



THE CHURCH IN MALTA

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**MESSAGE BY H.L. Msgr MARIO GRECH, BISHOP OF GOZO,
DURING THE MIGRANTS INTER-FAITH FUNERAL SERVICE**

We are in the presence of twenty-four unidentified dead human bodies but we know that many more, hundreds, lay in the great graveyard that the *Mare Nostrum* has become. We know not their names, their lives, – we just know that they were escaping from a desperate situation trying to find freedom and a better life.

We call them *the Unidentified*. Yet we mourn them, we weep their loss, we want to give them our last respects. Why? Because deep inside, irrespective of our creed, culture, nationality, race, we *know* that they are our fellow human beings.

« Who is my neighbour? » - In the Gospel we heard the lawyer asking Jesus to provide him an interpretation of the commandment of love. He – the lawyer – knew the law. Yet he feels uneasy with Christ's answer because what he got was not his expected academic discourse but a *down-to-earth, concrete* answer.

Facing this dramatic situation we may as the lawyer resort to *reading out* the law as to who is responsible of what, and who should take care of the great influx of migrants arriving on our shores. Surely, we are facing a complex situation and it is neither my competence nor the moment to propose solutions. We pray God to enlighten those who face such an arduous task.

Yet, in the light of this parable, we are reminded that the *way of the law* is not enough to tackle humanitarian emergencies. We can continue to *read out* the laws as the lawyer, but that is not enough. The *way of the law*, the *way of justice*, should open itself to the *way of love*. In every sphere of interpersonal relationships justice must, so to speak, be 'corrected' to a considerable extent by that love which, as Saint Paul proclaims, 'is patient and kind' or, in other words, possesses the characteristics of that merciful love which is so much of the



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essence of the Gospel and Christianity”.¹ *Charity goes beyond justice*, because to love is to give, to offer what is “mine” to the other. Charity transcends the economy of exchange.

Justice based on a *give-and-take* logic cannot alone govern human relationships. It cannot solve this crisis. We may, I for first, adopt the style of the «priest» and the «Levite» of the Gospel who limit themselves to see these poor persons and *pass by on the other side*. Missing this epochal *moment* by choosing not to stop and hear the cry of our brothers and sisters desperately seeking refuge, the situation will then deflate into what Pope Francis calls the *globalisation of indifference*. Sometimes we just stop, shed some tears, and then continue on our way. We may be within positive law. But in the way of love we would be guilty of omission.

«But a Samaritan ... came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.» Love, merciful love, brings the *unidentified* victim out of anonymity – he becomes the *brother*, the *concern* of the person who is a neighbour to him. Mercy that walks that extra mile not only changes the persons who are cared for but also *those who approach them with love*.

If we are transformed by merciful love, the present situation changes: from those who *succumb* the influx of migrants we *become neighbours* to the people who come to our shores. Merciful love impels us to not just *wait* for this dramatic situation to unfold further, but to *act*, *reaching out* towards the roots that are causing this exodus. Merciful love does not simply *pass by*, but *faces* this challenge with the eyes of the Good Samaritan who does not only feel sorry but *helps out* by also unconditionally putting his wealth at the service of the needy party. Merciful love is capable to look at every person, even at the declared enemy – as the Jews were in the eyes of the Samaritans – as *someone in need*. Being moved with compassion involves being attuned to others who are in distress regardless from whatever cause and regardless of who they are. For St John Chrysostom, compassionate attunement “is most especially characteristic of the saints. No glory, no honour, nor anything else is more precious to them than their neighbour’s welfare”.

As a shipwrecked man called Paul brought to these islands the news of a Love that redeems the world, so too these “shipwrecked” brothers and sisters who lie silent in our presence are messengers to Maltese, European and Western citizens alike of the need to

¹ POPE JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Dives in misericordia* (1980), 12; 14.



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journey the path of merciful Love, to *become neighbours* to those who suffer injustice, inequality, discrimination and poverty in the rest of the world. They are silent heralds of the cry for love that is the soul of effective social and political solutions. Love is the normative principle not only in micro-relationships (friendships, family, small groups) but also in macro-relationships, that is in social, economic and political context.²

Only mercy can break the cycle of egoism and violence and create the possibility of new future. Compassion is the ultimate ethical authority against human cruelty. A society without charity and compassion will no longer be human.

May these brothers and sisters rest in peace! We couldn't offer them our hospitality, our smiles, our hugs; but as we commend them to the Merciful God, we also ask them to forgive us for omitting to take the necessary timely measures which could have spared their lives. May their memory live in our renewed effort to *become neighbours* to those who are already on our shores and are approaching our shores.

As today we return back to our daily routines, may the word "Mercy" echo in our hearts and make us reflect and act. As St. Gregory the Theologian once wrote: "prove yourself a god to the unfortunate by imitating the mercy of God. There is nothing so godly in human beings as to do good works." May God bless all those "good Samaritans" civil authorities, rescuers, volunteers, men and women of good will who are doing their utmost to reach out to our distressed brothers and sisters. Thank you for being witnesses and models of this merciful love!

Dear brothers and sisters, as I conclude my reflection, you may ask me: *so what do you propose then? Beautiful words Father... but nothing changes!* Inspired by this Gospel, I will pray God to change my heart with his merciful Love... and that will change me to *become a neighbour* to all my brothers and sisters. I invite all those who believe in the Merciful ever-living God to do the same.

Amen.

² Benedict XVI, Caritas in Veritate