



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

The Church in 'r/evolution' mode

After the mini coup d'état that partially led, definitely speeded-up, the retirement of now Archbishop Emeritus Pawlu Cremona, the local Church had to wait for five months of deliberation before getting its Archbishop. Now that all is in place, ingress sorted out, photo sessions done, ceremonies complete, the hard work kicks in.

predict it won't be a trouble-free episcopate for Scicluna considering the current state of affairs of the Church in Malta, which to put it placidly is a jumble.

Even though he is of a strong character and enjoys a rigorous personality, it will not be straightforward for the cheery Archbishop Scicluna to assert himself. The Curia is outmoded and unwieldy and getting the heart of the Church operational is one gargantuan task.

There is also an air of wary watchfulness from the citizens and faithful.

Notwithstanding, the 'installation' was highly publicised by the media, from what I gather the crowds welcoming him to this new role weren't that convincing, definitely incomparable with the masses that thronged the streets in Valletta and the events that followed in Cremona's investiture. The air of festa was incomparable. The Catholics and non-Catholics in Malta at the time were in an upbeat mood.

The reasons for Cremona's affirmative anticipation could have been many and varied; possibly because he was an unknown quantity, perhaps his delightful character, probably because he came after a long episcopate, conceivably because Cremona's team were a bit more media savvy - whatever the motives, Cremona's appointment excited the Maltese.

But as they say, let bygones be bygones. Now 'we' have Scicluna in Office and no time for nostalgia.

Most had thought that after Cremona's semi-coerced retirement it would have been an automatic choice for then Bishop Scicluna to slip into the role, being the one brought over from Rome to save the day some two years ago as Auxiliary Bishop. However, it took almost six months for the Roman Curia to be persuaded he was the right man for the job. The reasons for this hold-up, nobody knows!

Back to Archbishop Scicluna. Unsurprisingly, like every new leader appointed to a high post, he reiterates that he wants to be close to the people. Fair enough. I do tend to agree that leaders and institutions need to be close to the people. But let's face it, the Church has never really been that far away. The Church through its organisations, parishes, M.U.S.E.U.M., catechism, NGOs, is very much involved in people's lives. I think what the Church needs to do is to change tack. Rather than

taking a role of having to teach us and tell us what to do at every stage of our lives, the Church has to realise that it is no longer the country's legitimate moral guardian. People are very well able to come to terms with what

is right and wrong and what we need is a completely different Church. If I may, I would like to share a couple of pointers in this regard, definitely not exhaustive:

Society needs a Church that reasserts its social role in the community.

The fact that there is a shortage of nuns and priests and most of the 'social' services that were provided by the Church are either partially or completely being taken over by the state leaves the Church bare and with no mission to claim its own.

Nuns and priests, in the main, were always very much able to see through the social agenda much better than paid professionals because of their commitment to the cause, their dedication and their resolve. While it is understandable that the cost of providing services for children, the elderly, persons with disability and those struggling with addictions are pricey, yet the Church needs to find a way to reclaim these welfare services and hit upon creative new ways and financial models that will allow it to regain jurisdiction of this agenda.

The parishes are in a mess.

Most parishes are seeing a steady decline in the involvement of the faithful. For example, people are less and less interested in having to sit through Mass, 45 minutes of boring prayers, rituals and sermons topped up with a 10-minute finger-pointing sermon. Except for the festa (which I will come to later) there is hardly any engagement from the community. The rituals and the symbols are no longer appealing. The Church needs to rid itself of pedantic priests, and here I'm not just referring to the old ones. Liturgy needs to be presented in a modern way and use of language should be popularised. Let's face it, going to Church has become dreary and mind-numbing. It lacks colour, excitement and appeal. Wakey wakey! Young people are no longer interested in this set-up. The sermons and rituals I personally have to endure week-in week-out leave little hope that young people can be enticed. Within 10-15 years' time our Churches will be just like the ones in London, Paris and Rome - big magnificent temples filled with emptiness. Some of the parish priests are so utterly incompetent and outright ignorant and unapproachable, it is hard to fathom. I would suggest closing down a number of parishes to converge resources and really involve the laity (men and women) not to simply fill in the gaps but to produce the goods. A general overhaul of the clergy training at the Seminary is called for.

