

**Thirtieth Sunday  
of the year  
~~Blind faith~~**

THE JOURNEY is almost over. Jesus is about 25 km from Jerusalem, having reached the garden-city of Jericho. It is here that many of the priests and Levites as well as the well-heeled of the metropolis have their villas.

The road through the city is filled with pilgrims en route for the Passover and those preparing to leave for the celebrations in the Temple. The streets are lined with opportunist beggars and those who for various reasons are unable to join the caravans.

As the young Galilean rabbi makes slow progress, teaching as he walks, his voice is drowned out on the fringes of the procession by one who cries: "Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me." How could they hear what the master was saying? He must hold his peace.

But once he has made sure, though the darkness of his blindness, that in the passing crowd there is one who can restore his sight, no one is going to make him keep quiet. "He only shouted all the louder. 'Son of David, have pity on me!'"

This time Jesus himself heard him. "Call him here." Abandoning his cloak laid out to collect what little the pilgrims might throw in his direction, he jumped up and went to Jesus. "What do you want me to do for you?" Of course Jesus knew, but he was looking for that expression of faith that assured his co-operation. "Master, let me see again."

"Go, your faith has saved you." The blind beggar's sight was restored immediately, but he did not "Go", but Mark tells us, "he followed Jesus along the road."

This is Jesus' last miracle of healing, bringing to a conclusion a section of Mark's Gospel that began in the north with the gradual cure of another blind man who, when healed, was bound by Jesus to silence.

The cure of the blind son of Timaeus, the only one cured by Jesus to be named, is remarkable in many ways. Not only is the miracle performed in the glaring publicity of the crowds, but it is preceded by an acknowledgement, even if unwittingly pronounced, of the messianic identity of Jesus: "Son of David, have pity on me!"

Bartimaeus is the only individual other than Peter and Satan to recognise the mission of Jesus. And yet the Master has spent the whole of his journey from the north trying to convince his closest followers of this very fact.

Bartimaeus did not hesitate to abandon his past with his cloak to follow Jesus whatever fate awaited him. Not for him the reluctant, where-eise-can-we-go discipleship of the Apostles who until recently were still arguing about and begging for the best places in the Kingdom.

Mark ends the "journey" section of his Gospel by asking his readers to reflect on the blindness of Jesus's closest followers. Here is one who with Faith immediately recognises the Son of David, and without precondition leaves all to follow the one who has offered him a new life.

Jesus has pleaded for weeks with his disciples that they see and understand that to walk with him is to accept him on his own terms. Calvary and Easter included. He came to serve and not to be served, not to be the 'first' but the 'slave of all'. If only the Apostles could be cured of their blindness as quickly! Then they could truly 'follow' him.

Laurence Essery, SDB

# The Synod: a unique experience for the Church in Malta

by Rev. Dr Hector Scerri

ON WEDNESDAY the Church in Malta meets at the Sports Pavilion at Kordin to celebrate the completion (or nearly so) of the first phase of the Diocesan Synod which officially started on September 29, 1999.

Much work has taken place since then. Parishes have been mobilised, and thousands of volunteers engaged in the capillary consultation process. Parish assemblies have been held over the last weeks to present the information obtained from the questionnaires distributed to every household in Malta. Many other consultation meetings have been held during the first phase of the Synod with various bodies and organisations.

So, things have really been moving. And gathering momentum. The members of the Church in Malta have been consistently reminded that the Church is a communion. The importance of communitarian planning and discernment have been mentioned now and again. In his homily, a month ago, on the 26th anniversary of his episcopal ordination, Archbishop Merojecca reiterated the main tenets of the synod experience.

What does ecclesial discernment entail as we live this unique experience? The diocese - assembled together: bishops, priests and laity from all walks of life - seeks to understand what the Holy Spirit is prompting in the particular situation which we are living, as well as to answer to the signs of the times which are being revealed. This makes the synod an experience of renewal for the local Church: the Church examines itself, eval-

uates its lifestyle, and seeks to renew its members and its structures of communion, thus endeavouring to live the Gospel in the world today.

It is an experience which strengthens the Church in its fidelity to Christ and to man. Therefore, the diocesan synod is not only an opportunity to improve structures of communion, or to enhance collaboration, or to plan sensibly for the future. It is, above all, an answer to the call to be faithful to the Lord and to man, while sincerely seeking the guidance of his Holy Spirit, as a community of faith, hope and love.

