The Vatican has sent the Episcopal Conference a series of questions\(^1\) which “allows the particular Churches to participate actively in the preparation of the Extraordinary Synod, whose purpose is to proclaim the Gospel in the context of the pastoral challenges facing the family today”.

The following is a brief report prepared for the Maltese Episcopal Conference by DISCERN – Institute for Research on the Signs of the Times. As evidenced by major reactions throughout the world the Vatican document suffers from two serious handicaps. First, the time given for the preparation of this report was insufficient, and secondly, it was couched in a theological language which was not unfailingly accessible to outside those this discipline. This shortcoming was a handicap for those uninitiated in theology and philosophy.

This report consists of ten sections, namely, an introduction in which the methodology is briefly explained, then another nine sections in line with Section III of the Vatican’s Preparatory Document. This report includes an Annex with Tables.

1. **INTRODUCTION**

As already stated, many throughout the world criticised the questions as being difficult to understand both in terms of the language (especially concepts) and the style of the questions. To try to avert this problem DISCERN constructed a more user friendly questionnaire by (a) breaking up questions into shorter ones, without diluting the original questions, and (b) by translating this from English to Maltese. During the former process close-ended questions substituted elaborate open-ended ones. At the translation stage several individuals were consulted as regards the intelligibility of the questions. This means that input of several people was also incorporated in the final version. The major constraint was the time necessary to “translate” difficult concepts in a manner that they would be more easily understood by Christians from all strata of society.

In line with the expressed desire of Pope Francis, that this questionnaire should reach as many people as possible, a copy of this questionnaire was distributed by Maltapost plc to every household in Malta and Gozo. Besides this, the questionnaire was posted on the internet and the general public was requested to answer it online. Others replied by post. Besides this, a shorter version which required detailed information as to what is taking place on the ground was sent to several people (clergy, religious and laity) who are involved in direct pastoral ministry.

By closing date, 7,017 questionnaires were returned to DISCERN via internet and mail. The first step was to code the open ended questions and then to input all data on the computer using IBM’s Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. This sample gives a robust 1.16 level of significance.

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\(^1\) This 2013 document appeared on the Vatican website undated.
Due to time constraints it was decided, in the first instance, to draw up a Preliminary Report based on a sub-sample of 1,590 respondents. This still gives a strong level of significance equal to 2.45. Hence, all in all, this report is based on the broad participation on the part of the Maltese and Gozitans. This however does not exclude a slight bias in favour of the older population as can be seen in the annexed tables.

To put this document in its proper perspective, the following introductory data is important. Official Statistics published by the National Statistics Office (Malta, 2011) show that in 2010, marriages in Malta and Gozo totalled 2,597 (2,356 in Malta and 240 in Gozo), of which 847 were civil marriages; the rest were all religious marriages, the very great majority of which being marriages in the Catholic Church, the rest being mostly other Christian marriages or Islamic marriages. Malta marriage crude rate \(^\text{2}\) stood at 6.2%. When classified by marital status, the bridegrooms were: 2,423 single, 34 widowed, 21 whom their previous marriage annulled and 118 divorced. The brides were: 2,417, single, 21 widowed, 29 whom their previous marriage annulled and 129 divorced.

The number of marriages registered in the Archdiocese of Malta during the year 2012\(^\text{3}\) stood at 1,562, a marginal increase over the previous year when 1,520 marriages were registered. 1,351 of these marriages, were marriages between Maltese citizens, while 74 were marriages between Maltese and foreigners. The latter marriages can be classified as follows: 40 marriages took place between Maltese Catholics and foreign Catholics; 21 between Maltese Catholics and foreign Christians; 13 between Maltese Catholics to non-Christians. Seven marriages were registered between Maltese citizens living in a foreign country, and 130 marriages between foreign couples. In the same year, 56 marriages were convalidated, and 41 persons who re-married following a declaration of nullity of their previous marriage from an Ecclesiastical Tribunal.

In 2011, in the Diocese of Gozo, marriages were both parties were Catholic amounted to 148, while there was only one marriage between a Catholic and non-Catholic. In 2012, these figures increased to 166 marriages between Catholics, and 3 other marriage where one of the spouses was non-Catholic. 74 persons from 31 different countries were married to Maltese citizens in Church: 16 from Italy, 9 from the United Kingdom and 5 from Russia. The most common ages of the couples married this year were between 20 and 29 years old.

While 2010 marriages in Malta increased by 9% over the previous year, the increase in Gozo amounted to 23% for the same period. During the same one-year period civil marriages in Malta and Gozo increased by 2%. “On average, a third of the brides and the grooms who married civilly were Maltese. More than half the Maltese bridegrooms (58%) married Maltese brides, while a further 18% of the grooms married Asian brides. Of the Maltese brides married civilly, 64% married Maltese grooms, while 12% married African grooms”\(^4\)

As regards births, 4,008 live births were registered in Malta during 2010, (of which 3,721 were registered in Malta, and 287 births in Gozo). Live births decreased by 3% when compared to 2009. Registered births in Malta dropped by 5% while those in Gozo increased by 19% when compared to the previous year. The majority of total live births occurred to Maltese citizens not foreigners.

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\(^2\) The Crude Marriage rate relate to the number of marriages per 1000 total mid-year population. Source: NSO, *Demographic Review 2010*, Malta, 2011. This is the latest published *Demographic Review*.

\(^3\) This information was compiled by the Marriages Office of the Archbishop’s Curia. It does not include information of marriages within the Diocese of Gozo.

\(^4\) *Ibid.* p xi
During the 2010, 1,010 live births occurred outside marriage and 253 cases had an unknown father. Moreover, nearly a third of the babies registered as having an unknown father were born to mothers under the age of 20. During the same year, the number of children born of Maltese parents outside marriage amount to 25% of births, while 7% had an unknown father.

