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TRUE RESPECT AND GENUINE CARE FOR ALL CREATION

SYNOPSIS OF THE STATEMENT BY THE CHURCH ENVIRONMENT COMMISSION

In a statement issued on the occasion of this year's Season of Creation (1st September – 4th October), the Interdiocesan Environment Commission (KA) highlights a number of examples of greenwashing which have characterized the local scenario throughout the 16 years it has been set up. Greenwashing is the practice of making unsubstantiated or misleading claims about the environmental benefits of a project in order to make it appear more environmentally friendly than it really is. The KA is highly critical of the way public statements try to gain credibility by claiming that decisions are based on scientific studies that, more often than not, are never published and made available for public scrutiny.

Consequently, the common citizens have to content themselves with the interpretation given by whoever may have a vested interest in seeing a particular project move on. As examples, the KA refers to the 2017 Report related to the Building Industry and the Property Market in Malta and its update (that served as an excuse to justify more unsustainable building); the feasibility studies about the tunnel connecting the two islands (upon which the decision to proceed has already been taken – and approved by parliament – even though not ALL the studies have been completed); and to the studies about the Central Link Project (whose lack of publication gave rise to a lot of speculations).

The KA feels that the Maltese public deserves greater respect, and that important studies about environmental issues should no longer be kept under wraps, as has very often been the practice for years under both administrations. It criticises the way by which prior to every general election, the public is led to believe that what it has to say will be valued and respected, but in reality it is what the consultants have to say and the mysterious reports mentioned that have the final say. It would be unwise to do away with professional consultancy. But consultants are duty bound to base their

advice on research and published data rather than personal hunches. Moreover, they should never ignore what the people have to say when decisions are taken, especially if what the consultant says goes against the general public opinion.

The KA refers to the prevalent strategy whereby one would justify a project deemed to be harmful to the environment, by proposing a solution which at face value would be rendering it less damaging. These “solutions” only lead the general public to focus on the detail rather than on the most important issue – i.e. whether such project is indeed necessary. Cases in point are the presentation of revised plans for certain projects where the number of floors is decreased, where more access is given to the public, and where landscaping is rendered more conspicuous – a clear attempt at rendering the proposed project apparently more environmentally friendly leading us to forget that the project would still be eating away on our open spaces. The KA also speaks of another case of bad practice – that of splitting a proposal for a huge project in stages, with each phase being presented at the most favourable time for obtaining approval.

The KA also criticizes whoever, within the Church chooses to cause environmental damage through various projects (be they small or large) by selling or leasing land for irresponsible development under the guise of addressing pastoral and social needs. Our faith obliges us to appreciate (more than anybody else) what God in his love has created, by disapproving and disassociating ourselves from any development which is not sustainable albeit permitted by law.

The KA complains that our country has done very little, if anything, to seriously address environmental issues since it claims the authorities are either afraid or are cautious not to irk the electorate (or a particular sector of society). As an example it mentions the delay in stopping once and for all the use of plastic containers and packaging. It urges immediate action even for the sake of bringing about economic justice with producers and importers who, through a great sense of responsibility, have already invested in sustainable alternatives.

The KA warns that our country urgently needs to establish limits to growth for our country, and states that if we really believe in sustainable development, every project has to be planned in such a way that it draws an equal balance between environmental, economic, and social interests. One has to ascertain that the gross domestic product of our country grows through initiatives that primarily bolster our well being.

It is encouraging to note the ever increasing number of people who voice their concerns on environmental issues. But these have to be careful not to give in to attempts to have their voice tainted with partisan politics. The ultimate aim of all our efforts should be the consolidation of the common good by securing the best quality of life. The KA concludes its statement by urging all Maltese to commit themselves to showing true respect to our Motherland whose name we bear.