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## **ARCHBISHOP'S MESSAGE ON PENTECOST VIGIL**

Brothers and sisters,

This year, through our reflection upon the following three passages, we recall the experience of the early Church as it was guided by the Holy Spirit:

"But the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit" (At 13,52); "they went from place to place preaching the Good News" (Acts 8,4) and so "the Word of the Lord continued to spread" (Acts 6,7).

This vigil serves to prepare us for the event which witnessed the birth of the Church: Pentecost. During his life, through his teachings, Jesus had already spent three years preparing his apostles and disciples. They were already familiar with the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

On Pentecost, the disciples were gathered together in a closed room, fearful of the prevailing culture; ten days had passed since the Lord's Ascension into heaven – a time spent in prayerful silence, overcome by memories of Christ, dead on the Cross – a death which appeared to be futile, but was not, since they had witnessed his resurrection. All that remained was for them to be empowered by the Holy Spirit in order that the Good News of Jesus could fortify them to challenge the difficulty reality they were facing. The coming of the Holy Spirit upon each and every one of them enlightened the way in which they encountered the world and encouraged them to share their experiences with those around them. Their personal experience of Jesus now became more powerful than their fear of the reality which they were facing.

This year is also a special year for the Church in Malta, following our experience and the result of the Divorce Referendum.

I feel that, as a Church and in accordance with our mission, we can look at God squarely in the face and declare that we did our best to avert the introduction of divorce legislation. And here I wish to thank all those – some of whom through great sacrifice – who worked towards this end.

Yet although we are now faced by a new social reality where marriage and family are marked by divorce, we have also been faced by a culture which on the part of the social media, is at times also aggressive. It is clear that the Christian who has made a profound option in favour of Jesus Christ, cannot continue to live his choices comfortably; he has to struggle with himself, his family and those around him in order to live by the truth of the Gospel. During various meetings with people from different sectors in the Church, I have stated this several times. The time has come for us to face this reality in a spirit of prayer and acceptance of the power of the Holy Spirit.

At this moment, we need to pray to the Holy Spirit to release us from any feelings of disappointment or anger and to fill us with his strength. I wish to present to the Church and all the faithful the great challenge which Jesus proposed to us by his words “Give to Caesar that which is Caesar’s and to God, that which is God’s (Mt 22,21). The Christian community should be recognized through its desire to give to God, on behalf of our dear people, that which belongs to Him: to live according to his teachings and to spread his word. I wish to offer every member of the Catholic Church this holy challenge: Are you ready to give to God that which belongs to him in this secular society? The reply to my question must be the mark of the Christian.

By making this personal choice, the Christian is committing himself to society: so that all which he believes in and which has been taken away from God, shall become a task to be undertaken in order that society can be marked by the values of the Gospel.

Every group or movement recalls how it was formed and relates stories about its early days, most especially when it needs to be renewed. As Roman Catholics who form part of the Christian community in Malta, we need to recall how the early Church functioned in order that it may be continue to be built according to the desires of Jesus Christ. It is customary that with the passing of time, as has so often happened in the history of the Church, we lack enthusiasm or become distracted.

Let me allow St Paul, through his Letter to the Romans (which we have just read) to enlighten us, as he did the Christians of his time, in order that we may discern the vision and the call of the contemporary Christian and the Church:

- "Till now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth":
  - The reflection of the Christian upon our reality cannot have as a starting point today's culture or be influenced by it; it must centre around God's plan for creation, moving towards new life in eternity, as expressed in the Word of God;
- "and not only creation, but all of us who possess the first-fruits of the Spirit, we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free":
  - Whatever his situation, the contemporary Christian needs to undertake a spiritual journey – desiring his sin to be transformed by the grace of forgiveness, desiring to be transformed by God's grace in order to rediscover the love of the Father within him, as an adoptive son or daughter of God;
- "For we must be content to hope that we shall be saved ... our salvation is not in sight, we should not have to be hoping if it were ... but, as I say, we must hope to be saved since we are not saved yet – it is something we must wait for with patience":
  - The hope of the Christian does not rest merely on the material reality of this life, but it must be open to eternal hope for a life in God's image;
- "The Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words, and God who knows everything in our hearts knows perfectly well what he means, and that the pleas of the saints expressed by the Spirit are according to the mind of God".:
  - The first community was full of the Spirit because it prayerfully opened up its heart to accept the Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus, in the Gospel which we have just read said: "If any man is thirsty, let him come to me! As Scripture says, "From his breast shall flow fountains of living water" (Jn 7,37-39). Such is the invitation which Jesus offered to his disciples two

thousand years ago. Similarly today, Jesus is presenting the same invitation to the Church in Malta.

At this moment, I urge you to pray to Spirit so that he may come upon us and among us. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was there, together with the apostles, who were praying and awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit. Let us also pray to her to consolidate our prayers as we await the coming of the Holy Spirit among us.

+ Paul Cremona O.P.

Archbishop of Malta