2. THE DIFFUSION OF THE TEACHINGS ON THE FAMILY IN SACRED SCRIPTURE AND THE CHURCH’S MAGISTERIUM

The majority of the respondents stated that they were not very familiar with this teaching (72.5%), while 17.4% have substantial knowledge of this teaching. Only 5.3% said that they do not know anything about it.

Marriage preparation is offered at diocesan and parochial level. Only 39.8% of the respondents had attended the course organized by Cana Movement and similar programmes. However, one has to keep in mind that this question does not apply to them for one reason or another, e.g. singles. Another 5.6% said that they were prepared for marriage by both the Cana Movement and their family. 7.4% responded that when they were preparing for marriage no such course was provided. 6.7% do not know whether their parish offers such preparation.

Apart from the religious instruction provided in State, Church and Independent schools, which includes the Church’s teachings on marriage, Catholic organizations provide occasional “talks” on this theme. From the results of the questionnaire the Church’s teaching on the family is also treated in homilies. However, several respondents commented on the negative effect left by the campaign against the introduction of divorce in 2011. Besides this, Civil Marriage was only introduced in Malta in 1975, and recognized divorce granted by foreign courts.

In 69.7% of cases the Church’s teaching on family life is accepted. However, as we shall see later this is selectively accepted. The teaching that marriage is a sacrament implying fidelity, exclusivity and indissolubility is accepted. A significant 18.8% stated that although they accept the Church’s teaching they find it difficult to follow. Only 1.6% stated clearly that they do not accept the Church’s teaching. Nonetheless, this has to be further qualified by the fact that while 48% said that they do not find any difficulty to live according to the Church’s teaching, 44.3 % reported that they find it difficult to do so. There were those who said that the Church’s teaching on the family was unrealistic. The Church’s requirements concerning sexual morality and family planning, which only permit natural birth control are among the difficulties encountered: 15.8% find the Church’s teaching on contraception and birth control as difficult, and 3.1% that the Church’s teaching outdated. 2.3% do not accept the Church’s teaching on sexual morality within marriage.

With regard to the question about the way the Church’s teaching is spread in the parish, the highest number (22.2%) revealed that this is mostly done through Catholic organisations (including the Cana Movement), 7.7% through courses organised by the parish, 19.7% during the homily; 5.7% said that what the parish offers is very limited and 3.4% felt that the parish almost offers no teaching on this theme.

Teaching about the family mainly takes place in the context of marriage preparation, which is frequently limited to the so called 10 two-hour sessions and concluding seminar organised by the Cana movement in preparation for the sacrament. During these meetings the sacramental and spiritual dimensions of marriage are discussed together with contemporary challenges to the
family life. There are also few meetings with parents in preparation to the sacraments of Baptism, the first Holy Communion and Confirmation of their children. As regards Diocesan level, 19.1% said that the Church’s teaching is disseminated through Catholic organizations, 20.7% through homilies and Pastoral Letters, and 10% through the media. 9.4% think that the Church’s teaching at diocesan level is either superficial or outdated. Those who do not know how the diocese is exercising this ministry amount to 8% of the respondents.

To what extent are the Maltese people aware as to how much the Catholic Church’s teaching about the family is known among non-Catholic non-practicing Catholics? While 18.2% do not know anything about this, 16.9% think that non-Catholics and lapsed Catholics are aware of the Catholic teaching on monogamy, unity and indissolubility of marriage. Others, however, think non-Catholics regard the Church’s teaching about sexual morality as simply “morality of prohibition” unrealistic: 14.7% said that non-Catholic lapsed Catholics “only know that the Catholic Church does not permit divorce, contraception and that cohabiting couples are barred from receiving Holy Communion…does not permit sexual activity before marriage… imposes her doctrine on married couples”. Respondents think that these two categories are aware that the Church opposes abortion (2.9%).

What do non-Catholics and lapsed Catholics accept of the Church’s teaching? 18.3% of the respondents think that these accept the Church’s teaching on family unity and faithful love. Monogamy and indissolubility are accepted also, according to 3.2%, while 4.5% think that these accept the Church’s stand on abortion.

On the other hand, 51.3% of the respondents think by and large, the Church's teaching “on sexuality in general, its position on abortion /euthanasia, divorce, birth control, heterosexual marriages and the refusal to give Holy Communion to cohabiting couples/civilly married/divorced and remarried” are contested by non-Catholics and non-practicing Catholics.

3. MARRIAGE ACCORDING TO THE NATURAL LAW

Given there is a scanty knowledge of philosophy in Malta, it was widely assumed that only a few people know the meaning of the concept of “natural law”. Hence it was necessary to start this question by a very direct question: “What do you understand by ‘Natural Law’?” Among the respondents 29.3% opted to leave out this question while 6.0% simply answered that they do not know and another 3.9% gave a reply which is totally off the mark. One can conclude that this questionable philosophy – so common in the Church’s moral and anthropological thought – is incomprehensible to at least 35.3% of the Maltese population. Hence to put it mildly, it is a useless concept in any form of general catechesis. On the positive side, 9.8% of respondents described natural law as “an order established by God”, “universal laws as dictated by nature”, “a body of unchanging moral principles”, “that law which is not conditioned by culture”. 29.0% gave a vague reply by identifying “natural Law” with marriage, thus describing it as “a union/marriage between two people”, and also with “family planning”.

It is clear that although an explicitly natural law viewpoint as regards marriage and family life is given very little importance, the ideal of a happy and stable family is still highly valued in Malta and Gozo. This wide-ranging agreement about the desirability of a durable family structure is undoubtedly the legacy of the Church’s teaching and the practice of the faithful which has “latently” transmitted concepts of natural law as far as marriage and the family are concerned.
According to 5.8% Parliament, the Courts and Civil Administration give a lot of importance to “Natural Law”, while 27.3% think that they give it due weight. On the other hand while 9.5% of the Maltese do not know whether these institutions give it any importance, 24% say that they give it little importance, and 7.6% said that they do not give it any. Hence opinion is divided in somewhere the middle. However, 35.2% did not give an opinion (25.7% did not answer this question).

