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IS THE GAIN OF THE FEW RISING ABOVE THE COMMON GOOD?

The Church Environment Commission (KA) while noting the eagerness with which a sector of the Maltese society is currently promoting a new trend of constructing high rise buildings, and having witnessed the complaints and reactions put forward by a considerable number of Maltese residents following the granting of permits in this respect in Mriehel and Sliema, feels that there is still a number of questions to be answered and doubts to be cleared about these projects and their impact on the quality of life of Maltese citizens. The KA feels that the common good is not receiving the priority it deserves.

In December 2015, having reflected on Pope Francis' encyclical **Laudato Si'**, the KA had presented a set of proposals about development and protection of the environment. Amongst other recommendations, the KA had stated: "***Many times when environmental organisations or individuals who have at heart the conservation of the environmental resources for future generations and speak out against an unsustainable project, such organisations and individuals are accused of trying to stop "progress". The challenges that are presented by such NGOs and individuals relate to the urgent need to develop new ideas and harness creativity so that we achieve development with the least use of land.***"

In this sense, the KA feels that the criticism posed by whoever took the proponents of these projects to task is justified, since before taking a final decision on any project, especially when one is dealing with megaprojects such as the ones in question, the effects on the environs are to be meticulously considered in every related aspect. In this case one has to consider the consequences on an area much larger than the surrounding streets, indeed reaching far beyond the locality of the building itself, possibly involving other adjoining localities, with adverse effects on traffic being felt as far as kilometres away. Moreover the increase in population concentration and the relative implications in any aspect of everyday life cannot be overlooked. The argument that building upwards is the only alternative in place if we cannot build outwards, would only hold water if (i) all existing buildings in our islands are being effectively utilized, (ii) no building activity is in fact being carried out beyond development zones, and (iii) the standard of living in our islands will definitely improve thanks to these high rise buildings.

Consequently, the KA feels justified in asking: Are these buildings really needed? If so, do we really need to go so high? Have we forgotten the high number of vacant dwellings in our islands? Moreover one has to be very cautious when drawing comparisons with other countries or even cities. Through experience we all know that everything comes at a price! Given the diversity of communities in different countries on the anthropological, geographical and other levels, it would be absurd to believe that a success story abroad will work equally well in the context of our islands. In this respect we would do well to take heed of Pope Francis' warning: *The time has come to pay renewed attention to*

reality and the limits it imposes; this in turn is the condition for a more sound and fruitful development of individuals and society. (Laudato Si' Par. 116).

Another proposal put forward by the KA in December was: ***“It is not rare for applicants for development permits to present a wholly unacceptable project which goes counter to various planning policies only to be later downsized so as to give the impression that huge improvements have been made. Although the final proposal would be very different from the first one, it would still be unacceptable under planning policies. However, a project would still be approved due to the psychological game whereby the first proposal would have shocked a lot so that the second proposal becomes “acceptable”. This is not the “innovation” we should be aspiring to.”***

The KA feels that the Environment and Resources Authority (ERA) led itself to be taken in the developers' confidence game. The ERA has been quoted as saying that it would not be appealing the decision of approval of the projects, since measures had been taken to mitigate the negative impact of the development. Moreover it was said that since it did not bring forward any objections at the preliminary stage, it would not be objecting later. Notwithstanding all this, the project goes beyond reasonable limits. The KA consequently feels that the ERA should appeal against the decision of the Planning Authority to safeguard the quality of life of all.

High rise building does not only concern the environment. It may also compromise the fiscal policy of the country. In its December 2015 proposals, the KA had ***“invited the Government to fund a long overdue and truly national study on the demand and supply of Maltese properties, and the fiscal and economic environment that has a bearing on them. The terms of reference for such study should be issued for public consultation and enjoy the widest agreement possible by all stakeholders. Such a study affects the whole nation and should be treated as such, and, when finalised, should be published entirely. Its implications for planning purposes, the safeguarding of the environment and affordable housing are widespread. This study, when completed, should be updated regularly and be an important source for the Strategic Plan for Environment and Development and the Local Plans. Otherwise, decisions related to the built environment are not going to be informed as they are expected to be especially in the case of a densely-populated country like ours.”***

In other words, if a considerable number of apartments or offices forming part of the high-rise buildings remain unsold or vacant, the promoters of these large projects may eventually force the government to adopt measures (fiscal or otherwise) to protect the developers from financial problems. Such measures may have an adverse effect on the property market or, indeed, on the economy of the whole country. Therefore the KA reiterates the urgent need for a national study on the property market.

The KA sincerely appeals to whoever is responsible for taking decisions promoting such projects to reflect and rethink a more sensible way forward. Let us all remember that our islands are, quite simply, our common home, endowed with an identity, a culture, and a character which our forefathers have worked tirelessly to achieve. We would do well to give heed to the words of Pope Francis in the encyclical quoted above: *Rather, there is a need to incorporate the history, culture and architecture of each place, thus preserving its original identity. (Laudato Si' Par. 143)*

Finally, the KA is pleased to note the statement made by the Sliema Parish Priests about the issue. Such an initiative will hopefully be an inspiration to other groups / parishes who have at heart the good of their communities. May they never refrain from speaking out in the name of those whose voice is seldom heard in quarters where decisions related to their quality of life are often taken.

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