

Seeking to live an honest life within a context often characterised by dishonesty

A Reflection Paper

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Abstract and Summary

- Introduction (**Section 1**). The Paper treats an extremely timely theme from a number of perspectives which are seen to converge. The Introduction seeks to present the true meaning of honesty and its implications within the everyday language of the man and woman in the street. Honesty is a complex virtue: it can be seen from a general and descriptive sense with reference to a character, as well as more specifically in relation to one's corresponding competence or office. Integrity and authenticity are highlighted.
- Sacred Scripture. What lies at the basis of honesty: True identity (**Section 2**). Throughout Scripture, it is clear that honesty is part and parcel of one's acknowledgement that God is Lord in Israel, and an acknowledgement of one's own identity. On the other hand, dishonesty is one of the consequences of a lack of this acknowledgement. A small, yet incisive, selection of biblical episodes illustrates these two affirmations.
- The Contribution of Classical Literature: Cicero on the meaning of honesty (**Section 3**). By means of Cicero's treatment of *honestum* in his *De officiis*, the following aspects are stressed: a sense of duty, manliness, dignity and moral goodness and rectitude, while embracing whatever is morally right and morally beautiful in relation to the cardinal virtues.
- Aquinas on honesty (**Section 4**). In one of the *quaestiones* in his *Summa*, Aquinas analyses: (a) the relation between the honest and the virtuous; (b) the relation of honesty to the beautiful; and (c) the relation of honesty to the useful and to the pleasant. Thirteen clearcut affirmations on honesty are gleaned from the Thomistic text.
- Contemporary Reflections on Honesty and Some Preliminary Suggestions (**Section 5**). This section includes some reflections by Gula and MacIntyre, and thus delineates aspects such as integrity, a strong character and moral backbone, human wellbeing and a virtuous life. The individual's commitment to Christian discipleship is underlined, as is the general and particular context of the individual seeking to embrace an honest lifestyle within a milieu often marked by dishonesty. The Commission suggests the carrying out of a sociological analysis on the latter. Honesty calls for an embrace of the rights, obligations and virtues that are embodied in the notion of 'citizenship'. The Church commits itself in the promotion of a new vision in public life and the citizen's rights, duties and virtues.
- Conclusions: Responsibility and Commitment, accompanied by Evangelisation and Catechesis (**Section 6**). This section dwells upon honesty as the responsible commitment to the truth. Emphasis is made on a principled approach offering normative guidelines to individuals and institutions. Evangelisation and catechesis possess pride of place with regard to the cultivation of honesty within family life, the political and economic spheres, the environment, social life and the administration of justice.

1. Introduction

The theme of this reflection paper lies at the heart of the concerns repeatedly expressed by the local bishops and, indeed, by numerous commentators, namely, the marked weakening of honesty in Maltese public life. In addressing this phenomenon, which is corrosive of the common good, several considerations are being presented in light of Revelation, Tradition and the contribution of a number of philosophers and theologians.

Honesty is a complex virtue because it can be understood in a general and descriptive sense with reference to a character, or else it can be taken more specifically in relation to one's corresponding competence or office.

Thus, in the phrase, "Frederick is an honest man" one would want to offer a general assessment of the person's character as honest, implying he is a person who will not try to deceive or manipulate or abuse of other persons. However, taken specifically, the term has *analogical* applications which correspond to their respective case. For instance, we could mean one thing when we said, "He is an honest judge", quite another when saying, "She is an honest accountant", or "He is an honest physician" or "an honest bank-dealer" or even, "she is an honest engineer". Although there is a difference, somewhat, in what being honest means, in every circumstance, there is also a common and participative semantic ground that holds of all the different cases, hence, the analogical interpretation.

To be an honest judge is not merely to be true to one's profession taken generally, but also to be a model of moral integrity in the application of one's hermeneutical skills to the law while keeping in mind the dictates of one's conscience, as well as the limitations of the parameters established by the same laws. There could be no honesty practised here, without the aid of necessary accompanying virtues, such as wisdom, intellect, memory, a comprehensive attention to details and to moral and legal principles and, most of all, prudence (taken in the Aristotelian-Thomistic sense, i.e. right practical reason).