When giving their opinion about the importance that is given to "Natural Law" in the “education sector” and at “University and academic circles” the difference is quite marked. 32.8% think that at the former sector Natural law is given due or a lot of importance; whilst this percentage goes down 17.6% as regards the latter. 31.4% of the respondents think that it is given little or no importance in “education sector”, while this goes up 40.7% in the University and academic circles. On both the above issues those who did not give an opinion amount to 35.8% in the case of the education sector, and 41.8% in the case of the University and academic circles.

As regards the importance given to "Natural Law" by the people at large, 28.9% think that it is given due or a lot of importance, while 38.1% are of the opinion that it is given little or no importance. Those who did not express their opinion or do not know amount to 33.0%

The issues as regards the concept of a person and the anthropological ideas underpinning the discussion on the family proved to be very difficult: 13.4% of the replies where totally irrelevant while, 15.3% replied that they do not know and 52.7% did not reply at all to this question. That brings the percentage of those who do not have any idea about this theme or did not reply to 81.4%. Only 7.3% opined that “human beings are different from any other creatures and are rational, hence they can make choices” or that “the human being has a number of rights and obligations” or that they are “created in the image of God/there is God's plan for humanity”.

However, an anthropological aspect about the family which is accepted by 62.5%, is the idea that the union between a man and a woman with the aim of setting up a family is based on natural law, while 5.8% are not sure and 3.8% disagree with this. Those who refrained from even answering this question amounted to 25.4%.

On October 14, 2013, the Maltese Parliament started the Second Reading of a Bill entitled an Act to regulate Civil Unions and to provide for matters connected therewith or ancillary thereto, included Civil Unions between homosexual couples, heterosexual couples, and the right of both couples to adopt children. The Bill states clearly that “Save as provided in this Act a civil union, once registered, shall mutatis mutandis have the corresponding effects and consequences in law of civil marriage contracted under the [Marriage] Act.”

The most controversial part of the bill was the section of adoption by homosexual couples. The strongest arguments presented in favour of this position were essentially three: the issue of non-discrimination, the issue that the Maltese law already allows singles to adopt children, and thirdly that there is no robust empirical evidence neither in favour nor against adoption by homosexuals. However, because of the public controversy that followed, the Bill has for the moment been put on the back burner.

Those who hold that family is a union between man and woman only, because only this union begets children (as mentioned in the Bible) amount to slightly less than a third of the respondents (29.4%), while 5.6% see natural law as the basis of society/family, and 8.7% hold that arguments are in favour of this position: however they mentioned no specific argument. Nevertheless one cannot ignore that 42.5% did not reply to this question.
What is the perception of the Maltese of the way natural law is being proposed and explained by the civil organizations in Malta and Gozo? The highest percentage of respondents have a negative perception: 16.6% replied that the civil organizations are twisting issues in a manner that suits their ideology; hence, to achieve this for a purpose some ignore natural law or tend to give the impression that it is the opinion of the “majority” that constitutes natural law.

However one has to keep in mind that only 56.6% replied to this question and 5.7% gave an answer which is unrelated to the question. Those who did not said that they did not know how to answer this question amounted to 10.9%, while 43.4% just left it out.

To the question as how Church organisations propose and explain natural law, 6% stated that they are explaining it well and giving it great importance; besides this 8.9% said that they are interpreting it within the context of the Catholic faith, and 11.7% said that these organisations apply natural law only to marriage and family life and marriage. In contrast, 8.1% said that these organisations are not doing much in this regard, and some attributed this stance to “fear”. The percentage who gave an answer which is not related to the question amounted to 6%; 7.7% said they did not know how to answer and 40.7% left this question out.

Another issue is the approach which the Catholic Church should adopt when lapsed Catholics and declared non-believers request the Church to celebrate their marriage. It is moot point whether non-believers ever ask for a sacramental marriage! While 24.9% of the Maltese argue that that this is a question of religious principle, and hence if they do not believe, these people should not be allowed to receive the sacrament of marriage, the percentage of those who take a more tolerant attitude is in no way negligible. More than one fifth of the Maltese (22.3%) are of the opinion that the Church should accept them and support them, hoping that they will return to practice their faith; 9.5% think that they should be allowed to get married by the Church even if they are non-practicing Catholics; and 2.5% said that the approach should not be "no" but "yes, with restrictions" (e.g. only bless the union). 9.7% think that the Church should study each case on its own merits. These percentages add to 44.0%: which show a high level of tolerance. Only 2.8% said that they do not know what the Churches attitude should be, while 18.6% refrained from giving an answer.

4. THE PASTORAL CARE OF THE FAMILY IN EVANGELIZATION

Praying together as a family is still quite common in Malta. While 62.1% simply replies “yes” when asked whether they pray together as a family; 5.5% said that they do so in times of crisis. However, the situation is not without its shadows, since 20.1% said that they rarely pray together as a family, and 6.2% rarely do so.

There are considerable ways of praying in everyday family life. The most common form is saying grace at table (64.5%), followed by the rosary (“daily rosary” amounted to 28.6% and “sometimes” to 32.5%). These were followed by 20.9% who read a passage from the Bible.

