



26th November, 2011

119/2011

PASTORAL LETTER FOR ADVENT 2011

THE COURAGE TO RENEW ONESELF

Brothers and sisters,

We bring you this letter on the first Sunday of Advent – the time which leads us to Christmas. From the human point of view, Christmas is the story of two persons – Mary and Joseph – and how they altered their lives for Jesus to enter into. Both were enlightened by God. Mary’s response was “I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to His Word”. Joseph responded by taking Mary as his wife. We too must change in order to accept Jesus in our lives.

The courage to change

Experience shows us just how true is the old adage which states that “the one who does not renew himself will wither away”. We can cite many examples of this, be it in our individual lives as well as in ecclesiastical and social circles. There are those people who would reason that it is better not to stir stagnant water because it will create an unpleasant odour! But it is precisely because it is stagnant that water smells nasty. Running water, on the other hand, is pure!

By his very nature, man seeks to renew himself and that which is around him. Life is a process whereby we move from one phase to another. At the same time, man is also capable of resisting change. He is capable of putting spokes into the wheel of change, choosing to remain entrenched very firmly in the past. This is because sometimes change comes at a price. Not only is it uncomfortable to move out of one’s ordinary routine, it can also be risky. In fact, some would venture to argue in this way: better the devil you know than the devil you don’t. Granted, not every change is for the best, but it is also a fact that it is not beneficial for a person to remain stagnant. There are some circumstances in life which certainly call upon us to accept our predicaments, especially if there is no way to resolve them, such as for example, in cases of chronic illness; yet, in other situations, to become too accustomed to a certain way of life can be dangerous. When a person becomes too complacent, he automatically stops trying to ameliorate his life and that of others. When something becomes habitual, in a negative sense, then a

person ceases to live animatedly. Habitualness leads to laxity, to abuse and to mediocrity.

In fact, we feel that habitualness is a condition which has infiltrated various aspects of human activity. In marriage and the family, it is easy to become familiar with one another, with the result that we become careless in our relations. Over-confidence in commercial circles leads to a lack of control and this encourages theft. In the field of health care, there is the danger of the patient being viewed as being merely a number, if not even a means of profit. When things are done out of habit, as is often the case in the world of politics, administration, education and journalism, these no longer remain to be efficacious tools. Rather they become a means by which people seek out their own interests.

Christian life

Unfortunately, we live in a culture where we tend to repeat the same things over and over again; this can smother Christian life. Although there are Christians who are convinced of their faith in Jesus and the Church, there are also those individuals and groups for whom faith is more culturally conditioned rather than being a lived experience of God. Religious customs are commendable, but not when they lead religion to become merely a convention. The Word of God has been rendered too cheap and we have become so accustomed to hearing it, that the voice of God is only one among many others. For some, prayer has become ingrained into their routine and as a result of this, not only do they find no pleasure in it, but in some cases, it also becomes a burden. In certain circumstances, participation in the mass, and even the celebration itself, becomes customary and as a result, one fails to appreciate the beauty and the power of the Eucharist. Some people request the bestowal of the sacraments, for themselves or for their children, as a social convention, rather than out of a genuine desire to meet Christ who can transform their lives.

There are some situations in which ecclesial communities appear to be at ease with the idea of resting upon their laurels and relying upon their usual routine, with the result that their message is repetitive and their rituals do not change. There are those who close an eye to the present, preferring to dwell nostalgically upon the past. In many cases, we are still speaking in yesterday's language and using methods of the past, in spite of the fact that we are aware of the great risk we are taking by doing so, because that language and those methods are no longer comprehended in this day and age. And this to the detriment of the message of the Gospel! Therefore, unless we are vigilant, as a Church we too run the risk of running dry, our liturgy becomes theatrical, the Church is rendered no more than a historical museum.

