



THE CHURCH IN MALTA

COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE
Archdiocese of Malta

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GREAT SIEGE COMMEMORATION (1565 -2015)

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We are gathered today in front of this monument built by our fathers in 1927, a strong and impressive work of art by the renowned Maltese sculptor Antonio Sciortino (1879 – 1947).

The central figure embodies the courage and determination of the local people who defended themselves against the enemy who had decided to make them slaves. The shield held by a man of great strength and with a determined look, twins the emblem of the Order of the Knights of St John with the Maltese emblem. The two figures on both sides are allegorical: the one on your left symbolises the Catholic Faith, and the figure on your right symbolises that of Minerva or Athena, the personification of human wisdom and reason. In this way, Antonio Sciortino represents the idea that the fierce struggle that took place here, on Mount Xiberras, and the in surrounding parts of the Grand Harbour, Vittoriosa and Marsamxett Harbour, 450 years ago, was a struggle fought on this small island in the middle of the Mediterranean to save faith and reason, the free worship of the one true God, and Western Civilisation. The allegorical figures are symbols of freedom, the freedom to adore God and the freedom of thought. Yes, the Great Siege battle of 1565 was a struggle against enslavement as obscurantism – it was against the enemies of true freedom.

This struggle today is still pertinent and necessary. How wise are the words of Emperor Manuel II Paleologue in Ankara in 1391. In his Dialogue with the Muslim theologian from Persia, he said, “God is not pleased by blood – and not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats... To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death...”¹

Pope Benedict XVI, in his speech at Regensburg University on the 12th September 2006, added his own comments to the words of the Emperor Manuel saying, “At this point, as far as understanding of God and thus the concrete practice of religion is concerned, we are faced with an unavoidable dilemma. Is the conviction that acting unreasonably contradicts God's nature merely a Greek idea, or is it always and intrinsically true? I believe that here

¹ “Manuel II Paléologue, Entretiens avec un Musulman. 7^e Controverse”, *Sources Chrétiennes* n. 115, Paris 1966, Controversy VII, 3 b-c: Khoury, pp. 144-145 quoted in http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html



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we can see the profound harmony between what is Greek in the best sense of the word and the biblical understanding of faith in God”.²

The two figures which Antonio Sciortino positioned on either side of this monument express the radical need of an encounter between the Biblical faith and the Greek sense of inquiry. The embrace sculptured in bronze between faith and reason expresses the fundamental idea that faith short of reason and reason bereft of faith lead to extremes of intransigence and obscurantism, lead to a tragic deficit of the human experience.

How apt were the words of Pope Benedict XVI when he said, “While we rejoice in the new possibilities open to humanity, we also see the dangers arising from these possibilities and we must ask ourselves how we can overcome them. We will succeed in doing so only if reason and faith come together in a new way. [...] Only thus do we become capable of that genuine dialogue of cultures and religions so urgently needed today. In the Western world it is widely held that only positivistic reason and the forms of philosophy based on it are universally valid. Yet the world's profoundly religious cultures see this exclusion of the divine from the universality of reason as an attack on their most profound convictions. A reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures.”³

As we stand before this monument symbolising the courage of those who fiercely fought in the Great Siege, we recall the words of Pope Francis in Sarajevo on the 6th of June, 2015.

“Peace is God’s dream, his plan for humanity, for history, for all creation. And it is a plan which always meets opposition from men and from the evil one. Even in our time, the desire for peace and the commitment to build peace collide against the reality of many armed conflicts presently affecting our world. They are a kind of third world war being fought piecemeal and, in the context of global communications, we sense an atmosphere of war.

Some wish to incite and foment this atmosphere deliberately, mainly those who want conflict between different cultures and societies, and those who speculate on wars for the purpose of selling arms. But war means children, women and the elderly in refugee camps; it means forced displacement of peoples; it means destroyed houses, streets and factories; it means, above all, countless shattered lives. You know this well, having experienced it here: how much suffering, how much destruction, how much pain! Today, dear brothers and sisters, the cry of God’s people goes up once again from this city, the cry of all men and women of good will: war never again!

² http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html

³ http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html



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Within this atmosphere of war, like a ray of sunshine piercing the clouds, resound the words of Jesus in the Gospel: “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Mt 5:9). This appeal is always applicable, in every generation. He does not say: “Blessed are the preachers of peace”, since all are capable of proclaiming peace, even in a hypocritical, or indeed duplicitous, manner. No. He says: “Blessed are the peacemakers”, that is, those who make peace. Crafting peace is a skilled work: it requires passion, patience, experience and tenacity. Blessed are those who sow peace by their daily actions, their attitudes and acts of kindness, of fraternity, of dialogue, of mercy... These, indeed, “shall be called children of God”, for God sows peace, always, everywhere; in the fullness of time, he sowed in the world his Son, that we might have peace! Peace-making is a work to be carried forward each day, step by step, without ever growing tired.”⁴

Addressing the Civil Authorities in Bosnia Herzegovina, Pope Francis pronounced these truly prophetic words: “In order to successfully oppose the barbarity of those who would make of every difference the occasion and pretext for further unspeakable violence, we need to recognize the fundamental values of human communities, values in the name of which we can and must cooperate, build and dialogue, pardon and grow; this will allow different voices to unite in creating a melody of sublime nobility and beauty, instead of the fanatical cries of hatred.

Responsible politicians are called to the important task of being the first servants of their communities, taking actions which safeguard above all the fundamental rights of the human person, among which the right to religious freedom stands out. In this way it will be possible to build, with concrete measures, a more peaceful and just society, working step-by-step together to solve the many problems which people experience daily.

In order for this to come about, it is vital that all citizens be equal both before the law and its implementation, whatever their ethnic, religious or geographical affiliation. All alike will then feel truly involved in public life. Enjoying the same rights, they will be able to make their specific contribution to the common good.”⁵

In 1934, in his poem “Lil Malta: Ta’ Llum u ta’ Għada” (“To Malta, of Today and of Tomorrow”), the National Poet Dun Karm, lamented in the following very strong words: “You were the flower of the world and you have become a rubbish dump [...] listen to what I’m telling you: do not come to this Monument with praises on your lips and laurel wreaths in your hands; let me tell you: your praises have become lies, and the Monument itself has become a lie”.

Is it indeed true that this Monument has become a lie?

Is it indeed true that the praises uttered here every year have become lies?

⁴ https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150606_omelia-sarajevo.html

⁵ https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/june/documents/papa-francesco_20150606_sarajevo-autorita.html



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Malta, Malta, do not cut the roots of your hallowed and sweet tree!

Take refuge in its shade, nourish yourself of its fruits,

Enjoy its goodness with all men in peace.

And the Lord will protect you and will be with you:

Here and everywhere, now and for ever. Amen.

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