To be an honest engineer, or pharmacist or pawnbroker, would also involve being true to one's profession, but with an entirely different scenario and a different set of intellectual devices, and so on.

2. Sacred Scripture

What lies at the basis of honesty: True identity

Throughout the books of Sacred Scripture, one encounters a leitmotif whereby honesty is part and parcel of one's acknowledgement that God is Lord in Israel, and an acknowledgement of one's own identity. Conversely, dishonesty is one of the consequences of a lack of such an acknowledgement.

In Genesis 25-27, Jacob who steals Esau's birthright; in the Writings, Psalm 116:11, the psalmist is alarmed that lying and falsehood has become the order of the day; in the Prophets, Israel embraces a culture of cheating (Amos 8:5); and in the Gospels, Jesus, who is reckoned the "good teacher" (Mk 10:17) is later described as a "deceiver and an impostor" (Mt 27:63); the one who is declared innocent and in whom no grounds for the sentence of death is found, is flogged just the same; he who has always spoken rightly is struck in the face, as if he were someone who has spoken wrongly (Jn 18:23); he who has not come to abolish the law but to bring it to perfection, is "reckoned (ἐλογίσθη, in its numerical computational sense) with the lawless (ἀνόμων) (Lk 22:37), right on to Revelation, where Babylon is adored as a goddess (Rev 18).

If a common thread had to be deciphered in all these cases, one would come up with the conclusion that true identity is always betrayed: of Israel, chosen as a model for all nations, who discards its identity for something else; Jesus' identity is thrown to the dogs and transformed maliciously into the opposite of who he actually is.

3. The Contribution of Classical Literature: Cicero on the meaning of honesty

It is also deemed useful to undergo a semantic study of the term *honestum* in the context of classical literature. This is a very rich term, and its meaning in the classical era was rather ontological, and was considered to pertain to the constitution of the human being. The concept of *honestum* included a whole series of virtues. It can be affirmed that the person who seeks to live an honest life puts the virtues in practice. Contemporary terms such as integrity, responsibility and co-responsibility all reflect the classical concept of *honestum*. One is invited to reflect on the concept as used by Cicero, in his *De officiis*.

And yet there is still another classification of duties: we distinguish between "mean" duty, so called, and "absolute" duty. Absolute duty we may, I presume, call "right," for the Greeks call it κατόρθωμα, while the ordinary duty they call καθήκον. And the meaning of those terms they fix thus: whatever is right they define as "absolute" duty, but "mean" duty, they say, is duty for the performance of which an adequate reason may be rendered (I.8)

M. Tullius Cicero. *De Officiis*. With an English Translation. Walter Miller. Cambridge. Harvard University Press; Cambridge, Mass., London, England. 1913.

(<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2007.01.0048%3Abook%3D1%3Asection%3D8>. Accessed 16.4.21)

Miller explains: "Cicero's technical terms are difficult because he has to invent them in order to translate Greek that is perfectly simple: *rectum* is 'right,' i.e. perfect, absolute. Its opposite is *medium*, 'mean,' i.e. intermediate, falling short of the 'absolute' and occupying a middle ground; common; ordinary.

- *honestum* is 'morally right'; as a noun, 'moral goodness' (= *honestas*); its opposite is *turpe*, 'morally wrong.'
- *honestas* is 'moral rectitude, 'moral goodness'; 'morality'; its opposite *turpitude*, 'moral wrong,' 'immorality.'
- *honestus*, on the other hand, is always 'honourable'; and *honores* are always 'offices of honour.'