When people pray on their own, they give greater importance to mental prayer: 73.1% said that this was their preferred mode of praying. However, 69.7% said that they pray at bed-time and on waking up in the morning. Participation at Mass remains quite a priority for Maltese and Gozitan Catholics: 65.2% attend Mass on Sundays and 53.1% attend frequently; others, amounting to 8.5% said that sometimes they attend Mass. The rosary and the visit to the Blessed Sacrament remain a very common mode of individual prayer: 49.4% and 45.4% respectively, while 37.7% read the Bible.
However according to Mass Attendance Decennial Censuses held over the last half a century show a consistent decline in Church Attendance. Parents today find it very difficult to convince their children into any area of life, particularly in the sphere of religion. A census of membership in Catholic youth organisations held late last year revealed clearly that membership in Catholic lay organisations has fallen abysmally. It is quite common that parents try to avoid conflicts rather than working to resolve them. This notwithstanding, 83.3% feel that it is their vocation to transmit their faith to their children and relatives: only 2.8% do not feel that they have this calling, while 6.6% are not sure. One must note that those who answered this question amounted to 92.7%, which is quite a high percentage.

How do those who feel the vocation to transmit their faith go about doing this? This was a more specific question; hence the response rate fell by almost 6.5%, to 76.8%. The respondents themselves specified two major “methods”. While 48.9% try to transmit their faith by example, especially by living characteristically Christian values (e.g. giving charity, by reciprocal love among the couple, by praying together and going to mass together as a family); while 12.3% encouraging their children “to participate in activities organized by the parish Church/To attend mass/Catholic groups”. The intellectual dimension is poorly transmitted by the family: 6.2% “teach” religion to their children and relatives, while 3.5% challenge them to live Christ's teaching. This might be the result of the fact that the parents themselves are insecure when they talk about religious topics, thus they try to avoid such arguments or remain speechless when it comes to transmitting the faith. That is why they insist that their children should go to catechism organized by the parish or Catholic lay organisations. In this connection, so far, an important role is frequently played by grandparents who take their grandchildren to Mass and/or to catechism lessons. Having said that, however, demographic and economic reasons are making this less and less possible.

Another way of transmitting faith is the celebration of the town or village “Festa”, and the participation in the traditional “rites de passage” such as Baptism, first Holy Communion and Confirmation, Weddings and Funerals. Popular religiosity is also a form of transmitting faith, especially devotional practices during periods of ill-health, serious accidents or injuries, and terminal illnesses.

In what way are the Maltese and Gozo Churches helping newly-weds to live in the Christian Faith? This issue has a response rate of 80.8%, while 14.3% said that they do not know what the Church is doing in this sphere of ministry. However, 32.5% are aware that the Church gives support to newly married couples to live their faith through the priestly ministry and lay organisations. But another 17.7% believe that what the Church is doing is inadequate.

Today, marriage success – in terms of happiness, fidelity, and stability/indissolubility can no longer regarded as being a matter of course. In this scenario, what is the Maltese Church doing to help couples who are facing crises in their married life? Among the respondents, 47.2% maintained that the Church is giving support through counselling services, groups and the clergy.of the Maltese say that the Church is offering her support in this crisis point. However, 10.9% think that as an institution, the Church is not doing enough, and another 1.6% say that although she tries to help, the Church is sometimes out of touch with the real life situations encountered by married couples. Those who think that the Church is doing nothing to help couples in crisis amount 2.1%. Those who do not know whether the Church is doing anything or not amount to 15.5% and 20.7% refrained from answering. On the other hand, several others said that help is forthcoming from parish priests, priests and sometimes even lay. Special positive mention is also made about the services of the Cana Movement and GRUFAN (Family
Groups). In view of this, it should however be noted that there is a marked need for a greater financial commitment on the part of the Dioceses.

5. PASTORAL CARE IN CERTAIN DIFFICULT MARITAL SITUATIONS

There are no official statistics as to the number of the young couples who are living together for a trial period before marriage. When asked how many do respondents know, 9.1% did not reply to this question while 15.2% do not know of any such couples. However 29.9% are aware of more than 6 couples living in this way, 36.7% are aware of 2 to 5 couples and 9.2% know of one couple.

According to figures provided by the National Office of Statistics, in 2011 in Malta and Gozo there were 3,975 (of whom 344 lived in Gozo) consensual cohabiting heterosexual couples and 168 (of whom 14 lived in Gozo) consensual homosexual couples. The highest number cohabiting heterosexuals was in the in the 30-39 age cohort (2,701 couples), followed by 2,066 couples aged less than 29 years. As regards to their legal marital status, these were distributed as follows 226 persons were widowed, 524 were divorced and 353 were persons whose marriage was annulled.

The present study has found that 11.0% knew of a single cohabiting couple, 40.1% knew from 2 to 5 such couples, and 30.8% knew of more than 6 cohabiting couples. Those who said that they do not know any cohabiting couples amounted to 9.4%, while 8.7% refrained from answering this question. However, marriages between couples who already have children are becoming more common.

When asked how cohabitating couples feel about their situation vis-à-vis the Church, 28.7% of the Maltese said that these people feel that, while God understands them, the Church does not. 9.2% think that cohabiting couples feel that the Church does not understand them and excludes them; this feeling both worries and hurts them. On the other hand, 12.5% of the respondents think that while these couples still feel that the Church does not understand, they do not feel that she excludes them.

Other respondents think that cohabiting couples do not bother about the Church but according to 13.3% and 15.0% that these couples “feel that they have not lost their faith” and “feel that they love and God still loves them.” Finally, 8.1% feel that cohabiting couple do not bother about the Church, and about God. This notwithstanding, 43.3% think that the fact that they are not allowed to receive the sacraments is a cause of pain to cohabiting couples; though 14.7% think that they do feel such pain. A high percentage - 35.2% - said that they do not know how these couples feel about this. A high percentage of the Maltese are of the opinion that the Church is concerned about the fact that the divorced and remarried wish to receive Holy Communion. Only 4.3% think that the Church is not concerned because it is not her fault, while 7.5% have the impression that it is not a problem for the Church.

