



“EJJEW GHANDI”
Archdiocese of Malta
65, Old Mint Street
Valletta VLT 13, Malta

Children’s Homes

Origins, Services and Current Challenges

1. Background

- 1.1 Residential Homes for Children in Malta were originally established by generous, Christ-oriented persons who wished to channel their wealth in a constructively humanitarian way to help those less fortunate than them. Their aim was to provide shelter for children who roamed the streets, neglected by their families, whenever these existed, risking corruption, mental and physical harm. The children’s parents or relatives sometimes exploited these children as a means of earning some money.
- 1.2 These Homes were generally administered and managed by religious institutions that accepted that the ethos of their Congregation matched with the social needs. The Second World War left many orphans and the Homes had a special mission to carry out during the war itself and in its aftermath.
- 1.3 The Church in Malta globally supported these initiatives, and saw them as an essential part of its mission to serve the poor and provide society with concrete models of Social Justice.
- 1.4 In 1966 the late Archbishop Sir Michael Gonzi set up a Committee for Diocesan Orphanages with a specific mandate to ‘co-ordinate, help and advice’ the Church’s already existing charitable institutions for deprived children.

After a few years, Archbishop Gonzi set up a Diocesan Commission for this purpose, and a new Central Office under the directorship of Mgr Maurice Grech. The Central Office has since developed support systems that allowed the re-formulation of policies specifically intended to minimise the effect of institutionalisation, an aspect previously not given much importance.

Presently the staff at Central Office is composed of a Director, an Assistant Director, Secretary, Accountant, four residential social workers and two volunteers. Another ten resident/residential social workers form part of the team. 32 religious work as Housemothers and Housefathers while some 48 lay persons offer their services as full/part time carers, handymen, domestic persons and others. An innumerable number of volunteers give an invaluable helping hand.

The Rt. Rev. Mgr Joseph Mercieca, Archbishop Emeritus, in the year 2000, approved an updated Church policy to ensure that the Homes are managed in a way that meets the present needs of the children. Central Office was given a new name “*EJJEW GHANDI*” (‘Come to me’).

At the moment there are about 180 boys and girls living in twelve Homes including the two Domestic Violence Shelters. Their age varies from 0 to 18.

Between January and December 2011 some 140 new cases were referred to Central Office.

2. Services

- 2.1 One of the important measures promoted by Children’s Homes was that the children’s life-style should not be modelled on that of a convent but on that of a normal household. This affected rising times, dress code and nutrition. Early rising, prayers in a foreign language, uniforms, discipline etc. were all reviewed and most abolished in favour of a more ‘home-centred’ style. Old customs were abolished – children were no longer sent to beg for alms, or walk in procession in a funeral to earn some money.
- 2.2 The Church gave due importance to the formal education needs of the children, and eventually arrangements with Church schools to start accepting children from Children’s Homes were made.
- 2.3 Children living in these Church Homes deserve the best according to their physical, spiritual and emotional needs. In the early sixties, a link between Children’s Homes, the Southwark Children’s Rescue Society (London) and the International Catholic Children’s Bureau (Geneva) was established, and through these contacts an on-going education programme was launched, initially for staff working at the Central Office, and eventually for the staff of the Homes themselves, whether they were religious, residential social workers or care-givers. As years passed, links were forged with The Faculty of Social Studies (University of Malta), The Malta Employment & Training Corporation and the Cana Movement.

Continuous education programmes have made all the personnel involved increasingly aware of the wide spectrum of needs children under their care have: care for the children’s physical, spiritual and educational needs have to

be supplemented by services addressed at the children's emotional and psychological needs as well as in order to ensure the balanced growth and development of these children who had experienced enormous traumas early on in their lives. A number of in-service courses were organised during the past years, including:

