rejoice in the many artistic endeavours that are emerging from the margins. The elderly, the poor, disenfranchised youth, our prison populations and—as has always been the signature of Maltese identity emerging from the encounter of “cultures”—the migrant; all have a rich contribution to offer for the critical task of re-chiselling Maltese identity in a glocal context. It is in harnessing this rich, distinctly local, but latent resource, together with internationalising our talent pool through foreign exchange, that Malta can achieve the fine balance between being a rich contributor to global culture by being rooted in a strong awareness and celebration of our distinctiveness.

3.0 Community life

3.1 A relatively new phenomenon in the Maltese islands suggested by recent data is the existence of a *communitarian-individualistic divide* with no clear borders. In fact, many Maltese seem to experience a fragmented lifestyle. Already in 1998, but more clearly in 2006, research has noted the emergence of a secular and individualistic identity that is competing with an inherited national identity grounded in people’s attachment to the Church and religion.¹⁴ The increasing signs of an individualistic lifestyle seem to move hand in hand with the growing economy and higher levels of education.

A case in point reflecting this phenomenon is the shift in preferred dwelling places. While in years past our towns and villages facilitated relationships and community life, today most of the new conurban realities reflect a desire for an individualistic lifestyle free from preying social control.

Ironically, even the recent trend to move back to the now-empty village cores suggests a desire for seclusion. Hence, the choice of home and lifestyle comes to symbolise alienation from the community and a concomitant lack of dialogue and participation. One laments the loss of the art of conversation and senses a growing feeling of loneliness even when immersed in a cacophony of noises and social transactions.

Lack of open spaces for everyday interactions and community gatherings facilitate this individualistic trend. In this regard, the government would do well to use wisely the land and immovable property transferred from the Catholic Church to the Maltese State. At a time when more than 27% of all dwellings are vacant,¹⁵ rather than simply utilising this property for housing needs, the government should seriously consider redeveloping some of these transferred properties into spaces for community development, as allowed by article 2 (1) of the same agreement.¹⁶

- 3.2 Nevertheless, notwithstanding these signs of individualism, there is also a growing trend for communal “rituals” as identity markers. Interestingly, religious *festi* tend both to reaffirm a collective memory of religiosity and solidarity and to reinforce piques, which divide the local community into *partiti*. While their tendency towards excess is problematic, *festi* also seem to point to the people’s need for rituals that bring them together. Hence, contrary to predictions, in these last four decades there has been a growth in the celebration of local festivals and a greater participation among the locals to organise them. In 2005, some 9000 persons were involved in the organisation of local village *festi*, and in 2005, 5658 persons participated in Holy Week processions. In 2011 the number of persons who were involved in the organisation and/or participated in the local village *festi*, went up to some 13,000 persons.¹⁷ This might be partially explained by the growth of the economy. However, it also reflects a desire to reaffirm communal bonds.¹⁸ Lay organisers, seem to have appropriated *festi* by tapping into old religious symbols and artefacts in order to infuse solidarity,

identity and a new religious/ritualistic sentiment, which may be distinct from the formal religion offered by the institutional Church.¹⁹ This mixing of mundane and sacred elements in *festi* and other communal events points to a growing sense of nostalgia to assuage the alienation that emerges from individualism.

- 3.3 Indeed, this communitarian–individualistic divide might be alerting us to something even more pervasive in Maltese culture. The individualism of modern western secularity was built on the liberal democratic ideal of the equality of all citizens bound by a social contract that presupposes civic rights. Social interactions are often impersonal, but strongly regularised and ritualised through the law. Yet traditionally, the fabric of Maltese society has been knit through a Mediterranean, communitarian familism and religious values rather than impersonal legal obligations. Contemporary Maltese “individualism” appears to be the result of more diffused education coupled by neo-liberal economic policies that inculcate an ideal of “individual choice”. Its effect is to weaken traditional kinship relations (the collapse of the extended family and village community) and to foster greater distancing from the Church—the literal and metaphorical “heart” of the village.

However, it is debatable how much Maltese people have truly appropriated the spirit and ethos of modern liberal democratic ideals. Even if the process of Europeanization is strengthening secularity, there remains a pervasive communitarian, even “tribal” substratum that is deeply agonistic and antagonistic (us-against-them mentality), lacks a well-defined “civic” identity built on the assumption of equal citizen rights and duties, and assumes nepotism and clientelism as matters of course. This is evident, among others, in our still strong political bipartisanship, a lingering sense of dependency on the State reminiscent of our feudal, colonial and even recent past in the seventies and eighties with its long string of public sector job openings, and a thriving “hidden” black economy. In other

words, the current tension appears to be of negotiating traditional “oral” *mores* in a new cultural milieu where the “literate” ideals of liberal democracy are being confronted by an emerging digital “orality”.

We observe how in the age of ICT and social media, the Maltese are more “connected” than ever, at the same time that their connections (real and virtual) are more fluid and shifting than ever. The ill effects include a narcissistic outlook that is not only antithetical to modern democratic ideals of citizen participation and responsibility, but also dampens the potential for true community grounded in empathy, compassion and respect for others. Hence, a certain lack of commitment, trust and responsibility in personal relationships (e.g. the rise in marriage breakdown), at the workplace (e.g. emphasis on entitlement rather than duty of contributing) and in society at large (e.g. the continued high level of tax evasion) constitutes a reconfiguration of social interaction itself: ubiquitous yet fleeting, ever changing yet shallow. As interaction becomes more fragmented and mediated, it creates a ripple effect on liquid, and often destabilising, personal and communal identities.

- 3.4 *Diversity in our community.* We cannot continue to assume that the Maltese are homogenous in their lifestyles or beliefs. Indeed if we assume such homogeneity, the risk would be of marginalising—and possibly discriminating against—entire groups within our society. Historically, partisan politics, gender and even physical and mental disability have been conscious—or sometimes unconscious—markers of discrimination in our society. While it is positive to note that the Maltese have become more tolerant of those who traditionally were considered to be emarginated groups or individuals, today, there is a rising tide of intolerance of that which is perceived to be foreign to the community, with an increase in xenophobia and racism, and suspicion (mostly due to ignorance) of other religious traditions.²⁰ As the face of Maltese society changes, it

becomes imperative to learn to celebrate differences that enrich, rather than dissolve, a common Maltese identity.

- 3.5 This is particularly true in view of the influx of *irregular immigrants* from sub-Saharan Africa that, in these past ten years, has reached our shores in precarious boats. Authorities have struggled to cope with the growing influx. Still, the more difficult challenge has been of coping with its suddenness and rapid escalation, which in Malta, like in other EU countries, has led to a rise of racist sentiments and xenophobia.²¹

The recent UNHCR report shows that Maltese perceptions have altered somewhat, since 54% do not consider migration to be a threat to their way of life in the local community.”²² Nevertheless, what remains worrying is the fact that 67.8% claim that they do not know any refugees or migrants personally, while 63.7% believe that “only a few Maltese people accept cultural differences.” After ten years of hosting migrants in our country, not only do many Maltese appear to resist, or at least, lack the opportunity to form meaningful communal bonds with other ethnic groups, but many still believe that the process of integration itself is very difficult. In this regard, the danger that our society is facing is not merely of overt racism, but even of the widespread perception that the Maltese are—and will remain—racist. Hence, we run the risk that racism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that leads to a maelstrom of cultural degeneration from which it could become increasingly difficult to be liberated.

The issue, of course, is not just of people’s perceptions from below, but also of policies from above. The government has been repeatedly criticised that the danger of rising racial violence is directly related to our detention policy and the ghettoization of migrants in large open centres. Many irregular immigrants are placed in detention for a period of one year up to eighteen months, except for those who are deemed to be in a vulnerable category. It is also well known that the detention centres are mostly substandard—a fact that has worsened the

migrants' relationship with the Maltese and led many to experience deep psychological difficulties.²³ These measures go against human dignity and are conducive to increased anger, violence and dehumanisation on the part of all concerned—not only immigrants.

Malta is at a crucial crossroad, but if we find the will to choose the wiser path of integration and solidarity, we will become a richer culture through embracing, rather than fearing, diversity. A holistic and multifaceted approach needs to be developed in order to include all aspects arising from, and affecting, migration: from an adequate and ambitious integration policy for migrants who stay in Malta, to the genuine search for alternatives to the current detention policy; and from political action calling for European solidarity in relocation mechanisms, to the evaluation of the effectiveness of voluntary return schemes, where these would truly benefit certain categories of migrants.

4.0 The Family

- 4.1 The family institution is fundamental to every society. Crossing all social strata, it is the one cohesive element in protecting values and transmitting to posterity the constituent characteristics of the Maltese way of life. The family is both the font of personal formation and enculturation, but also the economic cornerstone of our society—a trend that persists today with family businesses. Christianity has inspired this experience of the family as “household” in its everyday manifestations. This is evident in our Mediterranean traditions through a working amalgam of some British and Italian *mores* (e.g. *festi*, lavish First Communion, engagement and wedding parties).
- 4.2 Yet, as in recent decades Maltese society looked up more for inspiration towards a “progressive”, more “permissive” and

laicising Europe, traditional societal fabric started to fragment. Among others, the decision way back in 1987 to liberalise the market brought about radical changes in the standard of living, lifestyles, frames of mind and inevitably, values. In these past three decades, the European Values Survey has shown that with every passing decade, the Maltese are becoming increasingly “liberal” in their values as well. The attitudinal change toward divorce is the obvious example, since while in 1981, 81.9% of the population would have never accepted it, it became law in 2011. The same trend is evident in other beliefs and attitudes, including those related to what constitutes a happy marriage and sexual life,²⁴ or even in the tendency, accentuated through modern contraception and assisted reproduction technologies, to see “children” almost as a “rightful commodity” that can be chosen at will.