It is interesting to delve into the reflections offered by Aldo Scaglione (1925-2013), an Italian linguist, literary critic and historian. His study offers several insights in one of the sections of his book *Knights at Court* where he treats, what he calls, *A Ciceronian Connection*:

With its largely Stoic philosophical content, Cicero's *De officiis* was a major source of ethical speculation in the Middle Ages, its impact being enhanced by the important intermediary of St Ambrose's version of it. The term *officia* appeared in the titles of numerous derivations from St Ambrose, starting with St Isidore, whose *De ecclesiasticis officiis* turned the focus further toward Christian cult, down to the two treatises *De divinis officiis* by Rupert of Deutz (twelfth century) and Durand de Mende (thirteenth). It has been noted that Cicero's *officia*, which can be rendered as "civic duty," was somewhat of a mistranslation of his Stoic model, Panaitios's *Peri tou kathékontos*, where *kathêkon* meant "what is becoming" to social function, individual condition, and the status of citizen. Cicero developed his theme in a somewhat meandering way by embroidering around the cardinal virtues of justice, fortitude, temperance, and prudence, insisting repeatedly on the centrality, particularly for the public servant, of what he called *honestum*, a term which, in turn, can be rendered as "the moral good" or "the morally beautiful," corresponding closely to Greek *tò kalón*.

In book 3 Cicero argued at length that *honestum* and *utile* cannot be in conflict: when properly understood they practically coincide. Speaking of the apt use of speech (2.48), he pointed to the power of "comitas affabilitasque sermonis" in winning friendship and influence, with an interesting coupling of courtesy and affability as aspects of effective speech.

The qualities analysed in *De officiis* (especially 1.93–1.113) that bear more directly on the new curial ideal were those of urbanity (*urbanitas*), modesty, moderation, restraint, considerateness (*verecundia*), and self-control in the sense of subjection of passion to reason, all subsumed under the rubric of *temperantia*, the fourth cardinal virtue, like the other major quality of *decorum*, which also includes *reverentia* or reverence toward deserving men (116 f.). All these qualities, together with *affabilitas* and *iocunditas* or *hilaritas*, affability and good disposition, win friendship, and act both through decorous speech, which includes *facetia*, *iocus*, and *urbanitas* (Gr. *eiróneia*), and decorous bearing, which includes a beautiful appearance (*formositas*), grace (*ornatus*), and cleanliness in dress (*munditia*). Once again, we can think ahead to the German terms *schöne sîte* and *schöne zuht* as well as to Castiglione's *grazia*. Cicero ascribed this type of behaviour particularly to the statesman, whose public service it aids and enhances, thus making him a more valuable member of society and a more heroic citizen than the warrior with his military prowess (115 f.).

Scaglione underlines some key passages [from Cicero's *De officiis*] (1.27.93–94, 98, 107):

We must next speak of the one remaining part of *honestas*, wherein we find reverence (*verecundia*) and a certain ornament of life, temperance, modesty, and all restraint of the perturbations of the soul, together with a sense of measure in all things. Here is contained what Latins call *decorum*, the Greeks *prepon*. The force of this quality is such that it cannot be separated

from honesty: indeed, what is becoming is honest, and what is honest is becoming ... Similar is the nature of fortitude. For what is done with a manly and great soul appears worthy of a man and dignified, whereas whatever is contrary to this is morally ugly, hence unbecoming.

Hence poets will see what is becoming in the great variety of their characters, even the vicious ones; as to ourselves, whatever nature has given us in the form of constancy, moderation, temperance, and reverence, and since nature teaches us not to overlook the manner in which we act toward others, it is clear how wide the realm of dignified behaviour (*decorum*) is, to wit what is part and parcel of honesty as a whole, as well as what pertains to every single kind of virtue.

We all partake of reason and of that quality by which we are above the beasts, from which we derive all honesty and dignity (*honestum decorumque*) as well as the method of finding out what duty is.

Scaglione, Aldo. *Knights at Court: Courtliness, Chivalry, and Courtesy from Ottonian Germany to the Italian Renaissance*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, 52-53.