- **Teaching Catholic Doctrine and Values to distressed children**
- **Self Development**
- **Sexuality: God's Gift**
- **Emergency Aid**
- **Skills for Care Workers**
- **Child Abuse**
- **Emergency Care**
- **Residential Care**
- **Domestic Violence**
- **Managing Aggressive Behaviour**
- **Food Handling**
- **Food Preparation**
- **Standards of Care**
- **Data Protection Act**
- **Drama Therapy**
- **Story Telling**
- **Infectious Disease**
- **Services provided by the State and Private Agencies in support of Children in distress**
- **Teamwork & Methods of Discipline**
- **Building Better Relations between Staff, Children & Parents**
- **The Gospel of Charity**
- **Child Psychology**
- **Children and their Systems – Creating and Maintaining Professional Alliances, Team-Building, Listening and Communication Skills with Children and Adults, Keeping boundaries in line with our jobs**
- **Nursing Care**
- **Working with Fear, Local Law and Children etc.**
- **The Child and the Law**

In collaboration with St John Ambulance, the Residential Social Workers at St Joseph Home, St Venera, organised a First Aid Course which started from 17th October to 21st November 2011. All our care workers and administrators attended.

Dar Merħba Bik, in conjunction with Dar Qalb ta' Ġesù, between February 15 and February 17 2011, organized a Course titled "Self Development" whose lecturer was Sr Jacqueline Jones. Dar Merħba Bik also organized an in-house session about "Nutrition and Healthy Eating" on February 9 2001 and was tutored by Ms Audrey Muscat.

Ms Pamela Demicoli from Dar Merħha Bik helped in the organization of a Course titled “Mental Health Problems”. This Course, held between October 20 and October 27 2011, was organized through and the expenses were covered by the Commission on Domestic Violence and its lecturer was Ms Doris Gauci.

During the past five years, all professional staff (Superiors/Administrators and Social Workers) were invited by the Institute of Pastoral Formation to attend the following seminars:

- ✓ **How does the Church see humankind? (Anthropological Vision)**
- ✓ **The Church – Communion;**
- ✓ **Ethics and Service;**
- ✓ **Why does God exist?**
- ✓ **What is the inner meaning of service?**
- ✓ **Why is the Church a serving Church?**
- ✓ **What does accompanying the ‘pilgrim’ entail?**
- ✓ **The Contemporary Social, Cultural and Religious Situation in Malta;**
- ✓ **The Contemporary Social, Cultural and Religious Situation in Malta with respect to the Family;**
- ✓ **The Contemporary Social, Cultural and Religious Situation in Malta with respect to Persons on the fringes of Society.**

2.4 In line with modern thinking in this area of care and social policy, it was felt that the cycle of poverty and lack of care could only be broken if a holistic approach, addressing the needs of the whole problem families which the Central Office had contact with, and not solely of the children actually taken into care, were to be implemented. For this purpose professionally trained social workers were recruited. The main task of these social workers is to investigate cases prior to admission, to assist in rehabilitation work of the family, and to provide preventive services.

2.5 Children in Residential Care suffer from emotional upheavals and are in a state of trauma. The reasons for this are many. The main causes are:

- a) serious problems at home;
- b) separation from their family on entering the Church Home;
- c) difficulty in adapting to the new lifestyle in the Church Home, with strangers in a completely new environment.

The difficult problems which these children have to face at home before entering a Church Home are often related to physical, emotional, sexual and psychological abuse, serious illness, mental illness, addiction to drugs, alcohol and extreme gambling, domestic violence, separated parents,

divorced parents, single parent families, prostitution, abandonment by parents, imprisonment of one or both parents, etc.

There is no doubt that these experiences have a long-lasting influence on the children, and that these children need therapy.

Children who pass through such terrifying experiences tend to be emotionally unstable. This instability frequently manifests itself as anger and aggression

- towards their natural family,
- society in general,
- the Home where they are cared for and
- other persons related to their education and upbringing.

In their desperate attempts to protect themselves from pain they often try to cause pain to ~~in~~ others; they thus create a vicious circle by walking in the footsteps of their parents.