The Maltese people are also of the opinion that the divorced and remarried wish to receive Holy Communion: 31.9% think that “quite a few” have this desire, while 18.7% think that “many” have this desire, and 14.5% think that “a few” share this sentiment. Besides this, 13.5% think that “many”, and 24.8% think that “quite a few”, and 17.2% are of the opinion that “a few” divorced and remarried have concluded that there is nothing wrong to keep receiving Holy Communion. 39.1% do not know what divorced and remarried think about this issue.

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In Malta, the Ecclesiastical Tribunal is very often criticized especially as regards the duration of the cases of declaration of annulment. This study indicated that many – 75.0% of the population – think that if the process of marriage annulment were to be faster, it will help persons whose first marriage has failed; while 10.9% that this will make the situation a bit better. Only 3% think that it will not make any difference.

Is the Church in Malta and Gozo doing anything to help the divorced and remarried to remain close to God? The Maltese do not have a bright perception of what the Church is doing for that the divorced and remarried to remain close to God. When asked whether the Church in Malta and Gozo is doing anything in this regard 40.7% replied yes; however these are divided into 15.7% replying a straight yes (as opposed to 13.3% who replied a straight “no”, while 25.0% said that she is doing “a little”). It is indicative that 41.4% said that they do not know whether the Church is doing anything. These percentages gain greater importance when one takes into account that only 4.6% did not answer this question.

To an open ended question as to whether the Church is offering such help, and if so in what does it consist, almost 50 percent (48.8.6%) did not answer this question at all and 19.8% held that they not know what this help consists of. 12.9% said that the help which the church is offering consist of support given by Church organisations/groups, through teachings and through lent talks, while 5.6% singled out the individual help given by people of good will (including priests). According to 4.3% the church’s help is sometimes inadequate because it is out of touch with the real difficulties people face, hence they consider it ephemeral.

When asked about the way the local Church is proclaiming God’s mercy to these Christians and in what way she helps them in their faith, the responses were similar to the above. Those who refrained from answering this question amounted to more than one third (35.4%) of the population, while 23.1% replied that they do not know how this is being done. 17.5% said that the Church is doing this through individual priests, by teaching, including Sunday Mass homilies and through Catholic groups. Those who think that the Church is not doing enough or that it is rather keeping distant (with the exclusion of some individual priests) amounted to 8.7%, while 2.0% repeated that while trying to give help, she is not always in touch; 2.5% think that the Church is hurting rather than helping the divorced and remarried – she is seen as being judgmental rather than merciful.

6. ON UNIONS OF PERSONS OF THE SAME SEX

As stated earlier in this document6 in October, 2013, the Maltese Parliament started the Second Reading of a Bill to recognise Civil Unions and to provide for matters related to these unions. This Bill states clearly that “save as provided in this Act a civil union, once registered, shall mutatis mutandis have the corresponding effects and consequences in law of civil marriage contracted under the [Marriage] Act.”

While Parliament started the second reading of this bill on October 14, 2013, on October 16 the Maltese Bishops issued a statement offering a “reflection” on it in the light of the Gospel which “also sheds light on every human relationship because it is born of love and reflects God’s own love”. The first point which the Bishops made was that the Bill should reflect “a profound respect” towards persons with a homosexual orientation and quoting Pope Francis reflected that

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6 See p.5
“in life God accompanies persons, and we must accompany them, starting from their situation”. They also stated that they do not intend to repeat “the teaching of the Church” on this issue which “is clear”. When referring to that section of the Bill which gives the right to the “partners in a civil union” the right for child adoption, the Bishops stated that they consider “such an issue of a very delicate nature similar to every issue that involves children and the child’s best interest. Since there are contrasting views on the issue, it seems to us that it will be wise if the legislator takes the necessary time to make the right decisions on this matter. Children should preferably be brought up by their parents, a man and a woman.”

Finally the Maltese Bishops asked “the Members of Parliament to continue taking measures that strengthen the family built upon marriage between a man and a woman. Considering that the family constituted by the unity in the difference between a man and a woman “remains the first and principle builder of society”, we encourage all those who are convinced of this truth to treasure the family and continue expressing their high regard towards this natural institution”.

At this stage of the debate, the Maltese people seem to be quite confused about Maltese legislation on this issue. While 31.5% said that Maltese law recognises civil unions for people of the same sex and equates them with marriage, 48.6% replied in the negative and 10.9% said that they do not know. However only 9% refrained from answering this query.

When asked about the attitude of the local Church towards both the State which legislates on Civil Union between persons of the same sex, and the people involved in this type of union. 24.5% refrained from answering, while 7% said that they did not know. However, more than a quarter of the respondent (26.6%) said that the Church has either a negative attitude or directly opposed to legislation, while 8.2% said the Church objects to a law equated Civil unions with marriage and the adoption of children by gay couples. Some argue that since the Church did not raise any public objection to the present Maltese law which gives the right to singles – without distinction with regard their sexual orientation – hence she should not find any objection to gay couples to have the same right. Others (6.0%) think that the Church’s position is based on doctrinal principles; another 3.4% think that for the Church civil unions are sinful; however she is being “very cautious about what position she should take”. Thus, 3.2% think that she is having a lukewarm stance, to the extent that 2.5% feel that the Church is open to discuss this issue with the Government. Finally, 3.1% argue that within the Church herself there are different positions on this issue: hence the Church’s position remains unclear.