<https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft4j49p00c&chunk.id=d0e1629&toc.depth=1&toc.id=d0e1362&brand=ucpress>

4. Aquinas on honesty

This section dwells upon St Thomas Aquinas' presentation of the theme, as found in his *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae, q.145. In this *quaestio*, Aquinas treats: (1) the relation between the honest and the virtuous; (2) the relation of honesty to the beautiful; (3) the relation of honesty to the useful and to the pleasant; and (4) whether honesty is an aspect of temperance. The following affirmations by Aquinas are to be highlighted with regard to the topic of this reflection paper:

1. Someone/something may be said to be honest through being worthy of honour.
2. Honour is due to excellence: and the excellence of a human being is gauged chiefly according to his/her virtue.
3. Honesty refers to the same thing as virtue.
4. Someone/something is said to be honest, in so far as he/she/it has a certain beauty through being regulated by reason.
5. The honest coincides in the same subject with the useful and the pleasant, but it differs from them in aspect.
6. Someone/something honest is naturally pleasing to a human being.
7. Not all that is pleasing is honest, since a thing may be becoming according to the senses, but not according to reason. A pleasing thing of this kind is beside human reason which perfects his/her nature.
8. Even virtue itself, which is essentially honest, is referred to something else as its end, namely happiness. Accordingly, the honest, the useful, and the pleasant coincide in the one subject.
9. A thing is said to be honest, if it is desired for its own sake by the rational appetite, which tends to that which is in accordance with reason: while a thing is said to be pleasant if it is desired for its own sake by the sensitive appetite.
10. Honesty is a part of temperance (*as in Cicero and in Ambrose*).
11. Honesty is a kind of spiritual beauty. Now the disgraceful is opposed to the beautiful: and opposites are most manifest of one another.
12. Temperance is most significative of the good of reason to which it belongs in order to moderate and temper evil desires.
13. Temperance is accounted a subjective part of honesty taken in a wide sense.

5. Contemporary Reflections on Honesty and Some Preliminary Suggestions

This text, belowm from Richard M. Gula (*b.1947*) serves to highlight what has already been affirmed above. Gula, a Sulpician priest, is a contemporary Roman Catholic moral theologian:

“...[M]oral choices are fundamentally [a] matter of integrity. We say a person is of ‘strong’ character when the moral backbone is so strong that one’s sense of self plays a major role in explaining one’s behaviour. A person is of ‘weak’ character whose moral backbone is too vacillating. Such a person is easily swayed to conform to convention or is easily seduced by temptation without much of a struggle. ‘Good’ moral character shows itself in actions which affirm human well-being and promote goals beyond self-glory. Good moral character is the kind that produces what St Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit. [...]

“‘Bad’ character shows itself in destructive egotism. Our commitment to follow the way of Jesus and to turn to him as a model of the virtuous moral life leads us to say that a self-centred person, motivated by greed, committed to personal convenience, and drawn to others only as an opportunity for personal gain has a bad moral character.”

Richard M. Gula, *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry* (New York and Mahwah/NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), 34-35.

Alasdair MacIntyre (*b.1929*), a moral and political philosopher, and a convert to Catholicism, affirms that virtues do not exist in a vacuum but in a context which makes them intelligible. In our reflections on the theme of honesty, the context where honesty is to be embraced has to be addressed, namely, contemporary society, the family and education.

In the context of citizenship, honesty calls for an embrace of the rights, obligations and virtues that are embodied in the notion of ‘citizenship’. In the Maltese psyche, ‘citizenship’ is a bond that contends with what are best described as primordial loyalties, i.e., loyalties that are based on kinship, both blood kinship and tribal kinship. In Malta, tribal kinship has two overlapping dimensions – the parochial and the partisan. In the absence of a strong, uncontested ‘national’ identity, the bond of citizenship tends to take second place to the primordial bonds, a fact which accounts for many of the dysfunctional characteristics of Maltese public life – amoral familism, the weak rule of law, the clientelism, patronage, corruption and strident partisanship.

The Doctrinal Commission suggests the possibility of bringing some sociological analysis to its reflection on honest citizenship, as well as raising questions about what the Church in Malta can do to promote a new vision

of public life and the citizen's rights, duties and virtues. It is not for the Commission to undertake the task of *answering* these questions, but it can identify and dialogue with diocesan bodies that could be encouraged to engage with these issues.