These children need physical and emotional support with lots of tender and loving care and limitless patience. They need someone who understands them and helps them break this vicious circle in which they got entangled through no fault of their own. Their plight is such that this someone has to be professional helpers (facilitators) in the form of paediatricians, psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors, family therapists, speech therapists and other therapists who use different techniques such as drama, music, gym, clown, animal farm therapy, etc.

Therapy Rooms have been set up at Fra Diegu Home, Hamrun, St. Joseph Home, St. Venera, St. Rita Home, Tarxien, Angela House, Gwardamangia, St. Joseph Home, Zabbar and Jesus of Nazareth Home, Zejtun (K.I.D.S Programme).

Often Central Office has to seek, and obtain, support from State Agencies such as the Foundation for Social Services, the Health Department, the Advisory Board for Children and Young People with a Care Order etc. Church Homes are deeply grateful for the services offered for free. But this is still not enough. So, financial support was sought from *HSBC Cares for Children Fund* and its Board of Directors. The Bank understood the objectives and accepted to provide financial backing for a number of services that are proving to be of great benefit to the children, such as individual counselling and support groups for the children, individual supervision and support groups for the staff etc. Now, RTK Radio is also helping out.

2.6 HSBC Cares for Children Fund helps us also organise a great Carnival party, a summer outing to the small island of Comino, and other entertainment

activities throughout the year. We also get entertainment activities organised for all Church Homes by parishes, private firms and others, throughout the year but especially at Christmas time. All this serves as a beneficial respite for the children.

2.7 Central Office “Ejjev Ghandi” offers four other areas of assistance: Preventive Care, Respite Services for Battered Wives, Day Centres and Fostering.

2.8 The Preventive Care Program, which has proved to be very relevant, offers continuous support to families coming from the relative poverty line so as to avoid having to admit the children, without a very serious reason, into a Church Home. These families receive financial assistance and regular counselling, as well as training in social and life skills through which they learn to live in a dignified and decent manner instead of opting for the easy way out by having their children admitted to Church Homes.

This Preventive Care Program makes heavy demands on financial and personal resources, but the efforts and sacrifices have already started to bear fruit. The social workers at Central Office work hand-in-hand with a number of trained volunteers. These teach basic skills such as cooking and sewing, and help in caring for the children. They also go on home visits to these families.

Every year, some 80 to 100 families make use of this program.

Central Office is indebted to the Director of the Church Radio Station RTK for the annual organisation, at Christmas time, of the campaign *Kampanja Familji fil-Bżonn* which raises funds for the Preventive Care Program.

2.9 These last years have seen the birth of a new service in the country, that of Fostering, where families decide, with the consent and cooperation of the natural family, to accept in their homes a child, such that the child grows in a family environment. The foster parents ensure that the child keeps contact with their natural parents, and direct them towards full integration into their natural families such that the child experiences a smooth transition from its foster parents back to its natural parents. There are presently around 240 children in foster care. The need is felt for more effective legislation to regulate and strengthen this service.

Clear standards should be established, to be followed by all involved in foster care. Training is being provided for all would-be foster parents. There should be healthy contact between foster parents and the child’s social worker to ensure a shared responsibility among natural parents, foster parents and children. Persons taking up the responsibility of fostering a child deserve moral and financial backing.

In the late nineties, Central Office gave its input in the setting up of the Fostering Unit at APPOGG, one of the agencies of the Foundation for Social Services. Besides, Central Office provides limited assistance regarding adoption. The number of couples wishing to adopt a Maltese child is greater than the number of children in residential homes available for adoption.

- 2.10 Children's homes provide a further essential service, considered a priority in today's society: Child Day-Care Centres for children coming from families living under the relative poverty line. This service is provided at the 'St Francis de Paule' Home, Birkirkara; 'Fra Diegu' Home, Hamrun; 'St Joseph Home, Zejtun; 'Guzeppina Curmi' Home, Zejtun; and the Ursuline Sisters Home, Sliema.

At present more than 50 boys and girls are benefiting from this service.