Today is the start of Advent. This is a time of preparation for the beautiful feast which commemorates the birth of Jesus. It is also a time which invites us to be born and give birth anew. When Jesus became man "the people that walked in darkness has seen a

great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone” (Isaiah 9:1). For this reason, we wish for the coming Christmas to serve as a powerful experience of this “light” which stimulates us to make an effort to leave the dark womb of a closed mentality, which like the umbilical cord that has the possibility to suffocate a baby in its mother’s womb if it becomes caught around the neck, can also gradually suffocate us too.

Jesus Christ himself declares the need for our renewal in his words to Nicodemus, a leading Jew, when he told him “Unless a man is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God...unless a man is born through water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God...Do not be surprised when I say: You must be born from above.” (Jn 3:3, 5, 7).

In today’s contemporary world we need to feel duty bound to reiterate to our Church, particularly to the “leaders”, the urgency that “what is born of the flesh is flesh; what is born of the Spirit is spirit” (Jn 3:6). It is the opportune time to question whether certain teachings, attitudes, projects and religious customs are actually the fruit of the Spirit who works in the Church, or rather fruits which are borne out of our own personal initiatives only.

The same Spirit which came upon Mary of Nazareth and by whose power she bore a child in her womb – “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” – is the same Spirit of God, who, if we open our hearts to him, will instill in our hearts the Word of God that serves as a map by which to chart our life journey. As St Paul writes “for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). However, in order to receive God’s Word in our heart and claim it as our own, we need to be open to the Spirit of Truth. This is why we require “to be renewed with the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

Vatican Council II

50 years ago saw the opening of the Second Vatican Council which was a powerful experience of the Spirit – an experience which unfolded new and great horizons. On that occasion, the Holy Spirit planted the seed which, if allowed to sprout and grow, can serve as a catalyst for a more beautiful Church and Society. Yet it so happened that “some fell on the edge of the path and was trampled on; and the birds of the air ate it up. Some seed fell on the rock and when it came up, it withered away, having no moisture. Some seed fell amongst thorns and the thorns grew with it and choked it. And some seed fell into rich soil and grew and produced its crop a hundredfold.” (Luke 8:5-8). The Council was a powerful means of renewal for the Church. As stated by Pope Paul VI, “the Universal Church must adapt itself to the new needs of the world in the light of the Council’s teaching. The Universal Church is committed to this spiritual and organisational renewal”.

We acknowledge that the fruits of this Council were the various reforms which were adopted by the Church, for example, the renewal of the liturgy which now calls for more active participation on the part of the congregation, the wider role of the laity especially in the field of catechesis and diacony, the focus of the Church on the needs of society, as well as the attention it now pays to those who are on the peripheries, separate Christian brethren, and those who follow other religions or who have no religious beliefs at all. Yet since some seed has fallen onto dry land or among thorns, so the desired fruit might have not all been reaped.

Renewal

There exists a programme of renewal which cannot remain shelved. There is the need for internal renewal within the community of the Church, especially where the “altar of the Word” is concerned because our faith depends upon this, as does the liturgy, which is a celebration of our faith in Jesus Christ. This renewal must also be exercised with regard to the relationship between the ecclesial community and the world around us since today, this world is made up of citizens who all have different spiritual and ideological beliefs. With great love but in fidelity to Christ, we should not refrain from sharing our theological, spiritual and ethical patrimony, with the hope that this will stimulate renewal which will urge us to shift from our present standpoint and move forward, rather than simply going around in circles.

It is commendable for the Church to adopt the structures recommended by the Council, such as the Presbyteral Councils and the Parish Councils; but above all there must be “renewed” people and communities who are conscious of their duty to practice and transmit the spirit of Christ in order that we may have “new heavens and new earth”. (2 Pet 3:13).

We are being offered a valuable opportunity for renewal by Pope Benedict XVI who has announced a Year of Faith on the occasion of the 50th anniversary since the opening of the Council. This will begin on 11 October 2012 and end on 24 November 2013 on the solemnity of Christ the King. Let us prepare ourselves for this year by committing ourselves to the renewal of the Spirit.

We impart upon you our pastoral blessing as a pledge of every heavenly good.

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

✠ **MARIO GRECH**
Bishop of Gozo