It is also evident that there is no clear understanding about the pastoral ministry which is to be undertaken to help those who enter a Civil Union to live in the love of God and the Christian Faith. Inductively, considering that 29% did not reply to this question, 15.2% replied that they do not know, and 7.4% gave an answer which was irrelevant – that is, 41.6% in all - one can say that knowledge is quite scanty. The variety of other replies shows that there seems be no perceived direction on how to deal with homosexuals in a pastoral manner. The highest percentage of these - 8.1% said that they should be given individual attention to help them understand, by the help of faith, to refrain from having sexual intimacies; 6.7% said that the best way is that of accepting them and treating them as equals - including same rights - and 4.2% one can help by avoiding prejudice against them; 6.2% said that they should be thought that such behaviour is non consonant with the Church’s teaching; 4.5% said that one must show them that God loves them and accepts them as they are. Those who argued that it should be explained to them that they can never be treated as equals but that they can still take part and practice the Catholic faith amount to 1.8%. 
What can be done pastorally so that the Christian faith will be transmitted to children adopted by gays who enter a civil union? Apart from the 22.6% who did not answer this query (and the 7.9% who do not know what can be done), the highest percentage of respondents, that is 29.8% said that all children are equal and should be treated with equal love and respect; hence these should be treated with the same respect as regards their Baptism and in catechism classes. Some (6.7%) have argued that there should be courses and personal meetings (similar to those run by the Cana Movement) specifically addressed for gay couples and their adopted children, even at parish level. However, 19.0% gave an answer which is unrelated to the issue of the transmission of faith.

Another important issue is the way parents who were not married in the Church (sometimes referred to as people living in an irregular marriage) view her. Almost a quarter of the Maltese (24.3%) said that they do not know how these couples look at the Church, while another quarter (25.0%) of the respondents think that these parents do not see any difference between the way the Church deals with them and with other couples who received a Church marriage. Another 19.2% thinks that these people feel that although the Church does not agree with their “state”, however, she empathises with them. Almost the same percentage (17.2%) of the respondents think that parents who were not married in the Church feel that the Church neither agrees nor does she empathises with them. In the opinion of 7.2% they feel that the Church views them with suspicion.

One the other hand, 30.9% of the population think that people living in an irregular marriage expect the Church to treat their children in a similar manner as the children of those married by the Church; and 19.2% of respondents expect the Church to forgive them and allow them to receive the Sacraments. On the other end of the spectrum, while 21.1% think that these couples the Church not to interfere with their life it is the view of 4.0% that these couples have lost all interest in the Church.

7. THE OPENNESS OF THE MARRIED COUPLE TO LIFE

It is sad that one paragraph of *Humanae Vitae* has not only overshadowed the rest of the encyclical, but also the concept of responsible parenthood. When asked whether they know what "responsible parenthood" mean, 19.3% either refrained from answering or replied that they do not know. Those who were not sure what this concept means amount to almost a quarter of the population (24.4%), while those who said that they know what it means amounted to 56.4%.

43.7% of the population said that they know what the encyclical "*Humanae Vitae*", while 44.5% admitted that they do not know. Slightly more than one-tenth (11.8%) did not reply to this query. What does this encyclical teach about "responsible parenthood"? While 38.5% did not answer this question, 24.7% admitted that they do not know, and 2.1% gave an irrelevant answer. Among those who said that they know what its teaching is, 15.0% said that the encyclical deals with marriage and the transmission of life and that married couples should accept all children which God gives them, and that the only means of “birth control” accepted by the Church was abstinence and the natural method. Others (9.6%) said that the Church teaches that the number of children depends on one’s financial means, the health of parents and what is beneficial to the children themselves situation (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, par.51; *Humanae Vitae* par.10); 3.8% said that its teaching included parents’ duty to transmit Catholic faith to their children.

The ethical problems related to family size are strongly felt. This is natural in Malta which is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, and many still feel the pain of huge
migration programmes taken in the fifties and the early sixties. As a result, 81.1% of the population thinks that Church should study deeper the issue of responsible birth control. Those who said that the Church should not do this amounted to 5.5% and 6.9% replied that they do not know; while the percentage of those who refrained from answering this question amounted to 6.6%.

This result is confirmed by the fact that 21.1% say that in Malta and Gozo the Church’s teaching about responsible birth control is not accepted by the faithful in our country; while 56.2% do not think that the faithful are accepting this teaching. The percentage of those who say that the Church’s teaching is accepted in the Maltese islands amounts only to 7.9%. Again the percentage of those who ignored this question was as low as 5.2%.

On a personal level, 49.0% said that they accept and live according to the Church's teaching about responsible birth control, but find it difficult to follow, and 25.3% do not agree with the Church on this issue. Those who said that they preferred not to answer amount to 12.9% and 12.8% did not reply to this question.7

Those who said that they know how to choose between methods of birth control which are morally right and those which are wrong amounted to 49.0%, while 10.8% said that they are not so sure that they know and 7.2% said that they do not know how to choose on this issue. On the other hand, 19.8% said that they act according to their own conscience, 4.0% rely on a priest’s advice and 1.6% on a doctor’s advice. The percentage of those who ignored this query was a low 7.6%.

When asked which natural methods the Church in Malta promotes to help spouses live according to the teaching of Humanae Vitae, 39.1% refrained from answering at all, while 31.3% said that the Church promotes the rhythm method/billings method/safe period. Given the Church’s teaching as regards procreation, 21.0% said that this problem is keeping the faithful away from the Sacrament of Reconciliation, while 32.1% said that people go to confession but they do not confess anything related to procreation, because in conscience they think that there's no need to confess it. While 7.0% said that this issue does not keep people away from this sacrament, 16.1% said that while people simply do not go to confession, this issue is not the reason why they do so. Those who said that they do not know how to answer this question amounted to 18.2% and 5.5% refrained from answering.

Is the Church’s teaching with regard to procreation keeping the faithful from receiving Holy Communion? 50.9% stated that the faithful still receive Holy Communion because according to their conscience, they are not doing anything wrong, while 16.5% maintained that this teaching is keeping the faithful away from this sacrament. 17.4% replied they do not have an answer to this query, while 8.9% said that it is true that some faithful simply do not receive Holy Communion and the cause is not this teaching. The number of the respondents was very high: only 6.4% refrained from answering.

