



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

A comatose Church

The past few weeks should have been the moment the Church re-groups and in a way celebrates its most important message, that of Jesus turning up to help sort us out.

However, even though this is a great opportunity for the Church to convey a certain freshness, this institution still labours to reposition itself. Another Christmas goes by and the Church is not an inch finer. What bothers me is that the Church does not realise it is going dry and drab. It has become irrelevant to many, especially the younger generations, and more so as time goes by. It seems to have fallen in a comatose state, believing that the large number of churches and shrines that exist are enough to prevail. In fact, some are starting to question whether the Church would be better-off passing on its convents, chapels and churches for better use whether to act as cultural, social or leisure centres.

But, what has brought about this 'I can do away with the Church' mentality even in 'Catholic' Malta?

Some might argue that it is the natural progression of things – a changing world where spirituality and cult vanish into thin air! Wrong. I think that for most of us, the need for the 'encounter' is ever present. People want to live on, they somehow believe that there is something which is way bigger than themselves and which has a direct impact on how things pan out in their life.

I think that the Church has lost its footing because it has distanced its concentration. The focus, at least the way I see it, should be Jesus and his clear-cut teachings. Christ – and I am no theologian – does not speak about a life of sacrifice only to get the ultimate prize after death. No, Jesus talks about life, wealth, about improving oneself, about ambitions, love, sexuality, music, and about having life projects. The Church preaches the opposite of all this.

Let's try to zoom in.

The Church is in dire straits for many reasons.

First of all, it has so many of these grumpy priests talking rubbish during sermons. I am pretty sure they themselves hardly understand, let alone believe, what they are saying. And as if that were not enough, they elevate themselves on a podium that is only intended to look down on people, to tell us what and how to do things. As if these people can ever understand what it means to struggle with daily family choices and economy, what it means to raise kids, how to negotiate a work-life balance (which more often than not is not possible to have anyway). They are completely detached, disconnected and removed.

It is a Church that keeps excluding women.

It doesn't get more patriarchal than that. Women are relegated to *abbitinietti* (tokenism at its best) and the women that clean the church, cook for their parish priest and run the choir. Anignominy from A to Z.

Then you have the few and far between decent priests who speak their mind and, unless they part of the privileged group, who are usually pushed aside, threatened, gagged and asked to be obedient because if not they might disturb the status quo and might end up in South America. We've also heard of endless tittle-tattle of priests who had been involved in hanky-panky and were given a one-way ticket to Down Under or some other distant far-far-away-land.

The Curia as a building that hosts such a weighty institution is nothing to shout about.

It is an edifice that reminds me of melancholy. It is lacklustre, uninteresting, colourless, dowdy and dreary. Hardly welcoming, in other words, and it just promotes this tacky, tired and worn-out Catholic Church.

The bishops worry me as well. They go from one extreme to another. They are silent and inaudible at one point and all of a sudden they shoot from the hip. Mind you, it is not an enviable role. If I was a bishop, I would have been equally jumbled on what strategy to use. What does the Church want from her bishops; to speak or be silent? To sermonise or to talk their minds? To write encyclicals to the converted or to tweet virtues?

What adds to my concern is the up-to-the-minute priests, another debacle in the making?

Obviously not all of them. But how come the Church is still attracting young men who seem to have nothing better in life to do, who seem to have failed relationships, are struggling with their sexuality or their puzzled social life. The few good ones are lost in all of this obnoxiousness.

The parish priests are another nail in the coffin.

Some are trying, I admit, and some of those are succeeding. But most do not participate with the community. Most parish priests are nowhere to be seen during the village feast, do not share their time with the people, are not around in the squares and people's houses and hardly have communication skills. They think they are 'deity' and some even expect reverence.

Mass is another matter that has turned into a faux pas.

Now, don't go telling to look

for a nice Mass if I want one. It's either a Mass or it isn't – an Agape, a feast of love or not. More often than not, it becomes the equivalent feeling of going to the dentist waiting to get your tooth pulled out. There is no feast and no love in the masses I used to go to. The liturgy is absolutely late, old and unenviable. It is old fashioned and boring to death. You sit, you stand, you sit, you kneel, you stand – the best thing you can get from a Mass is the workout, other than that it's not worth the 40 minutes it takes. How can we even remotely try to convince young people that it is worth one's time when it feels like you need to slash your wrists a 100 times during the homily? Most people go to Mass because they think it's an insurance, that it's a way of guaranteeing a place in the realm. I think a Mass should provide pointers, give direction, afford a shoulder on how to live life together, how to connect with those in need and how to shoulder responsibility.

Then you have the organisations and movements.

They are the ones who are trying to create Church within Church. They are the 'homeless Catholics' in my opinion, the ones who love the Church but cannot bear the way it is unravelling. Even though most of these groups are endorsed by the Church it's the only way for the Maltese Curia to survive this onslaught – by allowing the movements to travel the journey the way they feel best.

The Church media is another conundrum.

Where has it gone? Newsbook and RTK are trying hard to return on the media-map but if you ask me, the Church's message is still in short supply. There is no collective voice, no social teaching, no discourses around principles of solidarity and reconciliation, inclusion and social justice. What is making RTK and Newsbook more popular is that they are taking on-board political issues much more than they did before (and maybe in the process peeving people off).

The Church and social services, yet another riddle.

The Church might be happy to argue that its missions like *Dar tal-Providenza*, Caritas, JRS and the rest are part of the Church. Incorrect. These organisations are practically run by lay professionals who are getting paid wages and the only churchy element they have is their history – the present is all irreligious.

It is very true that this country in a short period of time has been secularised and I do understand that this has pulled the

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carpet from under the Church's feet. But I've seen no renewal, no restitution, no revitalisation. It is a boat that is not weathering the storm but trying to hang on to the oars hoping against all hope that when the wind subsides they will paddle back to their comfort zone.

It is a Church that has no clear enterprise and the calling has gone coarse. It still hurts minorities; for example, the gay community (even though it is a known fact that there are people among its main exponents who are gay), single parents and women. It is a Church that has abandoned its sense of justice, for example, when it practically left young people, who were abused in Church institutions, to their plight, albeit offering them peripheral support.

Now I do know that people will think I'm anti-clerical but the simple fact that I am spending a Sunday night writing this article only challenges this supposition.

This is about me believing, not only in the important role of spiritual healing and accompaniment for people to live happily, but in a Church that has another decisive role. The Roman Catholic Church has a duty of being the voice in this highly secularised society that measures human beings solely on individual pursuits. The role of the Church is fundamentally to challenge this mentality.

On the 20 January I will be dealing with these and many other matters with the Archbishop during a scheduled interview on my radio show on Radio Malta.

“Ghandi xi Nghid”

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