- 2.11 Central Office "*Ejjew Ghandi*" also provides respite services to battered wives, with or without children, during crisis points in their lives. Central Office directs Sacred Heart Home, part of Cini Institute at St.Venera, which is managed by lay staff assisted by volunteers. *Welcome Home* in Balzan, administered by the Good Shepherd Sisters, gives this service too. At this Home women who have suffered domestic violence are given first assistance, following which they are cared for at Sacred Heart Home, if they so decide.
- 2.12 One of the problems encountered during the years was the plight of boys and girls in care when they reach 18 years of age. The problem was solved for girls: on reaching their 18th birthday, girls in care can ask for admission to one of the hostels co-ordinated by Children's Homes for working girls: Fatima House or Jesus of Nazareth House, Zejtun.

A similar permanent solution has to be found for boys over eighteen years of age. The present services are very limited.

3. **Benefactors**

Children's Homes are supported by a large number of benefactors who, in silence, keep this service running with their efforts, love and dedication. Central Office "*Ejjew Ghandi*" acknowledges and appreciates the continuous flow of donations and subsidies it receives from the

- Archdiocese of Malta
- The College of Parish Priests
- Religious Orders
- The NGO Committee (Ministry for Education Work and the Family)
- The Housing Authority
- The National Lotteries Good Causes Fund (Ministry of Finance)
- The Community Chest Fund
- The *Strina* Christmas Campaign
- Lions Mdina

- Round Table Malta
- APS Bank
- HSBC
- Bank of Valletta
- PBS Ltd
- Foster Clarke's Products Coy Ltd
- HSBC Cares for Children Fund
- Gasan Group of Companies
- Mizzi Group of Companies
- Demajo Group of Companies
- Farsons
- Friends of Cini Home
- Vodafone Children Foundation
- Malta Financial Services Authority
- Xuereb Foundation
- Voices Foundation
- Nestle Products Coy Ltd
- Citadel Insurance
- KPMG
- The Malta Charities Foundation
- Jugs Limited
- Other benefactors

Quite a good financial help comes from the Parishes during the Annual Charity Day collection.

Every single person's contribution is essential and precious. We Christians are accepting these children, crushed by their hurts and problems, with loving kindness into our family, the Church.

During the past years many benefactors have helped us upgrade, according to EU Standards, the outside play areas at St. Theresa Home - Zurrieq, Holy Family Home - Zabbar, St. Joseph Home - Zabbar, Angela House - Gwardamangia, Fra Diego Home - Hamrun, Jesus of Nazareth Home - Zejtun, St. Francis De Paule - Birkirkara.

Computer rooms have also been set up in the majority of the residential homes.

4. Cooperation with other entities

- 4.1 Central Office "*Ejjev Ghandi*" has a very good working relationship with the Family Court, the Department of Education, the Department of Health, the Secretariat for Church Schools, the Foundation for Educational Services, the Church Secretariat for Charitable and Social Action, the Ministry of Education, Work and the Family, the Commission for the Family, the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, particularly with

Agenzija Appogg, the Advisory Board for Children and Young People, the Department of Health, Mount Carmel Hospital, the Child Development Assessment Unit, the Department of Standards, the Central Office of Statistics, the University of Malta, the associations of Social Workers, Psychologists and Family Therapists etc. These links ensure that the educational and social aspects are well taken care of in the services offered to the children.

- 4.2 Recently Central Office *“Ejjew Ghandi”* collaborated with *Agenzija Appogg* in the preparation of three protocols
- (a) Respite Foster Care
 - (b) Admission in Church Homes Policy *and*
 - (c) the Admission Pack.

These protocols came into effect during these last years.

- 4.3 Besides, the residential social worker, together with the Mother Superior and the HouseMother / HouseFather often attend a case conference or a case review at *Agenzija Appogg* Headquarters to either prepare or assess the care-plan of every child. These same professionals are regularly summoned before the Children and Young Persons Advisory Board (Care-Order cases) for even further assessments.