- 4.3 It seems that this shift in values is related to an increasing tendency to consider family members as individuals rather than a group.²⁵ Taken to an extreme, greater individualism has serious consequences for family life, since, in contrast to a more communitarian ethic and identity, almost inevitably, the ideal of an “individual” self-centred fulfilment will conflict with the desires and choices of other family members, possibly leading to greater frustration and dissatisfaction.

It is a *sine qua non* of marriage (which in turn, models parenthood and all other social relationships) that there needs to be a conscious effort by both partners to work towards achieving the fine balance between true individual fulfilment in a mutually self-giving partnership that is not only a distinct entity—a family—but also greater than the sum of its parts. Hence in a successful marriage both partners are enriched in their individuality *through* being a part of the whole. Yet, in the manifold daily circumstances that build a life-long union, this demands prudence from both sides to discern the most reasonable choices and actions for the wellbeing of the family unit as a whole. As individual and family priorities are constantly reordered, the couple works individually and

together towards achieving desired long term goals, sometimes by sacrificing immediate gratification. Hence, self-control and resilience are as much part of married life as the happiness and fulfilment that we all desire.

Yet, it could be argued, that it is precisely such “character” that is becoming increasingly difficult to forge today. Notwithstanding the Church’s best efforts for marriage preparation courses (that, it should be noted, require an equivalent for those seeking civil marriages), young couples appear to be struggling the most, precisely with fundamental personal skills that allow for healthy relationships to mature. The irony is that the task of character formation always starts in the family. Hence, we are entering a vicious circle, where due to rapid cultural changes, many young couples are finding themselves lacking this formation in their own upbringing and thus, unable to pass it on to their children.

- 4.4 This mature outlook to life that allows for a reasonable ordering of individual and family priorities is not only crucial for married life, but becomes more complex and essential when couples welcome children into their life. The younger they are, the more children are dependent on the availability and self-giving of caring adults—in particular of their parents. Parenthood is the art of learning to love another by, quite literally, giving your very self—your time, energy and full dedication—to assist an other to grow to maturity. Yet, since with young children, the dynamic shifts more to “giving” than to (immediate) “receiving”, the exigencies of parenthood do not imply that we abrogate the important balance between each family member’s individual desire and responsibility for personal flourishing, and the needs of the whole family. Rather, this is the time to model positive self-care with responsibility toward the other.
- 4.5 This dynamic is particularly important to keep in mind for women, who through pervasive structures of patriarchy have traditionally been indoctrinated to always give to others while

forgetting or ignoring their own needs. Indeed, notwithstanding the success of the feminist movement to achieve greater equality between the sexes, the same phenomenon of forgetting oneself reminiscent of structures of injustice, remains pervasive in seemingly contradictory ways. Hence, on one hand, some women today seem to believe (perhaps mistakenly, though not necessarily) that their own needs for growth need to be “bracketed” while their children are still young. Some Maltese women give up careers, economic independence and even the personal satisfaction of contributing through their individual talents and skills to dedicate “everything” to their children and spouse. In this regard, the example of other European countries that offer generous paid parental leave, divided between both parents, and with the cost shared more equitably by the state and employer, is worth pondering, as it reaps long term benefits not only to the family, but also to society as a whole.

In contrast, the unreasonable expectation to be “superwomen” who can juggle multiple responsibilities without adequate support is just as detrimental. The truism that it takes a village to raise a child is ignored at our own peril. Not only ought the father to be equally involved in the task of child rearing, but affordable childcare services of the highest quality are an investment in the welfare of our families and society as a whole. Likewise, extended school hours where children are offered extra-curricular activities, would help put less pressure on couples juggling work and family responsibilities. In addition, and in view of Malta’s particular situation, the role of grandparents and the extended family is also to be celebrated. However, it cannot simply be taken for granted, especially as more couples are choosing to have children later in life when the older generation might be too frail to care for the young.

- 4.6 Similarly, however, excessive emphasis on the stereotypical role of the father as “provider”—sometimes even, to the extent of putting pressure on oneself to be the “sole” provider—is also potentially harmful, as it can distort and limit the father’s even

more crucial role of being actively involved in his children's upbringing. Indeed, a positive sign of the times is that more men are taking a more active role in family life.

Nevertheless, it remains a concern that as more children are being raised in single-parent households (usually by the mother), the absence of a father figure could have detrimental effects on children (and in particular, on adolescents), including the possibility of emotional and psychological difficulties as well as the risk of relative poverty.²⁶ In this regard, as the fourth report of the Parliamentary Social Affairs Committee, titled "The effect of fatherlessness on children", notes, it is important to evaluate how certain social benefits could be leading to "marriage penalties," discouraging instead of supporting stable relationships between the parents, which usually, would lead to a more beneficial family environment for children's upbringing. In this regard, the practice of allowing birth registrations with "unknown father" could be seen as particularly detrimental, since at the very least, children should have a right to know who their father is.

- 4.7 Measures to safeguard the family, however, do not necessarily cancel out all the threats. A serious threat to today's families remains excessive stress due to unreasonable individual and family expectations. The very lifestyle of the "typical family" has irrevocably changed. In a frantic race against time, voracious consumption, and increasing "demands" of schooling, careers and even leisure pursuits, families simply do not find the time to "connect". Yet, if as social beings, our quality of life is measured primarily by the quality of our relationships, then the way we relate to one another in the intimacy of our homes has significant repercussions on the way we function as a society.

Hence, precisely because families are so pivotal in shaping our society, we ignore the needs and challenges of Maltese families at our own risk. Various means of solidarity (educational, psychological and financial) are necessary to support Maltese families. In the recent past, the Catholic Church played this role

admirably in our islands. Today other groups and institutions have joined in this effort to provide for different forms of solidarity.²⁷ One may mention, amongst other desiderata: softer access to household finance, wider tax relief for working couples, longer paid holidays (possibly portioned among Christmas, Easter and summer), longer parental leave shared by both parents, assistance in school fees, alleviating heavier utility bills, and facilitating even more alternative energy tools for households. Even more pivotal, is the awareness that all assistance to our families should be directed to the end of more “balanced” and “human” lifestyles that would allow for the individual flourishing of each member and the family as a whole.

Yet as Pope Benedict warns in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, our “smaller and at times miniscule families run the risk of impoverishing social relations, and failing to ensure effective forms of solidarity. These situations are symptomatic of scant confidence in the future and moral weariness. It is thus becoming a social and even economic necessity once more to hold up to future generations the beauty of marriage and the family, and the fact that these institutions correspond to the deepest needs and dignity of the person.”²⁸

5.0 The Religious Dimension

5.1 The Social Values, Science and Technology Survey demonstrated that, when compared to their European counterparts, the Maltese have the highest belief in God (95%), the lowest non-believing group (2%) and the lowest group of believers in a life force or spirit (3%).²⁹ Overall, according to the European Values Survey, 87.4% of the Maltese feel that God is very important for them, 72.9% consider themselves religious, while 89.5% feel that religion is important in their lives. Yet the data also shows that while the vast majority feel Catholic, claim to attend Sunday Mass regularly (80.2%) and

pray everyday (64.7%), there has been a growing dissatisfaction with the way the Roman Catholic Church answers moral problems (53.3%), family problems (54.9%), social problems (43.6%), as well as spiritual needs (69.9%).³⁰

Moreover, even though only 3% of the Maltese claim to pertain to non-Catholic religious communities, they remain a striking testimony to the religious diversity on the islands. The largest community is by far the Muslim one with approximately 6000 members. There are some 21 other Christian communities and denominations present in Malta representing various eastern and western Christian traditions, as well as some other six religions.³¹

These realities point to obvious questions that are particularly contentious in the Maltese context that, while being traditionally Roman Catholic is becoming increasingly secularised: Is there a role for the Catholic Church in Malta in a discussion on the future of Maltese society? If so, what is that role? How can the Catholic understanding of a good life contribute to a wider discussion of our country's short term and long term goals? How to communicate that vision in a social context that includes different, sometimes even contradictory, belief systems and presuppositions?

- 5.2 The Second Vatican Council makes it clear that "Christ gave His Church no proper mission in the political, economic or social order."³² However this does not mean that religion and the Church should be excluded from the public sphere and retreat to the private sphere. This mistake is a mirror image of the Church dictating the social order. The Good News that the Church proclaims is of *integral human development*, of the wellbeing of men and women in body, mind and spirit in the particularity of their cultural context. The Church's main mission is to mirror Christ's Light by its own internal life, thus indicating a direction to society of that which is good, beautiful and worthy in the social dimension of human life. More concretely, this entails a commitment to the task of holistic

personal formation, such that all men and women, in whichever circumstance in their daily lives, can be inspiring witnesses of virtue and character that lead to integral human flourishing.