This is a mammoth challenge Scicluna has on his hands.

Most of the priests and religious really need to descend from Cloud 9 and get engaged. It seems that being a priest has merely turned into simply saying Mass on a Sunday. I expect the priest and the religious not to drill us in the Commandments and the do's and don'ts but to accompany the community, to be hitting the pubs, clubs, work places, schools, community events, getting involved in sports, visiting families, amongst other things.

Contrary to this, in these last years I've noticed that every priest and every religious who has tried to connect was in some way or other ostracised, was made to stand down, was asked to lie low. My religious model is Sr Michaela Paris and her colleagues who participated in this year's Malta Eurovision Song Contest. That was evangelisation, sharing a positive message via music. Brilliant!

The Church schools need to be revamped.

They were the cornerstone, the flagship of the Church but they seem to be losing their spark and their ethos. They have stopped evolving and are now in a conundrum, caught between a modern world and an old Church. Obviously this does not apply to every Church school, but most.

Some heads of school are really trying to leave an impact. But by and large, the Church school culture is fading. They were, I feel, an important source of formation not in terms of stringent religious value implantation but in other qualities ranging from leadership to inducing a sense of social justice. Church schools in most cases seem to be losing their punch even because they haven't really upgraded when it comes to the infrastructure and the pedagogical techniques. They are lagging behind the state and independent schools big-time. They were once the best schools, now the shoddier ones.

Apart from that, teaching religion has to stop and a parallel subject matter re-thought.

The way we try to shove Moses, Abraham and St Paul down kids' throats is backfiring. Religion makes sense when it serves as a beacon and a point for reference. Related to this, even though I am deeply appreciative of the work done by the people at the M.U.S.E.U.M. and the catechists, but the tone and method being applied is no longer compelling but boring and droning! It is such an opportunity to have so many children regularly going to these evening lessons - we should be teaching them to live together, work together, share ideas, be innovative, find solutions to problems - isn't that religion, isn't that being a Christian?

One other big issue that Archbishop Scicluna needs to untangle is the sex abuse question.

A number of unresolved pending cases need to be resolved.

There is a need for ongoing screening of priests and religious, closer supervision, involvement of professionals to ensure continuing assessment and taking bolder decisions. If there is an area I am pretty sure Archbishop Scicluna will be taking in his stride is this matter. He needs to sort out these issues and create an airtight system that flags deranged and unhinged religious, priests and laypersons working within the Church structures. The damage the Church has had to endure because of the sex scandals and the consequent 'resting on their laurels' has perpetuated a problem of mega proportions.

A final issue I would like to mention is the feasts celebrating the patron saints.

These last months, I have been working on a piece of research where I sought to understand the relevance of feasts especially for young people. The truth is that one of the questions that surfaced was that the festa is a perfect example where the Church and the community have drifted apart. How sad. Whilst I am no festa aficionado I still feel for the thousands of people who are passionate for this event and who seem to get the vibe that the Church is a completely separate issue from the external celebrations. If this is not an opportunity where the Church can reach out, I really don't know what is! We've had, in the past, high-ranking priests in the Curia that seemed to be keen on dismantling the festa, not patching up, not creating bridges but burning them. Scicluna, I believe, will tackle the hitch in a different way. The festa ta' barra and the festa ta' għewwa have to converge once again.

In conclusion, I believe that one of the solutions to the puzzle called 'the Church' is that the Church goes back to basics, drifts away from the Parishes and seeps into the community. Archbishop Scicluna should adapt the Latin American notion of 'base communities' whereby faith becomes a group and community experience, where people learn to live together, to share their difficulties and challenges and the Church is there to provide the support.

Scicluna's tenure needs to see an evolution in a number of matters.

At times, the smiling Archbishop might be called to do a revolution. He has the ability, the cleverness, the shrewdness and the proficiency - but will he get it done? Hope is the last to die!