

# Resilience in a Troubled World

Proceedings of the Malta International Theological Conference III



**JOHN ANTHONY BERRY**  
EDITOR

# **Resilience in a Troubled World**

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III

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# Opening Speech

Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca  
President of the Republic of Malta<sup>1</sup>

Let me begin by welcoming our international guests to the Maltese Islands, and in particular this evening's keynote speaker, Professor Tomáš Halík. Let me also take this opportunity to commend Professor John Anthony Berry and his colleagues at the Faculty of Theology, for facilitating this important conference.

St John's Co-Cathedral is an ideal venue to give a start to this conference. Caravaggio's masterpiece, located in this oratory, is an image of devotion and talent, but most importantly, I believe that it is an image of resilience. Caravaggio's ability to produce such overwhelming beauty, in spite of his deeply troubled life, is evidence of the strength of his resilience. In fact, he was in prison when this painting was unveiled in this room, for the first time. Caravaggio was able to overcome the odds, and to pursue his powerful artistic vision, which still has so much to say to us, hundreds of years later.

I think it is fair to say that the entire heritage of Malta is a story of resilience, during the many periods of oppression and hardship, which have taken place during our history. The people of our Maltese Islands did not break under the pressure of such challenges. The Maltese

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<sup>1</sup> Marie Louise Coleiro Preca gave her opening speech on 7 November 2018 while she was in office as President of the Republic of Malta. She held the presidency from 4 April 2014 to 4 April 2019.

have always found a way to rise. We, as a nation, continue to give our contribution to the prosperity and peace of our country and our Euro-Mediterranean Region, and also, across the world. The Maltese are also renowned for their solidarity, with one another and with the other members of our human family. For this reason, I believe that the Maltese are an example of resilience.

Resilience is an essential value. It has the power to transform us and to push us, to achieve the greatest good for ourselves and our societies. This is what Romano Guardini, Karl Barth, and Thomas Merton all explored, in their own unique ways, in so much of their writings. As you commemorate the fiftieth anniversary since the death of these three great theologians, I am sure that you will examine the ways in which resilience can be enhanced and promoted, for the benefit of our communities and our world, today.

All of us are aware that we are at a challenging time in the history of our planet. So many countries and communities are experiencing political tensions, social unrests, violent conflicts, and environmental disruptions. Therefore, I believe that resilience has never been more important. In fact, the research being done in the area of resilience, especially in the psycho-social sciences, has a lot to teach us, about how the value of resilience can be fruitfully applied to philosophical and spiritual studies.

Research tells us that resilience increases a person's ability to cope with difficulty and adversity; to endure and even to flourish under hardships; and to turn a negative situation into a source of positivity. Studies about resilience from various sources, including the Resilience Research Centre in Canada, pinpoint the role of optimism, generosity, and a strong level of self-awareness, as catalysts for resilient behaviour.

Research about resilience also shows us that when we harness our ability to confront our problems and to face new experiences, with a sense of hope and courage, then we are further able to achieve our aspirations more effectively. Such positive outcomes are not only important on an individual level, but must also be applied to our communities and societies. It is essential that our peoples are given the necessary tools to grow stronger, and to be more able to withstand the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

As scholars, working in the fields of spirituality and philosophy, you are perfectly placed to give us a "bird's eye view" of these topics. I am

## Opening Speech

convinced that you are able to shed new light on potential strategies, to build resilience in our communities, in our countries, and within the international community. I believe that our traditions of faith have an essential contribution to make, to encourage these endeavours. In fact, we need to encourage more respectful dialogue among diverse faith traditions. Such a respectful dialogue, between these traditions and the secular society, will make sure that important knowledge about resilience is being shared and appropriately applied.

As participants in this conference, and in your respective roles as academics and researchers, you have the ability to guide the necessary dialogue between resilience and religion, in a positive and enriching approach. Furthermore, I augur that your deliberations will have practical benefits, to assist our authorities and policymakers, to ensure that resilience is factored in our policies, to build stronger, more stable, and more respectful societies.

On concluding, let me take this opportunity to remind you of some of the inspiring words, from Thomas Merton. Although this holy man died fifty years ago, I am convinced that his teachings are still as vital and important as ever. He said:

Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. You gradually struggle less and less for an idea, and more for specific people. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.<sup>1</sup>

With these words, Merton reminds us that our resilience is not measured by our successes, nor, indeed, by our failures. Resilience is measured by our strength of character, especially the ways in which we form and maintain respectful, loving connections with the people around us. I believe that such relationships, which are built on love and which promote our inner sense of courageous resilience, are what our world needs now, so much more than ever before.

Thank you for your attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, in a letter to Jim Forest dated February 21, 1966, reproduced in *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters by Thomas Merton*, ed. William H. Shannon (London: Harcourt, 1993).