Traditionally, Maltese culture has been shaped by this Christian and humanistic character that has nurtured and transmitted our values. Yet the same process of secularisation that marginalises the role of the Church in the public sphere, and limits the scope of religious discourse to the internal “spiritual” and “private” sphere, risks weakening even important human values that have contributed to the formation of our culture and communal welfare. Thus, even in Malta, the Church’s mission must be of “new evangelisation”, of proclaiming once again the Good News of integral human development in words and symbols that are relevant to the shifting cultural context. This mission must reach those in positions of authority as well as the grassroots of society. It also includes an ongoing process of internal discernment by leaders of the Maltese Church to evaluate and, where necessary correct and improve, how the Church’s mission can continue serving our society better.

- 5.3 In the past, the Church prided itself on being close to the people and on responding creatively to their physical and spiritual needs. Thus, a renewed evangelisation requires that the Church, once again, makes every effort to study and understand the shifting landscape of our culture in order to respond effectively to the contemporary material and spiritual needs of our society—both as perceived by the people themselves, but also as interpreted by the Church in light of the Good News. This stance of being attentive and listening to the people’s fears and anxieties about the future, even to their sense of loneliness and hopelessness in facing their daily struggles, reclaims the Church’s pivotal role of being a community-builder that empowers people through offering them nurturance in a holistic way. “The joys and the hopes, the grieves and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the grieves

and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”³³

Of course, in today’s media landscape, listening to people also means being attuned to their new languages emerging from new technologies. Contemporary media is already very interactive through the “direct” transmission of news, phone-ins, text messaging, and web 2.0 technologies. These impose greater responsibility on the Maltese Church to be constantly and consistently open to dialogue with everyone and on every occasion. Yet while the Church must participate in the mediated landscape, its role cannot be reduced to being yet another voice in a pluralistic culture, but must include the function of offering the possibility of spaces of solace, quiet and reflection, that encourage face-to-face encounters and conversations in small communities, where men, women and children can be strengthened “to determine their own destiny” and “participate in the events and processes that shape their lives.”³⁴ This process, that builds personal integrity through healthy mutually life-giving relationships, also nurtures individuality—that must not be confused with individualism. Thus, each person learns to discern his/her unique way to growth in self-respect, satisfaction and contentment, through the irreplaceable contribution they can offer to society.

- 5.4 The Church’s stance of “new evangelisation” on a political level must be guided “by theological perception and not simply by the idea of increasing influence and power.”³⁵ As Pope Benedict noted, while accepting a “a healthy secularism of the State, by virtue of which temporal realities are governed according to their own norms, but which does not exclude those ethical references that are ultimately founded in religion,”³⁶ the Church has legitimate role in the moral and cultural development of the nation. This entails acting as a voice of moral conscience and a catalyst for change, reminding the state of its obligations to the common good, in particular to those who are marginalised.

Accordingly, the Church's pivotal role of influential leadership in society should be of reminding and promoting universal human values in a context where the new cultural forces appear to be leading to greater alienation. Our complex society certainly calls forth for "the deep thought and reflection of wise men in search of a new humanism which will enable modern man to find himself anew."³⁷ This leadership role must be exercised with wisdom through becoming a strong voice that encourages dialogue and deliberation among all sectors of society. While starting by offering an example of open and genuine dialogue *ad intra*, the Church's role *ad extra* should be exercised with authority as opposed to power: "all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). This also requires that the Church in Malta critically appropriates, and practices with prudence, the rhetorical power of new media. In this way, it can participate effectively in the "public" sphere through persuasive communication that encourages authentic human flourishing.

B. Mediating Factors

6.0 Environment

6.1 The MEPA's 2008 Environment Report warns that, while the Maltese are largely meeting their basic material needs, the cost is to place unsustainable demands on the environment, thus putting strains on natural resources and processes. Key indicators of the strain on the Maltese ecosystem include: significant rise in air pollutants, especially in high traffic areas; greenhouse gas emissions from industrial activity that are hastening climate change; widespread inefficiency in land use, particularly given current over-supply of residential, commercial and industrial buildings; increased danger to the sustainable use of coastal and marine environments; lagging behind EU waste management targets; and, perhaps most telling, the fact that 64% of habitats and 44% of species listed in the Habitats Directive have an inadequate or bad conservation status, while the status of 29% of Maltese habitats and 36% of Maltese species remains unknown.³⁸

The report also stresses that the environment is a crucial contributor to the Maltese economy: directly, it produces at least "one-fifth of employment and one-sixth of value added." The tourist industry also depends on the environment indirectly. In addition, the environment is essential not only to provide "amenities for recreation, residence and location of economic activity, but also to absorb the by-products of production and consumption." The latter include domestic and construction waste, which, in order to be reduced, implies limiting waste production in the first place through the efficient use of raw and other materials, as well as their recycling. This is particularly important for construction and demolition waste, which while in the EU-27 accounts for 25% of waste generated, in Malta 87% of our waste is the by-product of these industries, and it simply lays inert in landfills, spent quarries or even the

sea.³⁹ Lastly, the report notes that, while Malta has made significant progress in upgrading its environmental policies, “its institutional capacity still needs to improve in terms of human resources and funding, as well as public and private sector investments to upgrade operations and infrastructure.”

6.2 Surprisingly, however, notwithstanding, the critical nature of these issues, the environment remains an afterthought in much of our political discourse, and a Cinderella for policy makers who oftentimes expend more effort on strengthening the economy than on the very ecology that makes it possible. It is urgent that we reflect critically on how we are currently managing the “communal household” that we inhabit, and that we arrive at a consensus to enable and facilitate sustainable and harmonious human ecologies for the future. Most crucially, it demands that we cease considering environmental concerns as optional “compromises”, but rather as *necessary* shifts to our lifestyles on which our very wellbeing and that of future generations depends.

6.3 Indeed, the strain on our ecosystem due to over-population, over-consumption and a booming tourist industry is already severely affecting the physical, psychological and spiritual welfare of the Maltese people. Most obvious are the direct health issues arising from environmental degradation like, the rising incidence of respiratory illnesses in relation to poor air quality, or an increase in hearing impairment because of noise pollution. More indirectly, the lack of open green spaces and adequate urban planning continues to promote sedentary lifestyles and discourages physical exercise like walking and cycling. More subtly, but no less deadly, the aesthetic denigration of urban environments and the lack of concern for natural ecosystems and other species makes us ever more insensitive to real psychological and spiritual needs like silence, harmony and beauty. Also, the ubiquity and invasiveness of the many chemicals in the food we ingest, cosmetics we apply, and detergent use in our households leaves an ecological (and health) footprint that is hard to quantify. Even more invisible

but no less real is the electromagnetic pollution that we are constantly being bombarded with through new technologies and appliances. The complex combined health effects of these various environmental factors are not only mostly unknown, but exceedingly hard to assess.

- 6.4 We are systematically recreating our environment without adequate prior reflection or subsequent thorough evaluation of the immense and possibly indelible marks we are leaving on a global heritage that is not ours to keep, but our children's to pass on to. As Pope Benedict teaches: "Projects for integral human development cannot ignore coming generations, but need to be marked by solidarity and inter-generational justice, while taking into account a variety of contexts: ecological, juridical, economic, political and cultural."⁴⁰ In the case of ecological concerns, however, we seem blinded not only to the plight of the unborn, but even to that of the living. We need to raise awareness of the complex inter-relations between human and environment, in order to live harmoniously in our surroundings rather than aggressively mould it as we deem fit. In other words, we need to eradicate a mentality of dominance to replace it with the more just biblical teaching of the stewardship of all creation.

7.0 Health

- 7.1 In recent decades, Malta has invested in an excellent state-funded healthcare system, staffed by highly qualified medical professionals and paramedics, that seeks to guarantee equal access to most healthcare needs. This is evident from the very high-ranking achieved—fifth worldwide—in the 2000 World Health Report that assessed the performance of national health systems.⁴¹ Nevertheless, while Mater Dei Hospital is a modern teaching hospital that offers acute care through many specialised medical services, primary health care in local communities, as well as national health promotion services are

still lagging behind. Perhaps a reason for this dichotomy is the fact that healthcare is a highly politicised issue, that often seeks to respond more to people's immediate demands rather than their long term needs. For this reason, the complex system that needs to safeguard all people's right to adequate healthcare, while guaranteeing a just distribution of limited resources, has a tendency for crisis management. This is manifest in a lack of evidence-based care to establish real healthcare needs, or of adequate evaluation of new services.