The Synod is a celebration of what it means to be a Church. The actual synodal experience enables the Christian to feel that he or she is actually involved in the building of the edifice of the Church, a Church which is extrovert, looking out and actively engaged in the society where it lives. It means being the salt of the earth, the light of the world and the leaven in the dough. It means being a Church in dialogue.

Perhaps, the most positive result of the diocesan pastoral synod is the creation and promotion of a mentality of synodality, and that the Church may be actively committed to such an attitude at all levels, in the life and witness of its members.

The actual celebration of the synod - whatever its duration may be - is just the beginning of a journey together. I recall the prophetic words penned by Bishop Alberto Ablondi, in 1997, in the Final Document of the Fourth Synod of his diocese, Livorno: "Il sinodo deve essere una intonazione che, se non fosse seguita dal canto, resterebbe muta e senza senso" (The synod has to be like the initial intonation by a musical conduc-

## A CHRISTIAN OUTLOOK

tor which unless followed by the singing of a hymn remains mute and meaningless). Yes, the journey together continues in earnest.

Being open and attentive to what the Holy Spirit has to say to our Church in Malta is the principal richness which is being experienced in the synod event. Thus, the Synod may be the *kairos* through which the Spirit may inject yet another dose of freshness in the life of our believing community.

With this in mind, we can perhaps start to appreciate the relevance of a synod which is well planned (as ours has been, and meticulously so!), and celebrated with a true ecclesial spirit. It has indeed been a courageous decision on the part of the Archbishop and the local Church.

It offers a unique recommitment to renewal, and challenges passivity and lethargy. It is indeed a prophetic moment in the life of our Church at the threshold of the third millennium. It is up to each one of us to proceed together in the direction set. Let us sail into deeper waters. There, too, we will cast our nets... at the Lord's command.

### Church and child abuse

THE MEDIA in many countries tend to give the impression that priests are worse offenders in the area of child abuse than other professions or social groups. There are people who, as a result, try to correlate this situation with celibacy.

These accusations are totally off the mark. Statistics have proved over and over again the falsity of these accusations. Figures published recently by the Catholic Media Office in London show that from 1995 to 1999, 21 Catholic priests in England and Wales were convicted of sexual offences against children. The two countries have more than 5,600 Catholic priests!

The figures also referred to research by the British government showing that in over 70 per cent of cases of child sexual abuse, the abuser was the father, stepfather or other relative of the child.

Nevertheless, the Catholic Church in several countries including Malta has drawn up guidelines to manage any accusations made in this respect. Recently the bishops of England and Wales have announced a review of their measures to protect children from sexual abuse.

An independent group will examine and review arrangements made for child protection and the prevention of abuse within the Catholic Church in England and Wales, and will make recommendations to the bishops' conference.

Archbishop Cormac Murphy-O'Connor of Westminster announced the move last month. The group includes two senior judges, a top police officer and a consultant psychiatrist. Lord Nolan of Brasted, a former high court judge, will chair it. Other group members include social work and child protection experts.

The Church officials on the review body are Bishop Peter Smith of East Anglia, chairman of the bishops' Department of Christian Responsibility and Citizenship, and Mr Jack Kennedy, child protection co-ordinator for the Archdiocese of Liverpool.

Archbishop Murphy-O'Connor said the purpose of the review was to ensure that the mistakes made in the past were not repeated in the future.

"I apologise very sincerely from my heart for any suffering that has been caused by child abuse by a priest or religious or Church worker," the archbishop said. "That's

why I've launched the review, and I want to make sure that mistakes that were made in the past will never be repeated."

In his September 12 BBC interview, the archbishop conceded that the Church's child protection procedures had, in the past, been inadequate.

In 1994 the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales published a report, "Child Abuse: Pastoral and Procedural Guidelines". It emphasised that the welfare of children was paramount and that the Church must work closely with child protection teams, statutory authorities and other professionals.

In September 1996 the bishops published another report, "Healing the Wound of Child Sexual Abuse: A Church Response", stressing the importance for everyone in the Church to "appreciate the depth of pain in the lives of those who suffer, listen carefully to those who are victims - and survivors, and acknowledge their prophetic voice in the Church; promote open dialogue about child sexual abuse in the Church; activate pastoral resources".

