

Opening Address

by H.E. Marie Louise Coleiro Preca

President of Malta

I would like to extend a warm welcome to you all, and in particular, to those of you, visiting our island to participate in this Conference. It is indeed an honour for me, to be addressing such a learned audience, and to share my thoughts with you, on one of the most fundamental prerequisites, for the wellbeing of our society, that of the family.

I was given to understand that this regional Conference seeks to reflect on the conclusions of the 2014 Extraordinary Synod, and to offer its own conclusions towards the 2015 Synod. This makes your deliberations today of truly great importance, as they will shape the future of how the Church will sustain its flock, and seek to be a solid rock for all people. May the Holy Spirit guide you in this responsibility.

While preparing for this conference, I came across a contribution on “Global Changes in Marriage, Parenting and Family Life,” co-authored by Professor Angela Abela and Professor Janet Walker, published in 2013. These two learned professors had this to say about family life today; and I truly believe that their words are most fitting for today’s Conference:

“We live at a time of unprecedented diversity in household living arrangements, and of extensive social, cultural and economic change, both of which have far-reaching implications for marriage, parenting and family life in the twenty-first century”.

Malta’s contemporary society fits perfectly with this analysis. What is a family today? We can hardly define the family with a simple statement, as, if we choose to do so, we risk missing on many of realities of today. In

4 MELITA THEOLOGICA

Malta, at present, indicators show that 25% of mothers are single, with the majority being between the ages of twenty and thirty years of age; almost 4,500 households are made up of single parents with one or more dependent children. Other indicators for 2013 that show that 817 Maltese couples have contracted divorce. Even though Malta now has divorce legislation, indicators show that in 2014, there are 365 pending cases for church annulments, with 93 new applications for the same. And here I ask, how is the Church today responding to these realities?

I believe that the 2014 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops marks a series of contrasts which, in a way, mirror local contemporary society. While I agree that the Church seeks to sustain its links with the Apostolic Tradition in matters of faith and morals, in my opinion, it cannot remain indifferent to changes in the way that people perceive and live their lives.

I am pleased to note, that the *Relatio* itself states that “people need to be accepted in the concrete circumstances of life.” Likewise, as Maltese society, in its majority, still strives to retain its long cherished Catholic tradition and identity, it also faces change, as it becomes more inclusive, multicultural and tries to comprehend the meaning and consequences of an interfaith society. Yet, it is important that, acknowledgment of pluralism within our society should not be achieved at the expense of creating a crisis in identity. I believe that it is possible to remain firm in one’s convictions and the way we manifest them, but still respect and embrace diversity.

Maltese society today, especially many young couples, may be forced to make a series of compromises, such as when cohabiting, or having children out of wedlock, while at the same time, aspiring to marry at a later stage in life. This is perhaps an example of an attempt, to combine the traditional way of thinking, with current demands and constraints that people find themselves in. I also believe that ultimately, when people decide to opt for such choices, they need to find the understanding, assistance and protection from church, government and society.

On the other hand, we are constantly witnessing cultural shifts in our society. This is also a challenge for our country and its institutions. Definitely, we need to look at family life today in all its complexity, to comprehend fully and grasp totally, the basis on which any discussion on the family, can eventually take place.

I will venture to present a practical example from my own country. Many of us still recall the time when children born out of wedlock were not baptized publicly in parish churches and their single mothers had to seek refuge elsewhere. Some children were even baptized in some obscure chapel, or alone in the sacristy, as if they were children of a lesser God. Thankfully, this has changed,

but other circumstances now prevail, that likewise present the Church with new challenges.

I would here like to pose some questions to help in stimulating further thought regarding these new challenges: What is the Church saying to same-sex couples who want to continue to practise their faith? How will the Church respond to the request of same sex-couples who have adopted children, and want to baptize them? How is the Church reacting to divorced persons who want to build their lives afresh, and want to do so within the Church? How do we react to those who have to make difficult choices because of their suffering, or who are victims of abuse or violence?

We cannot close our eyes to the reality that is today. I believe that there is a sense of urgency today for correct responses, as by looking the other way we would be increasing the suffering of those in need of our solidarity, and reducing their efforts to be heard and understood. To put it frankly, I believe that both government and the Church need to respond through more actions than words. Society as a whole has to learn to understand rather than to condemn, to empathize and not to criticize, and to love more rather than to judge. This would not mean changing the teachings of Christ or the Church, but it does mean, that we all need to open our minds and hearts, to the reality of people's suffering, and hence love and respect more one another.

After all, I have been taught that our Christ was open to everyone; He turned no one away. He is love itself and hence would embrace everyone, and would see to the needs of each and every one of us. I was also taught that our God loves us all as we are, and He allows us the freedom to make our own choices, but we then need to shoulder the responsibility for the choices that we make. What I certainly believe is that we have no right to judge others. I reiterate what Pope Francis said, when he called the phase between the two Synods "a journey ... where the stronger feel compelled to help the less strong, where the more experienced are led to serve others, even through confrontations."

May you achieve the objective of this Conference, and in so doing, lay the foundations for the Church to end its haemorrhage and start to regenerate itself and become the wise and caring parent for all, and in particular for those who seek her solace. In conclusion, it is only then that, in Pope Francis' words, through a "path of solidarity," we may "journey together," where every person is respected, loved and valued as God's creation, irrespective of his or her faith, colour, sexual orientation and social status.