- 7.2 Meanwhile, it is also paradoxical that while the Maltese today have longer life expectancies than ever, there are worrying trends that we are becoming less healthy than earlier generations. While, traditionally our diet has been an amalgam of international influences reflecting our history and geography, until recently it was relatively wholesome one based mostly on local seasonal ingredients, spiced up with some distinctly British flavours that still pervade our cooking. Yet, just like many of our European neighbours, today our increasing affluence and exposure to Americanisation is expanding our waistlines, but diminishing our wellbeing. Coronary heart disease and Type 2 diabetes, often associated with sedentary lifestyles and obesity, are already the most prevalent silent killers. Indeed, a recent study shows, that nearly one-fifth of all deaths on the islands—19.2%—are related to low levels of physical activity. Malta tops a worldwide list for sedentary lifestyle, with nearly 72% of the Maltese not reaching minimum physical activity benchmarks.⁴²

As health conditions related to poor lifestyle choices take epidemic proportions, it is likely that we will see a reversal of the trend to increasing life expectancy as early as our children's generation. A systematic review comparing estimates of the prevalence of overweight and obesity in school-aged youth from 34 countries, showed that Malta topped the list with the highest prevalence of overweight (pre-obese and obese) and obese youth at 25.4% and 7.9% respectively.⁴³

This is an alarming situation that requires a systemic approach to curb and hopefully reverse. Not only is it necessary to educate for healthier lifestyles, but also to acknowledge how our health crisis is in effect, culturally mediated. For to be obese, to not exercise, to eat unhealthily, and to juggle two or three jobs continues to be the Maltese norm. Add to that the increasing stress on family life and the Maltese propensity to indulge in habits like drinking and smoking, and the situation appears perilous. Unless there is a radical cultural shift that reclaims moderation as a virtue to live by, rising consumerism is backfiring to impoverish—rather than enable—our health and prosperity.

- 7.3 Nevertheless, perhaps the most endemic but hidden issue that needs to be reflected upon is the effect of medicalization itself on the understanding of personhood. The evident success of medical technologies to treat disease and prolong people’s lives can give the illusion that everything—from psychological and spiritual needs, to cosmetic ideals—can be fixed or recreated through pills, the surgeon’s knife and—in the near future—genetic engineering. The technologizing of life and death—from IVF, to end-of-life issues—does not only lead to a plethora of bioethical dilemmas that need careful scrutiny, but more resolutely, to the implicit instrumentalisation of the human person. It is a sign of the times that the most sacred moments in a person’s existence—conception through a fruitful sexual act, the birth of a child and their parents, the passage of death—are today often mediated by medical technology. We can be conceived in a laboratory; we are born in a sanitised medical establishment (often through the use of manifold technologies); and oftentimes, we die surrounded by machines, but not necessarily family and friends. In this context, is it surprising that the medical establishment is expected to “play God” by determining treatment options and the allocation of limited resources among patients? How do we work towards the equitable distribution of healthcare resources while guaranteeing the patients’ right to be involved in all decisions related to their healthcare and treatment options?

8.0 Information and Communication Technologies

8.1 ICT provides another drastic challenge to the fabric of Maltese society. The Maltese, certainly feel the need to communicate. The abundance of traditional media enterprises and the higher-than-average use of social media bear witness to this. Globalised structures overcame the “island” factor not only in economic services but, more radically, in the communication sectors. Businesses have had to make adjustments as their intermediary value is being quickly eroded in certain areas. The young and educated have integrated these extensions of self into their identity—perhaps without being quite aware of the personal and collective cost. Our younger generations imbibe virtual social relations and digital artefacts that create new and unfathomed expectations in real life. ICT has changed the authoritative sources in society. The young are not only “educated” by the family, school and Church. They are also being shaped quite decisively through the influence of mass and social media.

Through the uncritical appropriation of ICT, today’s society expects immediate responses, constantly changing images, a leisure world without commitment, a visual rather than textual explanation, “packaging” rather than “substance”, relative opinions rather than authoritative commands, emotional rather than cognitive appeals. How do the traditional institutions penetrate such a milieu with their messages, if at all? Or do they run the risk of becoming part of a culture that prefers the limelight and applause, rather than diligent service? Can we pass on values of integrity, responsibility, humility through media whose very ethos seems to negate them? How do we promote the many advantages for human development of new media—rich milieu of information, instantaneous communication, the harnessing of grassroots political initiatives—while limiting the disadvantages?

8.2 The growth of traditional “mass media” in Malta is a test case worth pondering. While providing opportunities for younger

generations to express their creative talents and commercialise cultural artefacts, it has also increased the potential for social anomie. More seriously, in the frenetic hysteria for more local radio and television productions, we seem to forget (or are unable) to discern quality. As media enterprises depend on advertising, they have been shaped by a populist opinion that guarantees the highest audience. Sensationalism, simplistic viewpoints and, at times, even vulgarity, feed the consumer a mirror of themselves. For while radio and television can be excellent pedagogical tools if programmes are well crafted by maximising the potential of the medium as “language”—after all what is truly entertaining is educating and vice versa—audiences should not be treated as mere blind “consumers”, but rather as active partakers of artistic and intelligent communal products.

Lack of media education allows for the vicious cycle of mediocre programming that is “popular” and “successful” simply because the audience lacks the tools to discern quality. This situation can become even more tragic through new media, where everyone has the opportunity for direct participation, as well as to be creator and exchange multimedia artforms. Media (including digital) literacy must become a priority of the educational curriculum, since it is essential to promote a culture where media messages and forms are evaluated critically and adopted intelligently. Just as we openly concede that a citizen who cannot read and write is at a disadvantage, so we need to appreciate that a lack of education in new media will limit the exercise of civic duties and rights. Worse still, it can “manufacture consent”⁴⁴ through mere propaganda and indoctrination.

- 8.3 The digital revolution has captured the entire globe, transforming it into one amalgam of shared consciousness and information. Nevertheless, the local effects of such a cultural upheaval remain unique and distinct. In Malta, traditionally an oral culture, touched only marginally by the effects of print and the rise of modernity, digital media have quickly become

second nature, accentuating our “tribal” tendencies. Three particular effects can be highlighted:

- (a) the rise of nostalgia for the past (in particular for its artefacts, traditions and symbols), accompanied by some disdain for its values and ideals;
- (b) the increasing fear of the stranger, even while the Maltese are more willing than ever to embrace “foreign” influences, whether in lifestyles, ideals or symbols;
- (c) the astonishing energy dedicated to constructing self-identities—or at least in fashioning “publicity”⁴⁵ images that simulate identities—in particular through social media exchange, and embracing ideologies and accessories/artefacts as extensions of the self. Simultaneously, more Maltese are shying away more from the traditional bastions that defined personal identity—that is, family relationships and the Church.

All these tendencies are not only driven by the enthusiastic appropriation of digital media, but they extend (while paradoxically reversing) previously held cultural biases. Thus, if until recently oral communication was structured and hierarchically ordered (the symbolic power of the pulpit, the political podium in mass meetings and the radio—“Rediffusion”—in many households, come to mind) today, the relevant exchange is at the grassroots, imitating the ethos of the Web that obsolesces explicit hierarchy and more substantive discourse.

- 8.4 The emerging landscape challenges a rethinking of institutional and individual communication. While awareness groups have arisen in other countries to critically appraise the ICT situation, locally we seem to import one platform after another with little thought to the long term issues that such technologies necessitate. The right to be forgotten, data privacy and cyber security have not been in the forefront of local discussions. Because we perceive ourselves as being “small” we assume that while Germany can call Google to task, we have no other option

but to entertain an ICT bacchanalia without much ado. The dual dangers of a *laissez-faire* attitude and the potential for tyrannical surveillance that come from new technologies require direct communal democratic involvement.

A concrete way in which civil society and government can help “cultivate” an intelligent community-driven digital arena is by promoting the “open source” culture. The open source culture is the re-evaluation and free sharing of created content. It originated in the last century and owes its *raison d'être* to the tension between the need for creative practices, which necessitate access to propriety content, and very restrictive intellectual property laws. This cultural framework promotes works (mainly software) that although legally entitled to copyright protection, are nonetheless made available to the general public. Hence, such works can be modified and redistributed back into the community. For this reason, the open source culture has the capacity to foster a collaborative setting due to the free sharing of information.⁴⁶

C. Responsible Action to Create our Future

9.0 Economic life

9.1 Economics means literally, “the art of managing the household.” The wellbeing of society is bound to its prudent administration. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the economy has become the prime mover in the life of the *polis* and is changing the values of communities and individuals. The pivotal relationship between our aspirations for a “good life” and the economy needs to be studied carefully. Indeed, one of the dangers in contemporary society is that economics has taken priority over politics.

9.2 Over these past decades, Malta has developed a modern liberal economy, with expanding visible exports and a highly successful financial and gaming sector. The GNI per capita has increased from €11,133 in 2004 to €13,898 in 2010,⁴⁷ as households have continued to increase their gross income from an average of €19,871 in 2005 to €24,403 in 2009.⁴⁸ The creation of jobs and the diversification of the labour market topped the agenda of successive Maltese governments. Even more remarkably, from a widespread mentality not so long ago of parasitic dependence on the government and mistrust of private enterprise, today the Maltese have a keen appreciation for the private sector that generates wealth, and deteriorating confidence in the traditional institutions of parliament, the law courts and even the Church.

These remarkable benchmarks are due to an economic structure that has made productive use of our limited resources and has shown confidence in the potential of its people. Since the nineteen sixties, foreign direct investment has been a major contributor to economic growth, but we must not underestimate the value of Maltese entrepreneurship and business acumen. Malta’s small and medium sized enterprises,

mostly family owned businesses, have contributed to the livelihood of thousands of Maltese. These last twenty-five years, with a liberal and open outlook by both Government and enterprise, Maltese business ventured on exports and started investing abroad. The change from a heavy-handed approach in the past of State-involvement in business, to a gentler role by the State to give direction and implement regulation, has given a breathing space to business and has allowed it to grow and expand.

