

8th September 2018
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PASTORAL LETTER ON THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

BUILDING OUR HOUSES ON A ROCK

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the occasion of the national feast of Our Lady of Victories, that we Maltese celebrate on the 8th September, the liturgical feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin, we would like to share with you some of our thoughts about the housing situation in our country. We are referring to the difficulties faced by some of our families, many of our young people, and several foreigners among us, who struggle to find accommodation that they can afford to rent or buy.

The teaching of Pope Francis

Pope Francis, in his encyclical letter on the care of the common home, *Laudato si'* (promulgated in 2015), speaks of an integral ecology and explains that: "Ecology studies the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop. This necessarily entails reflection and debate about the conditions required for the life and survival of society, and the honesty needed to question certain models of development, production and consumption. It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected" (*Laudato si'* par. 138). In the same encyclical letter, Pope Francis deals with the problem of housing and writes: "Lack of housing is a grave problem in many parts of the world, both in rural areas and in large cities, since state budgets usually cover only a small portion of the demand. Not only the poor, but many other members of society as well, find it difficult to own a home. Having a home has much to do with a sense of personal dignity and the growth of families. This is a major issue for human ecology" (*Laudato si'* par. 152).

An appeal to society

Our first appeal is addressed to the Maltese society as a whole. In the housing sector we have emergency situations where families and the elderly cannot meet the rapidly escalating rent crisis and consequently are ending up on the streets; where young people, sons and daughters of workers, do not qualify for a bank loan because their salaries cannot guarantee the monthly payments; and where people who are going through a crisis like a separation, mental health problems or an addiction, rely on the rental market because they either do not have their own property or do not have social housing. These new situations are creating a social emergency that requires and demands a solution and commitment from everyone, whoever he or she may be. God forbid that we, as a society, become indifferent when faced with these dramatic situations that are creating a new type of poverty while also destroying so many people's hope, especially that of our young people.

An appeal to politicians

Our second appeal is addressed to all politicians, be they in Government, in Parliament, or even in local councils. This is the time and this is the issue that should unite you all in order to find practical and effective solutions for the urgent cases that require planning in the short, medium and long-term. A timely regulation of the rental market and provision for sustainable housing would give the people who are worst hit by this crisis, the dignity of having a suitable roof over their heads. Let us work together so that the housing issue, be it the availability of social housing or the planning and supply of affordable housing, will not be a partisan political football that is tossed from one side to the other. The housing issue should help us rise to the occasion in order to demonstrate that we are all capable and willing to work together for the common good.

An appeal to landlords and developers

Our third appeal is addressed to the property owners and developers. Everyone has the right to generate capital and to use property to increase material gain. However, this should not happen without restraint. As Pope Francis encourages us in *Laudato si'*, we should all reflect more seriously on the ethical and social aspects of the model of development, production, and consumption that is operational in our country. If, at times, the law governing the economy may be blind and operates without scruples on

the principle of demand and supply, we Christians, who have a social conscience, should also have a heart and mind that exercise restraint on the rates that regulate the buying and renting of property according to just and equal criteria, underpinned by responsibility and solidarity. What does it profit you in gaining the whole world, when at the moment of judgement, he who will judge you in justice and truth, tells you: 'I was living in your property giving you your due and you turned me out on the streets to satisfy your greed?' What does it profit you in paying foreigners a pittance an hour for their work while at the same time depriving them of their rights; or what does it profit you in turning entire families out on the streets in order to make an alternative income of thousands a month, all the while flaunting your generosity by donating substantial sums to your parish? Do you honestly think that Christ rejoices in such offerings? Or does he not rejoice more in mercy and solidarity shown to those who work and strive to provide for the family and cannot afford a rent that spiked from €400 to €900 a month?

An appeal to tenants

Our fourth appeal is addressed to tenants. The duty of tenants living in rented properties entails taking care of the property to the best of one's ability; paying the rent on time; settling the utilities bill; and leaving the property in good shape without resorting to causing damage as a vindictive parting shot. Social justice also demands that one does not unnecessarily resort to social housing to the detriment of those who really are in dire straits. Whoever abuses of the social welfare system through deceitful means is guilty of stealing while also putting an unjust burden on the same welfare system.

An appeal to ecclesial communities

Our fifth and last appeal is addressed to the ecclesial communities. We invite them to work hand-in-hand with civil society in order to find answers for emergency situations and to choose and implement adequate policies for the future. It is heartening to see that parishes and religious orders are using their available properties for night shelters, hostels for students, and homes for people in need. For a number of years, the Church in Malta too, through its Emigrants Commission, has been providing accommodation to around 400 migrants. Caritas Malta constantly cooperates with the Maltese Government and the private sector so that shelters like Dar Papa Franġisku and Dar Maria Dolores continue to operate and flourish according to emerging needs. Among

social and charitable structures that are part of the Church in Malta's commitment to offer accommodation to people in need, we also find the Fondazzjoni Suret il-Bniedem and Dar Osanna Pia. It is also very encouraging to note that lay people are offering their properties in response to this social cause. We must however make a greater effort to avoid being conquered by a culture that only seeks profit, and be prepared to make less lucrative choices in order to help those who are in difficulty. Today more than ever, the Church needs to lead by example.

Conclusion

The housing situation in our country demands a response of unity and solidarity from everyone, starting from us Christians. Maria Bambina, who always interceded for the people of Malta in difficult and challenging situations, will intercede for us once again to reinforce our country's social conscience. In this way we build our house on the solid rock of the Word and the example of the Lord who came to serve and not to be served. We need to work together to find solutions that ensure that no one is left without an adequate and dignified shelter in our country.

We cordially impart our pastoral blessing.

✠ Charles J. Scicluna

Archbishop of Malta

✠ Mario Grech

Bishop of Gozo

✠ Joseph Galea-Curmi

Auxiliary Bishop of Malta