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TIMES OF MALTA

The opportunity for change

As the last of the pandemic-imposed measures are about to be lifted, can one say that the experience of the last three months has led individuals and communities to make long-term and sustainable behavioural change? Have we seen evidence of such a transformation in Malta?

For example, with many people adapting to work from home, there was a reduction in time spent travelling and a consequent improvement in air quality and environmental conditions.

On an individual level, many would perhaps have recognised the importance of positive health behaviours, such as eating healthily, sleeping well and regular exercise.

On the other side of the coin, many families are now facing the harsh reality of anxiety, illness and unemployment. Early data reveals that the ongoing mental health impact of these factors is substantial, as are financial hardships and uncertainty over future job prospects.

As the authorities push forward with a hard reopening of services, are the benefits gleaned from the pandemic period set to fade? And is the drive towards renewed “normalcy” threatening to close the door on the positive change that might have come from the enhanced awareness of societal inequalities?

Behind both individual and communal well-being lies a strong sense of purpose, leading us towards growth in the aftermath of traumatic events. The question not being asked is whether our national narrative — the ways we show resilience and safeguard the vulnerable — is changing as a result of the pandemic.

Although the public health response to the need for short-term containment of COVID-19 appears to have been generally successful, transitioning from short-term solutions to long-term change is conspicuous by its absence. As the repercussions of the pandemic

continue to echo throughout Maltese communities, there is added urgency to engage in introspective dialogue.

The conversations taking place in other European countries, including the benefits of a four-day working week and environmental policies that restrict vehicle use and promote urban greening, are only just percolating to the surface of Malta's priorities.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we are capable of restraining our need to shop excessively, to travel at a whim and to take for granted the shared spaces that we inhabit with vulnerable members of society.

There is evidence that society can make behavioural changes following a crisis, however, without the support of national authorities, such change can only happen with consistent grassroots pressure. Civil society is already coming to the fore, identifying massive social and environmental concerns

that are impossible for any individual to fix alone.

Positive change by individuals will likely be temporary, if not reinforced by policy or regulation. Industry and government have a massive responsibility to promote positive change, and yet, so far, these have been the big offenders when it comes to a wholesale return to our broken sense of normalcy, in which the individual is a cog in the economic machine.

A first step would be to enable the well-being of all citizens by quashing threats such as gross inequality, xenophobia and misinformation in the aftermath of the pandemic. If we fail to do this, we will ultimately be neglecting opportunities for positive change and this exceptional period in the history of Malta, and humanity at large, will have been a missed opportunity.

Following the crisis, Malta must not let the opportunity for deep-rooted change slip out of reach.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Is there hell?

I have been tempted many a time to challenge some of Martin Scicluna's scribblings, especially when he professes on matters well-ingrained in scripture and the Catholic Church's teachings. So far I have left it to others more competent than myself to refute his assertions, for example, his claim that abortion is a matter of one's conscience, while he hardly gave any importance to the Sixth Commandment: “Though shalt not kill”.

On the matter of the existence of hell, I decided to venture forth to put in this my humble input following Scicluna's article (“Rethinking heaven and hell”, June 10). Without going into the question of what exactly constitutes hell (as Scripture is not all that clear on whatever shape or form God designed for it, although there is reference to “hell”, “darkness”, a place where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth”, etc.), I merely draw attention to what Jesus himself said.

In all these instances I am quoting from the Gospel according to St Matthew: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather be afraid of God, who can destroy both body and soul in hell” (10:28); “Then shall he say unto them on the left hand: Depart from me, ye cursed into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels...” (25:41); “the children of the kingdom shall be cast into utter darkness; where



A depiction of hell and damnation in a cathedral dome painting in Florence, Italy. Brunelleschi's dome was painted by Giorgio Vasari and Federico Zuccari. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (8:12).

Moreover, Scicluna conveniently attributes to Pope Francis something he never said, namely that hell doesn't exist. This is a quotation from an article that appeared some time ago in Italy's daily *La Repubblica* (in reference to a private meeting between the Pope and Eugenio Scalfari) and which was firmly denied by the Vatican.

Indeed, as written in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (para. 1033): “To die

in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from Him for ever by our free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called hell.” Also, as found in paragraph 1037: “God predestines no one to go to hell.”

Enough has been said as far as I'm concerned as a layman. I leave it to theologians and others more erudite than me to point Scicluna in the right direction. ANTHONY CURMI — St Julian's

Eschatological issues

Having read Martin Scicluna's comment in the *Times of Malta* (“Rethinking heaven and hell”, June 10), I suggest that Scicluna and the readers of this newspaper find time to consult the two latest detailed documents by the Holy See on the mentioned topics and related eschatological themes: “Some Current Questions in Eschatology” (1992) and “The Hope of Salvation for Infants who Die without Being Baptised” (2007). Both are easily accessible from the Vatican website.

Going through these insightful documents, most of the ambiguities raised by Scicluna will be duly clarified.

Towards the end of his article, Scicluna quotes Pope Francis. What Scicluna fails to state is that those words on hell are taken from an informal interview by Eugenio Scalfari with Pope Francis, appearing in *La Repubblica* in March 2018.

The content of what Francis, or for that matter, any other pope states in an interview, has never had the status of Church Magisterium.

Way back in 2018, the Vatican press office had issued a statement affirming that no quotation in the *La Repubblica* article can “be considered as a faithful transcription of the words of the Holy Father”.

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