9.3 *A success story*

This successful story of economic growth is due to several critical factors. These include: the Government's liberal market policies; the diversification of the economy with emerging market segments, such as the financial and business back office sector; investment in infrastructure, particularly in ICT; the capital expenditure in education; together with Malta's membership in the EU.

Economic development and growth can continue only if these outward looking policies are strengthened. Nevertheless, there needs to be a cautious balance between strengthening productivity in all resources, while restraining expectations for higher wages and salaries which are not always reflected in improved efficiencies. Education institutions need to invest more in creating entrepreneurs through programmes and processes that give space to creativity and innovation. Hence, greater investment in research and development by both the higher education institutions as well as the Government is a priority. As the global economy transforms itself through rapid technological changes, investment in internet research and innovation, while seeking business and market niches in this sector, is also a must.

However, it is necessary that we reflect on the implications of our growing reliance on sectors that are questionable on ethical grounds, such as that of i-gaming. Instead, it would be

recommended to focus more on sectors of equivalent economic potential but lower ethical ambiguity, such as those of innovation in internet technology, the arts, crafts, culture and history, and niche market prospects in agro business, fisheries and agro tourism.

9.4 *The need for greater personal responsibility*

Nevertheless, we should also be cognizant that there is a price to be paid for economic success. Increased dependence on foreign agencies and institutions through economic globalisation has redefined autonomy for both the State and society in general. Malta's national debt has increased considerably and day-to-day expectations are rising. Environmental stress is evident in our land grab, haphazard conurbation and difficulties in managing waste. Economic growth enables new "affluent" lifestyles, increasing individual choices and expectations, but—unless we learn to choose wisely and take responsibility for our choices—also in shifting our priorities to a consumerist ethos. As the "good" becomes increasingly materialistic, consumption becomes the key mark of our lifestyle. The relationship between productivity and monetary compensation—or on a macro level, real economic output and the financial economy—is shattered. On an individual level, the credit card becomes the symbol *par excellence* of instantaneous gratification and of living beyond our means. On a macro-level, the current global financial crisis is evidence enough of how individual and corporate greed and tax evasion lead to the inevitable collapse of debt-propelled economies.

9.5 Today individual signs of prosperity are intertwined with deeper issues that impact personal welfare. Most pervasive is the relation between changing lifestyles and health, in particular the rising obesity, especially among children. Equally obvious is the considerable stress on family life due to increasing debt-loads and personal financial mismanagement. Precarious work on one hand and the intense demands of high-

stakes positions on the other, imply greater job-related stress and the growing risk of burnout and psychological conditions like addictions and depression. The boundaries between work and private life have all but vanished, leading to an erosion of quality time for family and friends. Balancing work-family responsibilities is becoming increasingly challenging, especially for parents of young children. For while there is still pervasive gender imbalance in the workplace, especially in leadership positions, the widespread assumption remains that household management and the rearing of children are primarily a woman's responsibility, with the partner (and society at large) encouraged to "help" or "contribute" to "lessen" a considerable burden.

Moreover, as job mobility is today a requirement, the work environment itself has ceased to be a milieu of personal interaction and growth, but has become a series of impersonal contracts and lists of obligations that need to be fulfilled. In this context, it is no longer merely the "rights of workers" that need to be emphasised, but the very "quality of life" of citizens.

9.6 *Specific issues*

Contemporary economic life in Malta is one where, by and large, commutative justice is observed, but less so distributive and contributive justice in its wider significance of requiring that allocation of income, wealth and power in society to be equitably distributed and that persons fulfil their duty to participate in economic life. Not declaring income as well as a deterioration of work ethic have become *socially acceptable forms of stealing*. Those in positions of government and governance have responsibility for the just administration of communal wealth: from its equitable distribution for the common good, to accountability in the public sector, to facing the difficult—and unpopular—question of the long term sustainability of social services.

Incumbent on individual and collective persons is a call for *a more transparent mode in carrying out business*, especially in finance, with a greater sense of responsibility by trade unions and in a practice of effective fiscal payments. One cannot condone a system that, by and large, tries to bypass VAT and Income Tax payments through cash transactions or bartering. It penalises the taxpayer who by reason of his/her position (e.g. a salaried person) has his tax withheld at source thus creating an unfair imbalance among contributing citizens.

A true democracy is built on *the assumption of informed citizens*. Consumer and other laws offer support to an informed citizen willing to uphold her/his rights. What kind of informal education is required so that citizens can operate within this emerging Maltese society? For example, should economic education impart appropriate knowledge of how economic institutions work? What are the risks and benefits associated with current instruments of financial savings? Does our new society require training in socio-economic measures that may strengthen the social fabric? Who will offer such education and who will pay for it? Relying on business and industry to undertake this task does not seem to be a realistic expectation.

The increased financial and opportunity affluence of *Maltese youth* today ushers new challenges. While offering our young generations a myriad of choices, society appears to have failed in transmitting an appreciation for value in modern times. In lieu of other criteria, is it true that young people seem to be focused on wealth and its accumulation as the primary value and the basis for assessment of human worth? Or is it, perhaps, that youth themselves are disenchanted by our political and economic process? Should such an issue surface as an item on the agenda as Malta's future society?

Gender equality has been a declared objective in Maltese society for three or four decades. One cannot help notice progress achieved, in particular in education where every year, female graduates of the University of Malta outnumber males. Still

much more needs to be done, as the employment rate of Maltese women remains low at 43.5% compared to the EU-27 average of 62.3%. (The employment rate of Maltese men is 78.4%—higher than the EU-27 average of 74.9%.)⁴⁹ While family friendly measures are an important incentive to encourage female participation in the labour market and hence, need to be strongly promoted, they are only part of a complex picture that requires a more holistic approach. The Malta Council for Economic and Social Development (MCESD) has proved to be an effective forum for discussion of social and economic planning. Hence, it is recommended that this forum also take up the important national discussion on female participation in the labour market.

10.0 The Most Vulnerable Among Us

- 10.1 Society has the duty to protect its most vulnerable, in particular, those who run the risk of being radically marginalised by becoming economically poor. If the very system of economic liberalisation, with its individualistic and competitive ethos, generates wealth, it also creates pervasive discrimination between the haves and have-nots. And while through the principle of equity and its built-in social systems society seeks to protect the vulnerable, rising global and local economic bad tidings could threaten the right for a dignified standard of living and welfare for all.
- 10.2 Malta's poverty rate of 15% is only slightly better than the EU average of 17%. Similarly, the at-risk-of-poverty rate in Malta (14.2% in 2007) is slightly lower than the EU average.⁵⁰ Indeed, a 2010 report on poverty in Malta paints a complex picture and identifies vulnerable groups that are not always recognised in the statistics. These include single parents and their children; families with three or more children; those aged over 65; people with disabilities or mental health problems, including drug, alcohol and gambling addictions; the middle aged who are

unemployed; and irregular migrants, who after leaving closed centres often work intermittently in the illegal labour market because they struggle to find regular employment and thus many end up living in destitution.⁵¹

10.3 *The elderly*

There is already a high percentage of people aged 65 and over living below the poverty line in Malta: 22% in 2008, which is 3% *more* than the EU average.⁵² The problems of the elderly also include the higher probability of debilitating health and growing immobility. Hence, the elderly require not only ample medical resources, but also systematic healthcare planning for the future. Moreover poverty among the elderly will only worsen if pensions become increasingly unsustainable. As our population is aging, the needs of the elderly must be responded to in holistic ways that are respectful and not merely efficient. Indeed, it reflects the ethos of the times that senior citizens are becoming more “silent” and “invisible” even as their numbers increase in society. Inter-generational relationships need to be strengthened to reclaim the wisdom of our elders to be passed on to the young.

10.4 *Children*

The report of the Parliamentary Social Affairs Committee, “It-tfal l-aktar li jbatu l-faqar,” notes that “21% of Maltese children are living in relative poverty” and that “local studies show that children raised in such relative poverty have low scholastic performance, poor health and lack of participation in social life.”⁵³ Thus, relative poverty among children, which, the report notes, in Malta is higher than the EU average of 19% in 2005, implies the serious possibility of becoming entrenched in systemic poverty that is passed on from one generation to the next. This risk is growing in Malta in view of the increased number of single parent families, some of whom are poor or at risk of poverty.

Yet because of shame, and the fear of stigma, poverty in Malta, in particular among children, is very well hidden. A telling sign of relative poverty is when parents cannot afford to pay for hidden costs in their children's education (like uniforms, stationary or school outings). Yet rather than admit their economic difficulties, parents might prefer to not send their children to school until they can afford to buy these items, leading to school absenteeism. The phenomenon can be so well hidden that even teachers might have difficulty noticing the pattern.