More than three-fourths (77.9%) of the Maltese are aware that on the issue of birth control there are differences between the Church’s teaching and civic education. Those who see no differences amount only to 2.4%, while 13.8% are not sure. Responsible sexuality often insists the need to avoid unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, particularly AIDS. In view of this the Church’s prohibition of “artificial” methods of birth control, mainly the use of condoms, is

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7 When one takes into consideration that this was not a face-to-face interview, but an internet and a postal questionnaire, it afforded utmost confidentiality. Hence, these percentages indicate that quite a number of Maltese consider this to be a private matter.
openly ignored. One gets the impression that responsibility in the area of sexual relations is interpreted as “pay attention to what you do not want”, independent of the means one uses to achieve this aim.

The decision to have a child depends on a multiplicity of factors. State family policy has focussed for a long time on enabling both parents to remain in gainful employment permanently, and hence on improving the reconciliation of “family and work”. It is however vital to the future of families, over and above this, to provide a framework ensuring that young parents can take a free, responsible decision on structures within marriage and the family. The availability of childcare, as well as flexible working hours, part-time employment and going back to work are important factors here. However, questions as to the right time to start a family, stable partnerships, a secure livelihood, the family friendliness of our society and the recognition of family work within society also influence family formation and the number of children to a similar degree.

8. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FAMILY AND THE PERSON

It is a universal phenomenon that the family, given that it is a primordial primary group, is the fundamental social, moral and physical space in the society where humans are socialised, where culture – values, norms and mores/behaviour patterns - is transmitted from generation to generation. It is through interaction which takes place among family member that human bonds are forged and our identity is constructed. It is in this structure that beings discover trust and self-worth. In Malta the family still holds pride of place. In spite of its frailty, weaknesses and pitfalls, the family remains the core of the country’s closely knit society.

As a rule, the Maltese family remains the “space” were faith and religious identity and belonging is transmitted. In the experience of 19.6% of the respondents the family is helping to transmit a Christian anthropology and Christ’s will for humanity. However, 57.7% are of the opinion that the family is not always helping to give a Christian view of humanity and human vocation. There are 7.5% who opine that the family is not helping in the transmission of a Christian view of humanity and human vocation. These percentages indicate that the experience of the Maltese family’s positive importance in the transmission of faith is waning. Families today – both parents and children are living in what Zygmunt Bauman calls a liquid society, which is pluralistic, complex and with a frail orientation. The experience of those who are involved in the pastoral ministry indicates that parents feel insecure when faced with questions of religious nature, and hence very often they are either evasive in the replies or simply turn either a blind eye or a deaf ear.

Among the critical circumstances in today’s family-life which hinder a person’s encounter with Christ, 29.3% place materialism in its consumerist vestige together with a hectic life styles at the top of the list of various conditions. Financial stress to cope with this life-styles is distancing people from God. These are followed by 11.3% who blame family crises such as illness, disability, infidelity, separation, divorce, death and poverty. Careerism and work follow suit: 9.7% think that these features of contemporary life have taken priority over many other important aspects of life, including faith. Individualism and selfishness are also perceive by 5.7% to be distancing people from Jesus Christ, while 5.8% simply put “lack of faith” as the real cause. However, one has to keep in mind that almost a quarter (24.7%) refrained from answering a question on this issue.

Contemporary Malta is no longer structured around personal and family needs, though there is much political talk to make work more family friendly especially as far as mothers are concerned.
Long gone are the days when the Maltese family could meet for meals and afterwards to pray the rosary. At least logistically, apart from a weakening faith, this has become a near impossibility. The quality time which married couples could set aside for one another and for their children is extremely limited. Rest and leisure – like work – has become an out-of-home activity; and if this takes place in the home, it takes place in an individualised rather than in a familial manner. In line with this trend anything which has to do with religion has also become not only private but also individualised. This has gone to the extent that those who speak of a community are considered to be either out-dated or unrealistic.

Crisis of faith have great influence on family in Malta. One of the main reasons for this is that for centuries religion was a veritable sacred canopy covering all aspect in Malta: it was the main, if not the only, philosophy of life. When religious tenets started to be challenged, doubted or ignored, the foundations of Maltese society started shifting. Thus, if one takes a Durkheimian view, one can say that Maltese society entered into an increasing state of anomie: an insecurity of norms leading to an errant behaviour. Family-life is therefore immersed in an environment of shifting values and consequent shifting mores. The “ultimate meaning” of the family became a moot point. This has created an additional strain on marriage and the family, thus increasing the risk of marriage breakdown. This study shows that 59.9% of the Maltese think that the many crises of faith which we are facing today have a “great” influence on family-life; this percentage is followed 22.8% who said that this has had “some” influence on the family. Only 5.4% said that there is no relationship between faith and family-life or that faith have no influence at all.

When asked how a more open attitude towards having children can be fostered, 34.2% declined to answer, while 7.5% replied in a way unrelated to this question, and 9.5% said that they could not offer any suggestion. In the opinion of 8.0% the Church can do this by promoting the beauty of having children by the use of using various media. She should insist continue teaching that marriage is about love and giving life more than anything else (5.7% of the respondents). Others (4.6%) said that it is society in general which should present the experience of having children as a beautiful experience. According to 6.4% an attitude towards having more children can be fostered by giving support to working parents. However, 6.8% said that in today’s hectic life it is difficult to promote an open attitude towards having children.

A similar question, that is, how can an increase in the birth-rate be promoted, was answered only by 64.7%; another 6.4% gave an irrelevant reply, while 10.6% felt that they are not in a position to give an opinion. That is only 21.2% gave some sort of reply. When one takes all the population, 14.3% are of the opinion that the State should give family-friendly measures which would consequently promote an increase in the birth-rate. Another 6.8% said that for the birth-rate to increase there should be economic growth. 4.5% expect the Church to emphasise that marriage and having children entails sacrifices; while others (2.1%) suggested that she should set up structures – including financial ones – of support to promote an increase in birth-rate.