When addressing the ecclesial community, any reflection on honesty is to be focused upon the absolute priority of God, and that knowledge of God (and being in relationship to God) demands an honest lifestyle. In the context of dialogue with a pluralist society, the reflection is to be anchored to the natural virtue of justice. A useful point of departure in such a dialogue is that every person protests when he/she is treated unjustly: this serves to hammer the point that dishonesty is an unacceptable attitude.

The person truly embraces honesty when he/she challenges him/herself about the transcendent. It is important that the individual is challenged to ask him/herself what ultimately and very simply makes him/her truly happy and at peace with him/herself, with others and with God.

6. Conclusions: Responsibility and Commitment, accompanied by Evangelisation and Catechesis

In conclusion, the Doctrinal Commission seeks to offer a working definition of honesty. This would be as follows, namely, that honesty is *a responsible commitment to the truth*.

- (i) *Responsibility* implies the role that awareness, ownership, intention and free-will play such that the agent – or the institution, taken collectively – is accountable and can offer a reasonable explanation when asked ‘why did you do that?’
- (ii) *Commitment* refers to the morally binding force that relates intentions, wills and internal or external actions, typical of virtue. In this way, honesty ceases to be a smoky ideal but brings in a cluster of virtues that are related to justice and temperance but that all need to be ruled by the intellectual virtue of prudence, as Aquinas would suggest.

It is right practical reason (*phronesis* for Aristotle, *prudentia* for Aquinas) which will determine the mean that is the virtue of honesty in every concrete situation when it comes to individuals.

However, the bishops also have a social and civic notion in mind when talking about honesty. This cannot come about unless a more principled approach is adopted which could offer normative guidance to institutions, and which usually acknowledges the existence of such principles of their codes of ethics, policies defining good conduct or good practice. In a utilitarian society, where results, efficiency and profit have become the supreme values, it could be challenging to adhere to a principled approach. Many business leaders today are only in it for their quick profit. In the past people may have been really concerned about making something worthwhile, about building a business, about looking after their workers. They would hope that their children would carry on the business after them and go on contributing to the well-being of the local community. Now the scenario has changed with urgency. Entrepreneurs can close a factory in one town and open another one a hundred miles away. As long as they get their bonus and share options, they don’t worry about anything else.

An example will help illustrate such vices against honesty. When one of Britain’s largest construction companies, Carillion went into liquidation in January 2019 with debts of some GBP 7 billion, more than 2,000 lost their jobs, 30,000 suppliers faced massive financial losses and taxpayers faced costs of GBP 150 million. The parliamentary report was devastating:

Carillion’s rise and spectacular fall was a story of recklessness, *hubris* and greed. Its business model was a relentless dash for cash, driven by acquisitions, rising debt, expansion into new markets and exploitation of suppliers. It presented accounts that misrepresented the reality the

business, and increased its dividend every year, come what may. Long term obligations, such as adequately funding its pension schemes, were treated with contempt. Even as the company very publicly began to unravel, the board was concerned with increasing and protecting generous bonuses. (Report on Carillion, Work and Pensions Committee, UK Parliament, 16th May 2018)

Finally, there are other important considerations in addressing the People of God about the value of honesty, from the point of view of evangelisation and lifelong catechesis:

- (a) an authentic and challenging regular encounter with the Word of God, leading to personal and communal discernment;
- (b) the intextricable relationship between sacramental orthodoxy and sacramental orthopraxis (as illustrated, e.g. in Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, 2007, par. 83);
- (c) catechesis with an emphasis on honesty in these and other areas: family life, the political and economic spheres, the environment, social life, the administration of justice. This raises questions about the value of catechesis, as well as the appropriateness of current catechetical approaches, which are largely based on preparing children for the sacraments of communion and confirmation and, perhaps, have a narrowly doctrinal or liturgical focus.

Approved by the Doctrinal Commission
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