In this regard, schools are a pivotal public institution that could offer stability for children who are coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Formal schooling seeks to open the door to a more just and equitable society through giving the opportunity to all children to develop their full potential. Yet, due to absenteeism and other social issues, a trend of increasing illiteracy in the 10-to-19-age bracket could be detrimental to this effort. If in 1985 1.1% of the illiterate were in the youngest age group, by 2005 they were 4.9%.⁵⁴ These figures must also be considered in view of our low *adult literacy rate* compared to other nations. Standing at 92.4%, Malta ranks 92nd in the world on the literacy scale—a sharp contrast to our overall rank of 36 on the Human Development Index.⁵⁵

Hence in view of changing family needs, and in particular to combat the negative effects of poverty among children, it could be argued that we need *more schooling*, and certainly more time in the early years spent in constructive and creative activities in the safety and nurturing environment not only of homes, but even of good schools and regularised childcare services.

11.0 Education

11.1 The post-World War II period has been marked by discussion and a significant improvement in our educational system.

Access has been widened and our human talent pool vastly improved as deemed necessary by our diversified economy.

In 1946 primary education became compulsory for all, while the compulsory school age was raised to 16 less than forty years ago. The changes and controversies over Private/Church Schooling, comprehensive schooling and the University that characterised the seventies and early eighties served to popularise the importance and value of education. The reforms initiated in the late eighties and early nineties emphasised decentralisation and accessibility, especially to higher educational institutions. During these past decades, we have witnessed major reforms and initiatives in most sectors of education, namely the structure of state educational services, school administration, assessment, post secondary and tertiary education as well as the standardisation and accreditation of various forms of formal and non-formal learning experiences.

Nevertheless, there appears to be a widespread intimation that our methods of education, are at an impasse. The tension is apparent in the fact that while more Maltese people than ever are schooled and have formal qualifications, there seems to be a paradoxical decline in civility and a weakening of the ideal of responsible citizenship. There also seems to be a widespread acceptance of mediocrity, not only in our work standards, but also in the ill-mannered way we relate to one other in everyday social situations. Impropriety is reflected in our dress, local media, and even in the many possessions we surround ourselves with. Still more dangerous is the high degree of intolerance, not only of others' opinions and lifestyles, but of those perceived to be "others" as persons. How do we address these exceedingly disturbing trends that reflect an impoverishment of culture, and hence, of education?

11.2 *Holistic formation or economic considerations?*

The increasingly pragmatic and economic demands of producing a "competent workforce" are impinging on the

Maltese schooling system. While all educators contend that schools should be oriented to the holistic development of the child, there is a looming feeling that many reforms in education are motivated by practical economic considerations. While these two objectives are not necessarily in opposition, the recent emphasis of the latter over the former is undoubtedly leading to a utilitarian form of education. Evidently, current local educational policies are highly driven by the European Union's focus on competition, job creation and economic growth.⁵⁶ Even while, these policy documents always mention the need to have an education that contributes to personal development and social cohesion, there is little doubt that economic concerns are perceived as far more important. One major consequence of these thrusts is the increased emphasis on a competency-based education and the ensuing quantitative means of measuring a country's progress through the setting of targets, such as, the reduction of early school leavers and the increase of graduates in the 30 to 34 age group.⁵⁷

The pressure made by the European Union to put a disproportionate emphasis on narrow economic performance, inevitably promotes competition as value, in turn, diminishing solidarity and cooperation. The increased importance given to such international assessment programmes as PISA, TIMSS and PRILS⁵⁸ confirms an adamant resolve to improve our scores and ranking against those of other countries. While the aim of this competitive race to improve our international ranking appears to be "improved" and "higher" educational standards, the underlying assumption is that low rankings diminish opportunities for economic growth, and consequently the possibility to achieve or maintain "better" standards of living. In view of the current ecological crisis, one should question whether this economy-driven education model is ultimately desirable or sustainable, and indeed, whether the values it promotes will prove to be harmful to the human community and the world we live in.

11.3 Moreover, the profound irony of the quest for a “competent workforce,” of course, is that in today’s rapidly shifting technological environment, no technical training can be complete or lead to true know-how for concrete jobs, insofar as the training itself can be obsolete before the student can start employment. Especially in the rapidly growing service and knowledge industries, employers should be seeking well-rounded individuals who are team players, flexible problem solvers, eager to show initiative, willing to learn on the job and, most crucially, committed to the company, since the employer will inevitably have to invest in their ongoing training. The discerning employer seeks human skills over and above technical skills, because while it is relatively easy to teach the technical aspects of most jobs, it requires more effort and ingenuity to inculcate the values that make one a dependable employee, colleague and citizen.

Indeed, the ongoing shifting reality of the workplace is merely repeated and augmented in all aspects of daily life. The emerging social realities mediated by new technologies demand flexibility and ingenuity to adapt to new ways of behaving and functioning in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing social milieu. In this sense, it is being “street smart”—or attuned to one’s rich social environment—rather than merely specialised and technically qualified that will lead one to be not simply a cog in the (actual or metaphorical) economic machine, but rather, able to carry the responsibility of participating actively as a Maltese, European—indeed global—citizen.

Interestingly, research shows that in comparison to the EU-27 countries, Malta has one of the most creative workforces, distinctive for its high levels of problem solving skills, situational learning and ability to deal with complex tasking. This might seem particularly surprising when one notes that our higher education system is relatively undeveloped.⁵⁹ Instead, it is highly probable that these particular strengths reflect our inherited cultural educational models that, many

times, developed in response to our insular limitations. If we view education as a long term investment in our national identity and human resource capacity, we should be asking if the current way of developing education policies is building on our strengths, and facilitating the development of a people of character who are empowered to be flexible and creative. Are we too quick to follow EU policies and ideologies? One would have expected that the experience and results of the utilitarian educational policies during the seventies and eighties would make our policy makers more judicious before accepting the pressures of the EU in the education and training sector.

- 11.4 True enough, the recent consultation National Curriculum Framework (NCF) tries to address this issue by reiterating a holistic vision for education.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the pervasive frameworks/mentality of a utilitarian education become apparent in various parts of the document as well as in current educational policies and practices. A displaced priority on job and wealth creation leads precisely to practices and mentalities that are contrary to the declared principles of holistic education. Thus, for instance, while the NCF insists that knowledge should not be presented in a fragmentary manner and that students are equally entitled to eight different learning areas, the current practice of benchmark examinations in Mathematics, English and Maltese at the end of primary education, as well as using setting for selection purposes only in the latter scholastic subjects, is giving the wrong message to teachers, students and their families that only these subjects are important. Indeed, even the Primary syllabus website of the Department of Curriculum Management and eLearning gives the wrong impression that English, Maltese and Mathematics are the only core curricular subjects by putting them above all other subjects under the heading “Primary Syllabi”, while making it clear that they are separate from the other curricular subjects by using a dividing line and including a subtitle “Other PRIMARY Subjects”.⁶¹

The hasty introduction of new Form 1 and Form 2 syllabi, purportedly in line with the NCF principles, before the consultation process has been concluded, is in effect inducing a narrow interpretation of principles and making a mockery of the consultation process itself. Urgency, rather than lack of will to consult, seems to be at the basis of such decisions. However, even if one accepts that these moves are made in *bona fide*, they surely do not reflect an education grounded in wisdom. In an age where information is over abundant, and in a society where human resources are the only resource available for the development of the Maltese community, rash decisions may be counter-productive.

11.5 *Specific issues*

Even the *current structural reforms* in education do not seem to have taken into consideration all implications. Thus for instance, while the creation of two directorates and the clustering of schools in ten different colleges have undoubtedly facilitated new services, nonetheless they have also made the educational structure top heavy with too many leaders and more bureaucracy. Furthermore these new structures have also consolidated student anonymity in government secondary level schools.

Similarly the introduction of new Church primary schools and the concomitant increase in their student populations will mean that almost 40% of our younger generations will be solely educated in *gender differentiated institutions*. Has anyone reflected on the implications of such practices? An adequate response to the requirements of the younger generation and society requires wisdom and not haste.

While the abolition of streaming in the new education reform is laudable, selective examinations are not the only discriminatory practice in the system. We should beware against *informal streaming* and the possible widening of social inequality because of setting and economic means. The

principle of equity should guide our educational reforms, by focusing on the needs of individual students. In this regard, the grouping of state schools into College clusters needs to be evaluated, while collaboration among state, Church and independent schools should be enhanced for the benefit of all.

Similarly, it appears that the trend is towards more *differentiated teaching*. However, teachers need adequate training and support to respond effectively to mixed ability classes. Teaching methods and benchmarking needs are to be assessed so as to provide for a wider diversity of skills and interests and be balanced with the need for greater autonomy at the lower strata of the scholastic system. Likewise, the principle of *inclusion* in mixed ability classes should be implemented on the basis of solidarity between students, while ensuring the right to a high quality education for all.

Moreover, while the rights of *teachers* as employees should certainly be safeguarded, the art and vocation of teaching, so indispensable to society as a whole, can never be reduced to a mere job among many. No “professional” merely exchanges their time for money in a “job market”, let alone teachers in whose hands we entrust our most precious national resource and the hope of our collective future: our children. Thus, not only can we not afford to have unqualified teachers, but rather, we should encourage our brightest and those gifted with excellence of character to educate the young.

