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MESSAGE BY ARCHBISHOP PAUL CREMONA O.P.

DURING PONTIFICAL MASS ON INDEPENDENCE DAY

Your Excellency President of Malta and Mrs Abela,

Brothers and Sisters,

By his very nature, man finds the need to recall to mind those events which have left an impact in his life. When he recalls these events, they do not simply continue to form part of his memory but rather they encourage him to undertake a renewed reflection upon that which he lived through in previous years. Thus lived, the events serve a means of a new maturation which lead man to experience the enriched effects of such events.

The man of faith also recalls these events with reference to God, whom he believes plays an important part in his own personal narrative. This holds a more profound meaning for us Christians when we consider the fact that Our Lord Jesus Christ entered human history. When he recalls these events in the light of the Gospel, man is able to draw upon his faith in order to discern what he may improve. This may be done internally on a purely personal level, or else within the ambit of the family, society or the Church.

Independence Day

Today the people of Malta are celebrating Independence Day. This occasion, together with three others – 7th June, Republic Day and Freedom Day – are events which we commemorate as a nation that has gradually moved towards the attainment of the proper identity of its people. In commemorating them, we remember the events, their protagonists and those who commemorated them before us. Any form of independence signifies a distancing from any outside influence in order to become self-responsible. In so doing, one also takes upon oneself a moral responsibility. This could occur within a family – when one leaves to start one's own family, or in instances such as that which we are commemorating today – the independence of a country. The moment of independence opens up the way for a new challenge – that of strengthening the

independence which has been achieved. This is a challenge which points to internal independence, an independence of spirit. External freedom may be achieved, however any person or country, unless it achieves internal freedom, remains dominated by forces which do not allow good to prevail. Henceforth, the external freedom which was achieved does not bear the necessary fruit. Today we are celebrating precisely this: the path towards our holistic independence.

From a Christian point of view

As Christians, it is our desire to celebrate these events also in the light of our faith. For this reason, on this occasion, I wish to share with you some spiritual reflections inspired by the Word of God. 21st September happens to be the day upon which we also celebrate the Feast of St Matthew. St Matthew was a publican, a tax-collector. It is likely that he was influenced, probably even dominated, by certain ideas as a consequence of the position which he held: materialism, a greed for money, the exertion of power over other people.

At a certain moment in his life, he encountered Our Lord Jesus Christ who challenged him with the words “Follow me”. St Matthew accepted this invitation and abandoned his work to follow Jesus. We believe that as a result of this, his mentality, his values were transformed. He achieved authentic independence because he became truly free to love other persons rather than viewing them as persons whom he could take advantage of for his own personal gain.

In my opinion, if we combine independence from foreign domination together with this internal challenge facing each and every person, the values we may glean from today’s celebration would be of greater advantage to our society. There are several ways in which we may reflect upon this. I wish to share with you one particular passage from the gospel which I feel holds much significance for us who are gathered here today, bearing in mind that all who are here, in some way or another, have a greater influence than others over the direction in which our beloved country is moving.

Matthew 23

In Chapter 23 of the Gospel according to St Matthew, our Lord brings to light some factors which can hinder a person from maturing as an authentic person. I have always been under the impression that since St Matthew wrote about this in his Gospel, he too bore these things in mind during his transformation from a publican into a disciple of the Lord Jesus. This chapter speaks of the shortcomings of the Scribes and the Pharisees. In itself, I never really liked this chapter because Jesus highlights the mistakes which the Pharisees made in the course of their task. The Pharisees were the wise men of the Law – people looked to them for guidance.

I always understood that my position as a priest – and now as Bishop – places me firmly in this category. I grew to appreciate this chapter more when I realized that when Jesus

spoke, his intention was not to chastise but to enlighten the Pharisees where they were going wrong. I began to understand that the words of Jesus were timeless and applicable to every situation, with respect to those who have some form of authority or another: myself included.

Please allow me to share with you some of Jesus' ideas since these were of great benefit to me as a guide where my responsibilities are concerned. Perhaps these same words may serve to enlighten even those who do not believe in Jesus Christ.

The teaching of Jesus

Allow me to quote some passages from this Chapter and I will comment briefly as I go along.

Jesus says: "They have only words, not facts". It stands to reason that both with respect to communication and in order to advance, both words and facts are necessary. Jesus is referring to those occasions when we base ourselves only on our words, which leads us to confuse the facts. He is referring to those occasions when we use our words to convince others, possibly also making promises to them – promises which we do not fulfill.

Jesus says: "They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." When a person is in a position of authority, this gives him the chance to exert some power over the lives of others. This could serve for the good, however there is a possibility that he would not remain sensitive to the load which he could be putting upon others, sometimes even unjustly. This is seen when there is a great difference between the load that he who is in authority and the weaker members of society are carrying.

Jesus also says: "Everything they do is done for people to see", "they love the place of honor at banquets". These words focus upon our attitudes in the face of honour and glory. There is honour which one can bestow upon oneself, and there is honour which is bestowed upon some who are well-deserving and honest.

Jesus says: "...But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers". Jesus wished to remind us that everyone must keep God as a point of reference. Unless a person does not have a point of reference which lies outside himself, then he becomes his own point of reference, with all the consequences that this brings with it. Such consequences may be seen through the course of history: he becomes a tyrant, or a relativist.

Jesus says: "But you have neglected the more important matters of the law - justice, mercy and faithfulness". These are virtues which serve to create a more humane society: justice – so that everyone may receive his due, as a logical conclusion of his

inherent human dignity; mercy – because there are those who require help in order to achieve that which is rightly theirs; sincerity – since there must be sintony of the mind, words and actions.

Jesus continues to say: "First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean". The fight for the good takes root in the heart and conscience of every person. Perhaps this is most applicable in the context of the social communications media, who push us to focus more upon our 'image' rather than towards the cultivation of sincerity and honesty.

Conclusion

The Independence and sovereignty of a country depends largely upon the solidarity of its citizens. We move towards authentic independence when we understand that any wrong actions have an effect upon others, just as all good and just actions also have an effect upon others. Independence is also an amalgamation of all this, of the personal responsibility of each and every one of us.