



Kummissjoni Pastoral

Dwar Dinja tax- Xogħol

Unions' Contribution in Society

The Catholic Church has constantly agreed and supported the right of workers to unite and set up unions so as to safeguard their rights to a just pay and decent working conditions. It is important that one reflects on the church's position regarding unions in order that one would be able to discern how to strengthen these unions so with a view that these may spread and prevail for the benefit of the workers. As stated by **Pope Paul John II** *'History has repeatedly demonstrated that such unions are an indispensable factor where it concerns quality of life, more so in today's modern and industrial societies.'* He further stated (in this encyclical letter which is dedicated to work **Laborem Exercens**) *'one should refrain from believing that only the industrial employees have this right to form a union but that this also applies to all professions comprising both manual and clerical.'*

When the same Pope was speaking in an international unions' congress (02/12/96) he had stated: *'Your organisations were founded on the principle of sustaining the value of work and the dignity of the worker. Today this same principle urges you to take the new initiatives so as to develop a society oriented towards achieving the common good. The challenges that we are facing on account of the economic globalization coupled with the introduction of new technologies impel us to revise our opinion about the modus operandi of the unions and the new methods of representing the workers in different situations.'* This is the invitation put forward by the Church enjoining all to be constantly aware of periodical environmental changes, to acknowledge own individual status, to take stock of prevailing times, and situations, and in our case as unions to identify the manner how we can be of tangible help in real situations.

This observation by **Pope John Paul II** confirms and revives the notion that was made by his predecessor **Pope Paul VI** in a similar conference which was held on the 21 May 1977. Pope Paul VI states: *'During this period of time when we have problems which are affecting the workers' means of living beyond all limits, call for a demand for an international coordinated remedial action. It is of no surprise that a global organisation*

such as the Church to be interested in such topics: the dignity of the workers together with the safeguarding of the adequate working conditions of individual. The Catholic Church must always remain loyal to its founder, Christ, who multiplied the bread to suppress man's appetite both physical and spiritual.' From this extract one acknowledges the importance of unity in difficult moments that befall humanity. The Church appeals to all those who represent the workers, to unite in order to strengthen their position through a coordinated stand that they may undertake: unity with the very same Church which is itself a teacher in the social field since days of old of its founder; Jesus Christ.

Pope Benedict XVI in his message to the Italian unions (**CISL** 31/01/10) makes this reflection which proves to be useful not solely to Italy but also to all those who work for the good of the workers: *'today it is necessary that we dismiss any personal interest from our deeds and unite to tackle our difficulties mostly in labour field. The dire need of unity was never experienced until now, the difficulties encountered in the labour sphere demand further collaboration and more effectiveness from all elements of society.* In the Scripture itself one comes across references for such an appeal for collaboration: *Two persons are better off than one, leading to better work efficacy. If one fails, the other is able to aid him, but pity for the sole player because he will have no one to raise him (Koheleth; 4:10)*

A term that the Church refers to is the EU's motto and elicits our commitment: **Unity in diversity** is a challenge for us all even to the Unions which while retaining, their principle and history be accessible to work collectively. We should not consider this as a choice but as an absolute necessity in our work objective.

Pope Benedict XVI in his last encyclical letter **Caritas in Veritate** paragraph 25 states that: *'Owing to various factors by way of economic and social changes the unions and organisations are experiencing grave difficulties in executing their functions in representing the workers' interests, on one hand due to governments' valid economic reasons frequently limiting the freedom or the ability to attain agreements forwarded by the Unions. Such a phrase explains the present situation of the Unions' in an objective way.* Owing to the present economic situations the Unions are experiencing difficulties in executing their work and we believe that these difficulties could be overcome through an undertaking of mutual understanding between the government and the unions. There is always room for dialogue between these two parties since surely they both work with a common aim beneficial to the workers. In this encyclical letter the Pope also mentions and demands whether the Union is venturing beyond its boundaries and is ready to defend the interests not only of its members but also of other who are not members particularly those immigrants present in the country.

A pastoral letter issued by the American Archbishops in 1986 lodges a similar appeal to the institutions within the Church so that: *'they recognise the rights of their own workers that they may manage and formulate an agreement related their working conditions ... we appeal to the institutions within the Church to adopt new methods of cooperation.'* This is also a point of concern where the Church while conferring with the Unions about their work should refrain from failing to mind the safeguarding of the rights of her own employees' by a Union.

In his encyclical letter **Laborem Exercens** Pope John Paul II reiterates that the Catholic Social Teaching does not perceive the Unions' function simply as class

structures in society, neither that the Union is committed in this class struggles but actually looks at the Unions that are committed towards social justice for all, primarily working for the common good. The aim of the Unions is not to eradicate its opponent but to ensure social justice. In this encyclical letter the Pope also states that the Unions' principal aim is not only limited to the safeguarding of the wages and working conditions of workers but also to ensure that the workers that they represent contribute in a positive and creative way both towards the company as their employer as well as to the community in general.

Another topic that society should always respect regarding Unions concerns what **Pope Paul VI** states in his pastoral letter **Octogesima Adveniens** where amongst other things he states that we must recognise the importance of the Unions' role in society where we acknowledge the fact that they represent various categories of workers, acknowledge the vital contribution that Unions have in the economic progression of the country, in other words we should acknowledge and appreciate and encourage these organisations to maintain their fruitful effort in favour of the workers and therefore in favour of society in general.