9. OTHER CHALLENGES AND PROPOSALS

What other challenges or proposals related to the topics in the above questions do the Maltese consider as having urgent need and treatment? Those who did not give any reply amounted to 41.5%; 6.6% stated that that they do not have any suggestion to make, while 5.8% gave an irrelevant reply. Hence the “actual” response amounted to 46.1%.

Almost one-tenth (9.0%) of the population are of the opinion that the Church, particularly the clergy, are not giving enough individual attention and support to “established groups”. These groups have the benefit of a systematic formation programme. The Church’s teaching, including
homilies, are considered by 6.9% of the respondents to be out of touch with modern life and are not proactive. Hence, the Church is urged (by 5.3%) to review her own channels of communication and make better use of social media. Besides these suggestions, 14.5% gave varied suggestions which would be very unrealistic to try to bring together as one category.

A substantial percentage (42.3%) did not make any new proposal regarding the way in which the Church can put in practice her mission to evangelise the family. The clearest proposal which was made by 13.0% was that the Church, especially through its clergy, should make more frequent, direct contact with people on a one to one or family basis. The proposal that the Church should support “established Catholic groups” which already work with families and young people was reiterated by 6.4%. A similar percentage said that the Church should make better use of the media and social networks. Finally, 5.3% proposed that the Church should update herself. Other made other proposals which do not enter one category; these amounted to 10.0%. Still there were 5.7% who said that they were not in a position to make new proposals.

10. CONCLUSION

Despite the wide variety of responses, the survey pointed to several aspects which are significant to the overall situation of the Maltese Church and the need of new directions in her pastoral ministry.

In spite of increasing difficulties, the family in Malta, remains the strongest institution and the main socialising agent of youngsters in their formation for married life. What the institutional Church is seen to be offering in terms of preparation are the compulsory courses offered by the Cana Movement and few other organisations. Although all Catholic organisations aim at giving a holistic Christian formation; groups aimed at the continuing formation of married couples are few and far in between; and their memberships or attendance for their meetings, compared to the number of families in Malta, remains minimal.

Hence at the parish level the Church’s teaching on the family in Malta is spread by Catholic organisations/groups and homilies. Very often, the content of this formation centres mainly on monogamy, fidelity indissolubility, contraception, abortion and extra- and pre-marital sex. Although the sacramentality of marriage was frequently mentioned, grace was hardly ever mentioned. This makes one doubt what the Maltese understand by the sacrament of marriage. One can safely say that for most Maltese the sacrament of marriage has a limited canonical meaning such as the right “quoad torum et mensam” and the consequent right to beget children.

The major difficulty which married couples find in following the Church’s teaching is the latter’s doctrine on birth-control. The other difficulty is not family-specific, but is related to basic tenets of Christianity: many find it very difficult to forgive, and this makes reconciliation when the partners start drifting apart more difficult. The lack of priests, and lack of their availability, especially with regards to the sacrament of reconciliation was frequently mentioned. Others believe that they prefer the Church to have married priests because this would help the priests to be more understanding and empathic with married couples. Another difficulty which Maltese Catholic couples are finding is that of transmitting their faith to their children.

Among the causes mentioned one finds on one hand the rapidly changing culture and on the other is the hectic rhythm of contemporary life. Besides, long working hours outside the home has become a must to keep a stable standard of living. Difficulties of a cultural nature include a postmodern philosophy according to which “anything goes”, individualism coupled with
relativism. On the economic front, materialism, especially as expressed by increased artificial consumption, is omnipresent. All these currents are fuelled by the negative influence of both the mass media and the social media.

However, family unity and love are accepted even by lapsed Catholics and by non-Catholics. The latter however rejects the Churches teaching on contraception, divorce and the Church’s rejection of homosexual marriage. The debate on civil unions in Maltese Parliament has fuelled the local demands on the Church not to interfere in the public sphere. The Church language came under attack as being non-communicative. In the questionnaire sent by the Secretariat of the Synod, this difficult philosophical and theological language was epitomised by the question which referred to “natural law” and the other regarding the “anthropological ideas underlying the concept of man.

As regards the reception of the sacrament of marriage by lapsed Catholics and non-believers, the opinion of a sizeable number of the Maltese is divided, among those who say that the Church should not administer this sacrament to these people, and those who argue that they should be allowed to marry in Church, after proper preparation with the hope that they will start practicing their faith again. On the other hand the opinion of many Maltese is that the Church’s help to married people, whether they are in a happy situation or in crisis, is given by the Cana Movement and the clergy. Some suggested that the priest who celebrates their wedding should continue to mentor them. Many think that little help is being given to the divorced and remarried. As regards Civil Unions among homosexuals, there was a sizeable number who said that the Church is opposed to such unions, especially when they are put on equal footing with marriage; besides this she is also opposed to the adoption of children by homosexuals. It is clear that there is a divide between the official teachings on sexual morality and the people’s sexual life, above all when it comes to pre-marital sex, cohabitation, and birth-control. Culturally, homosexuality is very often frowned upon. It is the impression of many that, as regards sexual matters, the Church sees red.

The majority of the respondents said that they are transmitting the faith to their children by examples; much less are doing this by encouraging them to participate in ecclesial activities or organisations.

As far as parenthood is concerned many have little knowledge of what responsible parenthood means. Most Maltese are unaware of what is the teaching of Humane Vitae. While natural method of birth limitation is known to be acceptable by the Church by at least 31%, contraception remains a bone of contention. There is a support assisted procreation by means of IVF. This however cannot be quantified.