As noted above, the Church in Malta has published its own guidelines and has its own structures to try to manage such horrible abuses. A committee headed by a retired judge receives complaints and investigates them in a very serious way.

The responsible committee has (we can remember at least one such occasion), through its PRO, published the number of cases that were referred to the committee. The published figures prove the point made by the Catholic Media Office of the bishops of England and Wales.

When the number of abuses are compared to the number of priests or persons in religious life, one immediately concludes that accusations and allegations of such abuses have been inflated and that an unfair perception has been created vis-à-vis persons living a consecrated life.

This is in no way an apology for such abuses. On the contrary, we wholeheartedly share the concern shown by the Church in many countries and encourage anyone who knows anything about such abuses to come forward and make this information available to the committee set up by the Church to handle such cases.

### The GWU and the cuckoo

OCTOBER 20 will perhaps be remembered as a day when all sectors in Malta were in a happy mood. And thank the Good Lord for that! That was the day when the General Workers' Union ordered workers not to report for work for a couple of hours so as to present a petition about the budget measures to the Prime Minister in Valletta. The Malta Labour Party encouraged its supporters to participate in the protest demonstration.

What happened last Friday week can now be evaluated objectively by all the community. Government indeed lost no time to give the official figures of the relatively few public sector workers who obeyed the GWU directives. The GWU in its turn said they were happy with the turnout in Valletta. All commercial enterprises were also happy as their work went on as usual. None of these, it seems, suffered any losses financially since very few followed the directives of the GWU.

This must be a propitious time for the GWU bosses to reflect in depth. They have to leave behind their political, hidden - or not so hidden - agenda. Today there's a common consensus that the GWU plays the role of the cuckoo with the government of the day. When the MLP was in power the GWU was repeatedly accused of passing through a prolonged phase of lethargy and of kowtowing to the socialist administration.

Now that there is a Nationalist administration, the GWU comes out of its hibernating place in the clock and again tells Castille "Cuckoo, cuckoo, I'm here again".

This is indeed a good time to work hand in hand with all other social parties, where no one leads or follows, but where all lead and all follow. The gross blunder of the politically-minded bosses of the GWU is that they think they should dictate laws to all. They find it so convenient to forget their many blunders of the past - even very recent ones - and easily play the role of the wounded lamb.

These days the bosses of the GWU have launched a vitriolic attack against the UHM, which obviously brought the disapproval of the CMTU. This attitude of the GWU should take them back at least 16 years for a sober examination of conscience.

One still remembers how sad it was then to read the following statement about the GWU's performance in connection with the one-day sympathy general strike called by CMTU in the report by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights:

"The CMTU called a one-day strike

on October 10, 1984, in sympathy with the Malta Union of Teachers and in particular against the government's lock-out of teachers. The GWU advised its members to ignore the call, and subsequently GWU shop stewards insisted that the management in several firms take disciplinary action against workers who went on strike in response to the CMTU directive." Of course, the GWU then was still statutorily fused with the Malta Labour Party.

Indeed the past should always be the teacher of the present, as much as the present should lead to the future. This is a God-sent time for the GWU's bosses to honourably play their role as a social partner. Those bosses who prefer party politics might as well tender their resignation and join the political party. Now is the time for the GWU to build bridges with the other social partners and Government, and not to build walls. The cuckoo can teach them a lesson.

### TeleSHAMEism

NET TV has been plagued with ratings problems from its very beginning. We consider this to be very unfortunate because the station on several occasions produces programmes worthy of note, appreciation and support. It has also produced award-winning programmes.

We agree that it is a small consolation to produce high-level programmes which are not popular at all. A television station needs popular programmes to be able to self-advertise space. Without such money the station goes off the air.

On the other hand we do not believe that a station should try and win the ratings war at all costs. It seems that Net TV has given in to this temptation. It seems that it is ready to stoop to all time-lags to try and boost its popularity.

Last Thursday's edition of *Television*, Net TV's flagship talk show, was a desperate attempt in this direction. It was an exercise in extreme bad taste thinly veiled as a discussion about sexuality.

In our opinion there was no redeeming factor. It was a pity that a number of respectable people associated themselves with this programme through their participation. It was very disappointing that these persons did not protest vehemently at what was happening around them and at what was shown on our screens.

We believe that such programmes will not increase the audience of Net TV but will only bring on the station the scorn and disgust of many.