

Church – State Relations

A. Relations between the Church and the British authorities up to the 1920s

‘All rights, privileges, and immunities in Church and State are confirmed to the Maltese people. The Bishop of Malta is the head of the Maltese Church. No inquisitorial powers emanating from the See of Rome can be admitted, and no ecclesiastical authority of any other sovereign can be acknowledged.’

The instructions by Abercromby to Pigot quoted above outline the general policy of the British authorities towards the Catholic Church in Malta. Though the future of the Maltese Islands was still uncertain in 1800, the British realised the important role played by the Church in the daily lives of the Maltese. They were also aware of the Church’s role in the uprising of the Maltese against the French a few months before.

As early as 15th June 1802, the Maltese had made their feelings about their religion clear with The Declaration of Rights. Articles 6, 7, and 8 of this Declaration related to religious matters, particularly the protection of the Church and of worship. These stated:

6th. That His Majesty the King is the protector of our holy religion, and is bound to uphold and protect it as heretofore; and without any diminution of what has been practiced since these Islands have acknowledged His Majesty as their sovereign to this day; and that His Majesty’s representatives have a right to claim such church honours as have always been shown to the regents of these Islands.

7th. The interference in matters spiritual or temporal of no other temporal sovereign shall be permitted in these Islands; and reference to spiritual matters shall only be had to the Pope, and to the respective Generals of the Monastic Orders.

8th. That freemen have a right to choose their own religion. Toleration of other religions is therefore established as a right; but no sect is permitted to molest, insult or disrupt those of other religious professions. (2)

Royal Commission of 1812:

The British authorities were not too happy with this Declaration but realised that cooperation with the Catholic Church in Malta was their only option. Though the Church maintained several privileges contrary to the British policies of emancipation, the Royal Commission of 1812 suggested that any abolition or modification of these privileges would lead to *'an angry priesthood and, through their means, create a considerable degree of discontent among the people.'*

Instructions to Maitland, 1813

The instructions provided to Sir Thomas Maitland (Malta's first Governor) in 1813, therefore, included the following instruction: *'The free exercise of religious worship to all persons who inhabit and frequent the island is to be secured.'*

British Official Policy towards the Maltese Church: neutrality, liberty, cooperation, protection.

'The British appreciated the strategic significance of Malta and Gozo in imperial defence and succeeded in winning over the confidence of the people largely by securing every respect to their religion.'

Indeed, the British authorities in Malta did their very best to keep the Maltese Church happy. They adopted a policy of religious neutrality and gave the Church liberty, protection and cooperation.

Proselytisation of the Maltese was one of the important issues in the suspicious attitude of the Maltese Church towards the British rulers: what the Maltese Church feared most was an attempt on the part of the Church of England and other Protestant Churches to convert the Maltese to Protestantism.

Protestant Bible Society

When, in 1814, the Biblical Society (of Malta) was formed by the (Anglican) Church Missionary Society, it was forbidden to describe itself 'of Malta' and was restricted in its activities. It could only translate parts of the Bible into Maltese. Two other protestant organisations – the American Missionary Society and the Society of English Independents –

were allowed to own a printing press (at a time when no such privately owned presses existed in Malta) but were limited to printing material for distribution abroad and could not print anything in Maltese.

Queen Adelaide & St. Paul's Cathedral, 1844

Indeed, the Anglicans were not allowed any grants by the British government to build their own church and it was only in 1844 that the first Protestant church was opened in Malta. This came about through Queen Adelaide, widow of King William IV and Queen Victoria's aunt, who had visited Malta in 1838. She wrote to her niece asking her to intervene in the matter of building a Protestant place of worship but Victoria felt that she could not interfere in such a delicate issue. Adelaide, therefore, funded the construction of St. Paul's Anglican Pro-Cathedral in Valletta.

British reforms and the Maltese Church: British dealing with the Vatican.