- 4.4 Central office also contributed towards the preparation of these documents:

- a) Children’s Homes in Malta – A report on the workings of Central Office.
(Diane and Jim Richards, 1997)
- b) Children’s Residential Homes – A study on their Health needs
(Dr. Astrid Muscat Baron, 1998)
- c) *Il-Ħtiġiet tat-Tfal f’Malta* - The Needs of Children in Malta-
(Church-State Report 2000)
- d) Residential Homes for Children in Malta: A General Overview
(Ms. Chiara Cini Micallef – October 2000)
- e) Standards of Care 2000
(Ministry Social Policy)
- f) Building Bridges – Networking between family services
(National Family Commission – May 2002)
- g) Child Protection – A Shared Responsibility
(Proposals – July 2002)

- h) The Family from the Eyes of Adolescents
(National Commission for the Family – May 2003)
- i) A Fair Deal (A Study on Children and Young People With Very Serious Challenging Behaviour – June 2006)
- j) Models and Procedures for Residential Care (2005-2009)
- k) Standards for Residential Care (2007-2009)
- l) Mental Illness and Residential Care (2010-2011)

4.5 Central Office took part in various international conferences:

- a) *Rape; the unforgotten issue* (Dublin, Ireland) (June 2000)
- b) *Children's Rights in the Enlarged European Union* (Ljubjana – Slovenia, Brussels – Belgium) (June 2003)
- c) *The Right to Education* (BICE – Paris, France) (June 2011)
- d) *Conference on Support Services for Women victims of violence* (Council of Europe, Strasbourg, France – 6-7 December 2007).

4.6 Central Office Staff participated also in the following National conferences and Seminars:

- ⊕ Dialogue meeting with Dr. Patricia Jane Aldgate and Dr. Wendy Elizabeth Rose on “Bettering the quality of service in residential homes” (July 2000)
- ⊕ Child Protection – A shared responsibility (2002)
- ⊕ The Single Parent – Inclusion in Society through Employment (June 2003)
- ⊕ Missing and Sexually Exploited Children - Round Table (February 2006)
- ⊕ Gender Mainstreaming – The Way Forward (June 2006)
- ⊕ National Conference on Quality Children's Programmes (June – 2006)
- ⊕ *Progett Innocenti* (K.I.D.'S) (September 2006)
- ⊕ Domestic Violence Law Seminar (November 2006)

- ⊕ Transition from Primary to Secondary Education: Time to break the mould? (November 2006)
- ⊕ Consultation on the Code of Practice and Conduct for Social Service Workers and their Employers (November 2006)
- ⊕ Object Relations (November 2006)
- ⊕ The Therapeutic Relationship in Systemic Family Therapy (March 2007)
- ⊕ Holding Safely (April 2007)
- ⊕ Preventing social exclusion of children and young people in Europe: Participation and early intervention - EUROCHILD ANNUAL CONFERENCE (November 2007)
- ⊕ The International Foster Carers' Organisation in collaboration with the Foundation for Social Welfare Services and the National Foster Care Association of Malta-European Regional Training Seminar (18-21 November 2007)
- ⊕ The Integration of Asylum Seekers in Maltese Society (Intercontinental Hotel-St.Julians' September 2008)
- ⊕ The Sustainable Integration and Operation of Government/Church placements (New Dolmen Hotel-July 2009).
- ⊕ Conferences on 'Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010'
- ⊕ Bix-xogħol ninvestu f'Soċjeta b'Saħħita Għalik - Segretarjat Parlamentari għal Konsumatur, Kompetizzjoni Ġusta, Kunsilli Lokali Konsultazzjoni Pubblika (11 March, 2011)
- ⊕ Benefiċċji tal-Attivitajiet ta' wara l-Iskola, Djalogu Pubbliku - Konferederazzjoni tal-Għaqdiet tan-Nisa Maltin (22 March 2011)
- ⊕ Think Equal – NCPE (Dr. Romina Bartolo) (12 April 2011)
- ⊕ Presentation of the Survey about Foster Care in Malta - National Foster Care Association Malta (19 April 2011)
- ⊕ The EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child – MEUSAC (28 April 2011)