Lastly, while most would agree that our educational system requires ongoing assessment and, at crucial times, even reform, all policies should reflect a long and arduous process of discernment that puts the needs of the young first. Yet, could it be that even in our educational reforms we are tempted to safeguard the interests of a few over the needs of the many? For instance, do we hold on to a vast *diversity of curricular subjects*—and indeed even seek to create new ones—to protect the interests of the few experts in the area? Even in our tertiary institutions of research and teaching, does excessive

specialisation promote or hinder understanding, knowledge and ultimately, the love of wisdom? Can we truly be committed to the expansion of knowledge if educators and researchers do not practice humility and cooperation—especially in a world where the complexity of the issues we are facing demands that we pool interdisciplinary resources together?

12.0 Governance

12.1 Politics deals with power and the way it is structured in a given group or community. With few exceptions, Malta seems to lack strong and effective professional organisations that could counterbalance the political parties. Still, it is not altogether clear that political parties, or even the House of Representatives, are in fact the key players who set the national agenda. While the actual distribution of power remains ambiguous, at the same time there is a growing disquiet that power is in the hands of the very few.

A healthy Maltese society can continue to evolve when democracy is safe guarded and there is a true application of the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. In the current governance system, the relationship between voter and politician is such that mutual dependence can perpetuate an attitude of choosing what is easy in the short term, rather than acting upon necessary measures for the long term. The role of “hidden” persuaders and even not-so-hidden lobbyists, like unions and even private contractors, to sway policy making, cannot be underestimated. Given the role of politicians and other social leaders, it is not only pivotal that we become discerning voters, but also that clear ethical standards guide our political, financial and social activity. This would imply that those who put themselves forward for public office should possess requisite skills proven through a track record of demonstrable commitment and contribution in their local communities.

12.2 *Towards greater subsidiarity*

Critical reflection from a wider body of concerned citizens is necessary to challenge the *status quo* and move beyond the impasse of partisan politics. In this national conversation, several important players have an essential contribution to offer to evaluate and widen the communal and cultural agenda. Among others, the University, often silent on political matters, has a pivotal role to play to encourage a multi-disciplinary conversation based, not only on empirical research, but on sharpened skills of deliberation. Likewise, the Church, in its role of safeguarding authentic human development, must be a crucial voice to defend the needs of the poor and marginalised and to encourage human flourishing. On their part, journalists, committed to inform the public of the truth, and to educate by being political commentators, can enhance the participation of the public in political discourse.

In particular, change should come from the grassroots, even if the consequent nepotism of our closely-knit communities sometimes makes it very difficult to stand up and be counted. Civil society has a crucial role to play for a healthy, transparent and participative democracy. Yet, because of lack of resources and fragmentation in civil society, notwithstanding the considerable efforts and personal sacrifices of the personnel and volunteers who work in this sector, civil society organisations are not always satisfied that their hard work and commitment bears as much fruit as desired. Few NGOs and interest groups collaborate sufficiently to achieve common goals. Through strengthening existing structures, like the Malta Council for the Voluntary Sector, and through making better use of resources, especially as offered by the European Union, there is room for greater participation and opportunities to make our voices heard locally and more widely.

12.3 *Justice, Solidarity and Integral Human Development*

Politics is also about justice, the equitable distribution of resources to safeguard the common good and each individual's right to flourish. A shared dialogue needs to identify the goods to which all members of society aspire, and hence, which they should be free to access. A vision of *integral human development* requires freedom *from* everything that restricts human growth (e.g. poverty, disease, war, political oppression), freedom *to* pursue individual interests that promote wellbeing (e.g. education, art, culture) and freedom *for* what is authentically transcending, that is, the spiritual life, which connects the human most directly to the mystical dimension of reality, and hence, which in being fundamentally transformative, infuses true compassion. Hence, integral human development necessitates many kinds of goods: material, cognitive and institutional goods, as well as moral and spiritual goods.

More broadly, *integral human development* includes:

- (a) access to life's necessities;
- (b) protection from social ills, including the support necessary to both victims and victimisers;
- (c) opportunities to broaden one's horizon of meaning through knowledge and the refinement of culture;
- (d) moral growth as awareness of other persons' dignity, especially of the most vulnerable;
- (e) a taste for the spirit of simplicity and poverty manifested in an active interest in the common good and desire for justice and peace; and
- (f) a thirst for the highest values such as love and hope, together with the search for God, which is marked by God's gift of faith. Religion and spirituality play a social role when they inspire forgiveness and reconciliation, as well as allow for openness to the transcendent.

Such a holistic and universal vision of the ordering of human goods allows us to offer a healthy critique of current culture and political practices, as well as the possibility to promote specific aspects of development where these are still lacking.

- 12.4 Hence, modern economic liberalism assumes that human development is possible only if there is economic growth. The freedom of the few to accumulate profit is expected to allow others in society to benefit through a trickle-down effect. Yet, a more human-centred approach would argue that development consists in the “expansion” of freedom, as the enhancement of human capabilities, in the here and now. Freedom from everything that shackles human development is a means of achieving true development and not simply its end. Hence, most fundamentally, authentic human development requires the five complementary and mutually reinforcing “instrumental” freedoms of political participation, economic facilities, social opportunities, guaranteed transparency and security.⁶² Only when these are present can there be participation in the processes of free decision-making that provide the opportunity to attain higher desired values.

Indeed, if our aspiration is *integral* human development, the hierarchy of human goods warns that the fulfilment of basic needs through economic stability and just political management, policing and judiciary, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for authentic human flourishing. Hence, our politics should reflect a commitment to encouraging the cultivation of those higher freedoms *to* achieve greater nobility of character, wisdom and virtue, as well as the highest, most “human” freedom of all, *for* becoming a model of authentic virtue for others. It is a poor life indeed to be caught up in a vicious cycle of acquisition and consumption, no matter how wealthy one might be. Likewise, it is the mark of a feeble mind to pursue one’s self-interests without concern for the welfare of others, irrespective of how many degrees or qualifications one might have. Instead, a life truly worth living seeks authentic happiness in the recognition that who we are is always

dependent on the transcendent, and that as long as we live, we remain a project-in-the-making seeking to become a gift for others through becoming a gift for ourselves.

12.5 *Specific Issues*

The *diminishing trust* in political parties and their programmes or manifestos is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it could lead to a healthy questioning of political rhetoric and demand greater transparency and accountability, in particular from elected members of parliament. On the other, it could deteriorate to sheer mistrust and political alienation. Such a tendency is already evident in many local councils, where an excellent opportunity for true participative democracy has been tarnished by increased partisanship, leading to lower voter turnout and greater indifference and cynicism among citizens of local communities. Scepticism can also be augmented as politics becomes more of a careerist option than a public service.

Like any system, even democratic political structures have endemic *biases* through their *modi operandi* and implicit assumptions. The danger is that these structures could be inherently discriminatory—to the extent of contradicting the very spirit of democracy. Possible examples include the electoral system, media regulation, party financing, or even the subtle ways in which entire categories (e.g. women) are practically excluded, or at least discouraged, from active participation. In view of the danger of such mechanisms, the democratic process depends on an in-built mechanism of *ongoing critical appraisal* so its true end of striving for the common good continues to be served. The role of civil society and its many players is precisely to ascertain the honesty, transparency and accountability of its representatives to protect the public interest. In this regard, propaganda and partisan media is particularly dangerous since it seeks to sway public opinion, precisely by blinding and obfuscating a process

that without transparency can deteriorate to the extent of becoming a mockery of itself.

The strengthening of the role of *civil society* as a partner in the political process also requires better capacity building, a greater recognition of its role, and respect for its autonomy from partisan politics. In turn, this would sustain the legitimacy of its participatory and representative role. The involvement of civil society through institutional interaction and structured dialogue has emerged as one of the defining characteristics of the European political process. This was further enhanced through Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union. Hence, a more effective and organised civil society would represent an important, positive step in the “Europeanization” of the Maltese socio-political scenario.

13.0 Creating a “Culture” of Integral Human Development

13.1 If there was one theme underlying all of *Converse’s* dialogue sessions with leaders in our society, it was the hope for the personal and communal flourishing of all people in our islands. We all seem to agree “the kind of society we would like to live in” is a thriving one, characterised by health, prosperity, peace, freedom, leisure, mutual respect, intellectual stimulation, artistic expression and spiritual values of conviction, courage and compassion. We might not always agree on the details of how to get there, or even how to make sense of the issues we are facing. Yet it seems obvious that if the freedom of self-determination is to be taken seriously, if, in the words of Pope Paul VI, we are to be “artisans of their destiny,”⁶³ then a foundation of objective “instrumental” freedoms and of subjective values to live by is not only desirable, but essential.

In this document we touched upon various social conditions that objectively need to be present, and if already available, sometimes rectified or enhanced, to allow for authentic human development. These include: sound political and economic structures; access to housing, healthcare and education; support to struggling families in the face of new cultural realities etc. Nevertheless, harmonising such political and economic issues and all the complex relations that make up society cannot be reduced to a set of rules, nor can it be solved through mere majority rule. It needs the input of technical experts from different fields. It needs the ability to see and interpret the dynamics of society as a whole, in the midst of a shifting reality. It requires persons who are willing to take risks in an attempt to provide the conditions that allow—as far as possible—for the integral human development of every person and of all persons in our society. It hangs upon the contribution

of the religions to help people educate and nurture their inherent desire for transcendence.

