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GOVERNANCE AS STEWARDSHIP OF THE STATE AND OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

THE ARCHBISHOP'S HOMILY ON INDEPENDENCE DAY

The 55th anniversary of Malta's Independence and of the consequent realisation of sovereign statehood for the Maltese Islands gives me the opportunity to offer some brief reflections on governance as the art of stewardship of the State on both the national and the international level.

The art of stewardship helps the leader to live out his high calling to take charge of the household, in this case the State, in the spirit of service to the wellbeing of society and the promotion of the common good.

In the Greek of the New Testament the word for 'steward' is 'oikonomos'. This word in turn shares its roots with the more familiar term 'oikonomia' (from where we get the word 'economy'). 'Oikos' is Greek for house or home. 'Nomos' is Greek for law or order. The root suggests that the steward (the 'oikonomos') is the servant that guarantees and promotes the order, stability and consequent peace of the household or home.

The steward is entrusted with the wellbeing of a household that is not his property to abuse at will. He is a servant and is called to serve and not to be served. He is called to dedicate his life for the good of others and will shun any temptation to abuse his authority for personal gain, profit or advantage. In order to fulfil this calling to the best of his abilities he needs a healthy sense of detachment, internal or psychological freedom and the humility to face adversity and failure when things do not go according to plan or where tough decisions taken in good conscience come at a heavy political price. All this needs a good dose of the sense of humour St Thomas More prayed for daily in these words:

Grant me, O Lord, good digestion, and also something to digest.

Grant me a healthy body, and the necessary good humour to maintain it.

Grant me a simple soul that knows to treasure all that is good
and that doesn't frighten easily at the sight of evil,
but rather finds the means to put things back in their place.
Give me a soul that knows not boredom, grumblings, sighs and laments,
nor excess of stress, because of that obstructing thing called "I."
Grant me, O Lord, a sense of good humour.
Allow me the grace to be able to take a joke to discover in life a bit of joy,
and to be able to share it with others.

Pope Francis quotes this prayer in a number of his writings (see *Gaudete et Exsultate* par. 126). I once told him how much this prayer had touched me and he told me that he prays it every day.

The Gospel I chose for this year's celebration hinges on another important aspect of the steward's calling: accountability. The Lord will come and demand an account from the steward of his stewardship or ministry. He addresses his parable to Peter and the other apostles and concludes with the aphorism: "To whom much is given, of him will much be required" (Lk 12:48).

Accountability requires leadership to be open to public scrutiny and censure. Accountability is the antidote to that sense of impunity that makes a mockery of leadership as service and of democracy as an expression of the rule of law. The steward leader, in a democracy worthy of the name, knows too well that he is accountable to the people he serves both politically and legally. He will embrace politics as a service to the common good and will respect the fact that he is not above the law.

In the Lord's parable, the bad steward gets drunk and mistreats the members of the household. That is, he is ruled by his egoistic passions and needs, and abuses of his authority. The bad steward turns authority on its head. For him it is not a means to serve but an opportunity to be served.

Independence Day comes every year to challenge us Maltese citizens to develop a true sense of the state (what the Italians call 'il senso dello stato'). Independence Day challenges each and every one of us to grow out of an atavistic sense of entitlement at the hand of a benevolent despot (so typical of the heritage of our colonial past) and to move forward into the very uncomfortable place of participating in the destiny of our society as co-stewards. This place is uncomfortable because, to paraphrase the wisdom of US President John F. Kennedy, being true and loyal citizens of an independent country means that we ask ourselves first and foremost what we need to

do for our country rather than what our country needs to do for us. We need to move from the passive quasi-parasitic dependence on the State as the Big Brother of Orwellian fame to a proactive co-ownership of the instruments of the State as the stewardship of the wellbeing of each member of society, especially those that are the weakest and most vulnerable.

Independence Day comes every year to hold us as a sovereign nation to account as to how we are fulfilling our calling to stewardship on the international level. The globalisation of challenges on the economic and environmental level calls for a globalisation of stewardship that runs counter to the petty narrow-minded populist rhetoric that puts the interest of the individual states above the wellbeing of the human family.

In 1967 our newly independent country was instrumental in promoting the Law of the Sea Convention in the interests of the planet and of future generations. This globalisation of care should encourage us to play an active part on the international stage to promote a true sense of fraternity among nations. We are right in expecting that other European Countries share the responsibility derived from the influx of migrants from the Southern Mediterranean shores that poses a disproportionate strain on our resources and territory, limited as they are. On the other hand, we owe it to the family of nations, not least to the other members of the European Union, to the Commonwealth family of Nations, and to the international community, that our instruments of state and sovereign status remain at the service of the rule of law, the full respect of human rights and the stewardship of the global community.

As we celebrate the 55th anniversary of Independence we pray that Malta as a Nation and we Maltese as citizens of a Sovereign State, embrace stewardship as a way of governance, a way of life.

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