- ⊕ Tfal, Kriminalità, Ġustizzja - Fondazzjoni Mid-Dlam ghad-Dawl (6 May 2011)
- ⊕ Roles and Processes in Child Protection (Mr. James Blewett) (30 May 2011)
- ⊕ Child Protection Services & Children & the Courts – APPOGG (20 / 22 June 2011)
- ⊕ Consultation Seminar-Research on Looked After Children - The Office of the Commissioner for Children (5 July 2011)
- ⊕ Symposium on Good Practices in Gender Mainstreaming – NCPE (26 July 2011)
- ⊕ Freeing Children for Adoption (September 2011)
- ⊕ Strengthening & Encouraging Volunteering - Reaching out to a Wider Society EU Flagship Project European for Volunteering 2011 (23 September 2011)
- ⊕ A symposium on Multiple Discrimination – NCPE (1 November 2011)
- ⊕ Family-Work Balance & Parenting - Malta Unborn Child Movement (11 November 2011)
- ⊕ Where Next for Equality – NCPE (14 December 2011)

4.7 The Director represents Central Office

- during the Annual General Assemblies of the International Catholic Children Bureau,
- during the monthly meetings of the Archbishop’s Delegates Group,
- the quarterly meetings of the Church’s Secretariat for Charitable and Social Action, and
- meetings organised by the Gift of Life Movement.

During the recent past, the Director and staff took an active part in the preparation of these reports:

1. **A Fair Deal** (A Study on Children with very serious challenging behaviour)
2. **Standards for a better management** in our homes and child day-care centres
3. **Models, Policies and Procedures for residential care**

4. Mental Health and Children in Care

5. The Church in Malta and Residential Homes (Debono Report)

- 4.8 The Director represents Central Office during the bi-monthly Delegates Meetings summoned by the Archbishop of Malta.
- 4.9 Central Office is also a member of MAFT-St (Maltese Association of Family Therapists and Systemic Practice), the Foundation for the Rights of the Unborn Child (Malta Catholic Action) and the Platform for Children (Commissioner for Children).
- 4.10 Central Office is also an associate member of the European Federation for Street Children (E.F.S.C.), Eurochild (for promoting the welfare and rights of children and young people) the International Social Service Secretariat, the Child Rights Information Network (C.R.I.N), Amici dei Bambini Foundation (Italy), European Anti-Poverty Forum, KidsRights, and Child in the City.
- 4.11 Central Office is also in contact with the Children's Society of the Catholic Archdiocese of Westminster, London.

5. Newsletter

Beginning from the month of June 2009, an electronic newsletter is being sent to all the Homes and Child Day-Care Centres. This is a very useful exercise in keeping everyone up to date.

St.Joseph Home-St.Venera and Sacred Heart Home-St.Venera have their own newsletter addressed mainly to their friends and benefactors.

6. Other Service

It is good to point out that during these last years the Central Office, the various Homes, as well as the Child Day Care Centres have allowed students from the Seminary, from the Police Academy, from the MCAST, from the Faculty of Psychology and Social Work of the University to attain some experience in connection with their future work.

7. Challenges

One of the main challenges facing Children's Homes is the lack of staff brought about by the dwindling of female religious vocations. The employment of additional professional caregivers would continue to strain the Homes' limited financial resources. Besides, one has to keep in mind that children in care need the best available medical and educational services to ensure that the disadvantage to which these children have been subjected by their upbringing and environment is somehow redressed.

The Church Authorities, the Maltese Government and the people of these islands have always been aware of the problems faced by the poor and by less fortunate men, women and children who have to face daily hardships, and have always gone out of their way to help. The Maltese are a living witness of Christ's order to his followers to spread his love to their neighbours.

Updated as on 31st December 2011

Updated by Msgr. Victor Zammit McKeon
DIRECTOR GENERAL

And posted on the website:

<http://maltadiocese.org/lang/en/secretariat-commissions/diocesan-commission-ejjeu-ghandi-childrens-homes/>