For this reason, throughout our conversations it was also repeatedly pointed out that while strong leadership and governance are essential, it is also the task of every one of us to seek to grow individually through embracing qualities, values and lifestyles that promote personal wellbeing and the common good. In particular, as we are faced with a rapidly shifting cultural situation, and the temptation is to be caught up in the maelstrom of flux, a sound character shaped through acquired virtues is essential to free us to pursue the ideal of integral human development.

- 13.2 Personal growth in decorum, dignity and character, that leads to communal participation to shape a “culture” that is fully human, requires flesh and blood models to inspire us, as well as the sharpening of our skills of discernment for right action.

While the desire for a “good life” is universal, the specific form it takes is culturally mediated and individually instantiated. Hence, a primary task of any society is to offer models of the “good life” and thus, to encourage the lifelong process of human formation as inculturation: how the child imitates the parent to become a good citizen, and how youth are mentored to adulthood by models of excellence. In this wide sense, “culture” is crafted through efforts of desiring, imitating and acquiring traits of excellence. These symbols of growth include, but are not limited to: language and other artforms as expressed in everyday social interaction and through the media; the ingenuity of our skills, labour and business ventures; the reasonability and civility with which we organise our government and judiciary; the care and dedication we put into nurturing our citizens, in particular children who are among the most vulnerable; the creativity expressed by artists who are the barometer of culture; and the way we express and live our desire for transcendence, which alone gives the impetus for authentic flourishing. Each element of culture reflects a

people's desire for flourishing and offers a concrete way of observing, interpreting and evaluating the progress achieved to be artisans of our future.

Yet, evaluating rightly progress achieved as well as directing it purposefully demands the wisdom, "common sense" and creativity that allow for the freedom to shape our life and mould our destiny. Indeed, even these traits of being reasonable and prudent are not simply a given, but require perfecting. Pope Paul VI's admonition for a "new humanism,"⁶⁴ recalls that the original aim of a "humanistic education"—quite literally, the "drawing out" of our inherent potential of becoming fully human—was to form youth in the various skills of the "word" as thought and articulated, in order to prepare them for active participation in civic life. Today, in a world where communication and exchange, and thus, personal character and virtues, are more pivotal than ever, we need to retrieve those time-tested techniques to re-orient our personal life and society's priorities: interpreting all phenomena in emerging new situations; evaluating the veracity of multiple understandings and positions that compete for our endorsement; and nurturing the ability to communicate our reasoned arguments in ways that are persuasive because they are intelligent.

- 13.3 In this way, through these techniques of speaking/thinking well for acting well, and amidst our new political, economic and ecological challenges, we could hope to safeguard and enhance integral human development through a culture of deliberation and dialogue.

It is only through a process of dialogue, which is marked by clarity, attentiveness, humility, prudence and sincerity, that we can come to see which social, legal, educational, economic and religious structures could be truly just in our contemporary society. The very practice of intelligent dialogue inculcates the desirable personal and communal character traits that contribute to a well-ordered and harmonious society where the

pursuit of truth, goodness, justice and beauty are both possible and enhanced. Hence, it is not only because our new challenges are so multi-faceted and multi-layered that they demand that representatives from all spheres of society come together in dialogue. It is also because a culture of dialogue realises what it enacts: a social dimension characterised by authentic human development.

- 13.4 The task ahead is a mammoth one. Yet, since the task of deliberative dialogue that leads to prudent action must be shared among all, the burden is also a collective one, made easier through everyone's responsible participation, just as the fruits to be reaped would benefit us all.

This document is just a humble beginning of the discussion to which we invite one and all to contribute. *What kind of society would you like to live in?*

Endnotes

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⁵⁴ National Statistics Office, *Census 2005* (Malta: NSO, 2007).

⁵⁵ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, “Literacy and Education data for the school year ending in 2010,” accessed August 11, 2012, <http://www.uis.unesco.org/literacy/Pages/adult-youth-literacy-data-viz.aspx>; United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2011: Sustainability and Equity—A Better Future for All* (New York: UNDP, 2011). Malta’s profile is available at: <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MLT.html>

⁵⁶ Starting in the mid-nineties, the European Union increased its investment in education as a way of tackling the rise in unemployment. Education was understood as the key means to social integration, equality of opportunity, and growth in the economy, mainly through increased competitiveness and job creation. This policy line was reconfirmed and further narrowed to focus on job creation and economic growth through the Lisbon Strategy (2000), the Mid-Term review of the Lisbon Strategy (2005), and more recently by the adoption of the Europe 2020 (2010).

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⁶⁴ Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio*, 26 March 1967, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html, 20.

Why Palazzo DePiro?

Dating back to the second half of the 16th century, Palazzo de Piro originally consisted of three separate houses. The Metropolitan Cathedral Chapter restored the Palazzo at a substantial investment to create a venue of cross-cultural, artistic and social dialogue. The structural changes made to the building have recreated a typical baroque-inspired grand house of the 18th and 19th centuries. This renovation has given Palazzo de Piro a new life and transformed it not only into its past glory, but also into an exquisite meeting place.

The *Converse at Palazzo de Piro Project* engaged a wide cross section of Maltese society around the vital question *What Kind of Society Would We Like to Live In?* The itinerary of these *Conversations* was simple and conducted in a spirit of broad and open dialogical communication. The team organising these *Conversations* initiated an invitational paper that was proposed as a basis and springboard for the dialogue sessions that were organised as business breakfasts. Each session brought together persons from particular sectors, who reflected on the theme set by the paper. The insights were incorporated in the document that was revised after each session. This final version of the document reflects the insights that emerged during our business breakfasts and invites the general public to continue the dialogic process. *What Kind of Society Would You Like to Live In?*

The *Équipe* organising the *Converse at Palazzo de Piro* is the following:

- Rev. Dr. Mark Sultana (Chair)
- Rev. Edgar Busuttil, S.J.
- Prof. Salvinu Busuttil
- Dr. Nadia Delicata
- Dr. Jean-Paul De Lucca
- Ms. Stephanie Falzon
- Dr. Adrian-Mario Gellel
- Rev. Dr. Joe Inguanez
- Mr. Joseph F.X. Zahra

The itinerary of the process was the following:

Launch of Dialogue Process:	9 th January 2012
Dialogue with Civil Society:	11 th January 2012
Dialogue with Unions:	1 st February 2012
Dialogue with Business Persons:	15 th February 2012
Dialogue with Human Scientists:	29 th February 2012
Dialogue with Mathematical, Physical and Life Scientists:	14 th March 2012
Dialogue with Religious Communities:	17 th April 2012
Dialogue with Educationalists:	9 th May 2012
Dialogue with Artists:	23 rd May 2012
Dialogue with Media:	12 th June 2012
Dialogue with Political Movements:	4 th July 2012
Presentation of Final Paper:	27th September 2012

The persons who kindly accepted our invitation and participated at our Business Breakfasts were:

Mr. Paul Abela	Dr. JosAnn Cutajar
Br. Alan Adami, op	Prof. Mary Darmanin
Mr. Roderick Agius	Ms. Angele Deguara
Mr. Henry Alamango	Mr. Joe Farrugia
Ms. Grace Attard	Mr. Joseph Farrugia
Rev. Dr. John Avellino	Mr. Louis Farrugia
Prof. Victor Axiak	Prof. Joe Friggieri
Mr. Moses Azzopardi	Prof. Oliver Friggieri
Sr. Josephine Azzopardi	Ms. Christine Galea
Prof. Paul Bartolo	Rev. Dr. Joe Galea Curmi
Mr. Michael C. Bonello	Ms. Fiona Galea Debono
Mr. Christopher Borg	Mr. Arthur Galea Salomone
Mr. John Martin Borg	Mr. Mario Gerada
Mr. Joseph Borg	Dr. Helen Grech
Ms. Helen Borg Bonnici	Mgr. Victor Grech
Ms. Marie Briguglio	Ms. Louise Laferla
Dr. Roderick Bugeja	Mr. Alfred Lupi
Prof. David Buhagiar	Ms. Nora Macelli
Dr. Jean Buttigieg	Mr. Wilfred Mallia
Perit Carmel Cacopardo	Mr. Mario Mallia
Mr. Raymond Camilleri	Rev. Louis Mallia, mssp
Mr. Victor Carachi	Dr. Julian Mamo
Rev. Christopher Caruana, op	Dr. Duncan Mercieca
Prof. Arnold Cassola	Mr. Anthony Mifsud
Ms. Maryanne Ciappara	Prof. Paul Pace
Rev. Martin Cilia, mssp	Rev. Dr. Paul Pace, sj
Dr. Gordon Cordina	Ms. Joseanne Peregine
Mr. David G. Curmi	Mr. Sonny Portelli
Sr. Doreen Cuschieri	Mr. William Portelli

Mr. Jes Saliba
Mr. Anthony Saliba
Mr. Charles Sammut
Mr. Clinton Sammut
Dr. Carmen Sammut
Rev. Dr. Alan Scerri, o.s.a.
Mr. Godwin Scerri
Ms. Irene Schembri
Sr. Marie Scicluna

Dr. John Paul Tabone
Rev. Dr. Charles Tabone, op
Mr. Josef Vella
Sr. Doris Vella
Prof. Alfred Vella
Prof. Frank Ventura
Mr. Godwin Xerri
Mr. Lawrence Zammit
Ms. Ingrid Zerafa

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