The British government wanted to introduce several reforms – legal, economic and military – that would help Malta become more integrated within the British Empire. However, it was quite clear that the local Catholic Church would oppose many of these changes. London, therefore, sought to hold direct (and indirect) talks with Rome. Since the Congress of Vienna (1815), relations between Protestant England and the Vatican had improved considerably when Lord Castlereagh (British Foreign Secretary) and Cardinal Consalvi (Papal Secretary of State) had held direct talks. The British, therefore, decided to hold talks with the Pope on matters relating to Malta rather than with the Maltese Ecclesiastical authorities.

Ecclesiastical Immunity (Sanctuary)

Governor Ponsomby's administration is associated with important changes in ecclesiastical jurisdiction, in the course of which, the right of asylum in churches, enjoyed by criminals, was abolished, and the clergy were made subject to the jurisdiction of the lay Court in temporal matters. It happened also that the question of appointments to the See of Malta, a problem which awaited solution for a number of years, was finally settled during his term of office. The suzerainty over Malta, exercised by the King of Naples and Sicily, carried with it the right of nomination of the Bishop who was dependant on the Metropolitan See of Palermo. At the death of Bishop Labini in 1807, the British government had tried to obtain the nomination of Canon Caruana, but King Ferdinand III opposed the nomination. The Pope found a way out of the difficult situation by appointing a Maltese priest, Ferdinando Mattei.

When Mattei died in 1829, Pope Gregory XVI nominated Canon Caruana as Bishop of Malta. He further decreed that the Church should no longer be dependant upon the See of Palermo but should be subject directly to the Holy See.

Up to 1828, criminals taking refuge in a church were considered to be beyond the jurisdiction of the civil law, and many criminals escaped a just punishment in this simple way. The right of refuge in churches was, by proclamation, abolished in 1828, and numerous small chapels in the countryside have had, since that date, the inscription “*Non gode immunita’ ecclesia*” stuck near the door.

Clandestine Marriages, 1831

The removal of these ancient rights of the Church led, however, to a situation that was unpleasant to the Maltese. The restriction of the authority of the Ecclesiastical Courts led to the question of an increase in clandestine (illegal) marriages. The number of people marrying illegally rose so much that on 7th September 1831 the Governor Frederick Cavendish Ponsonby introduced a Clandestine Marriages Act which prohibited any form of marriage without the proper legal procedures.

The question of the bishopric of Malta

The problem that most severely strained Church-State relations before the 1921 Constitution concerned the right of presentation to the Malta bishopric. Aware that “he who rules the soul rules everything”, the British Government did its utmost to elect a bishop of its own choice.

In granting Malta and Gozo to the Order of St. John, Emperor Charles V had established that whenever the See became vacant, the Grand Master was to nominate three ecclesiastics of the Order so that the sovereign or his successors would choose one for confirmation by the Pope. Their wish was almost always met with. On 30th April 1807, Archbishop Labini, the last bishop elected under the Order, died. The ecclesiastical authorities informed King Ferdinand III of Sicily who, on 12th June, presented his candidate to the Pope. The Civil Commissioner of Malta, Alexander Ball, questioned this procedure, but accepted the nominated candidate, Ferdinando Mattei, a Maltese.

The Royal Commission of 1812 argued that, should the islands be officially taken over by Great Britain, the right of presentation would automatically pass over to the British Government. When Bishop Mattei died on 14th July 1829, Governor Ponsomby claimed the

right with the Papal secretary that very day. There was agreement on the candidate, Francesco Saverio Caruana, but the See remained vacant for more than nineteen months.

The right was also claimed by the King of the Two Sicilies. The British were offended and sent Sir Fredrick Hankey to Rome in November 1830. As a result, Caruana was elected on 28th February 1831. On the same occasion, Pope Gregory XVI separated Malta from the Metropolitan See of Palermo on 20th June 1831, as the British had requested. However, complications would arise if London and Rome disagreed on a candidate.

Such a problem rose in 1837, when the Vatican refused a candidate proposed by the British government. The British were very much offended. In the beginning of 1838, Governor Bouverie issued an ordinance declaring that appointments to ecclesiastical offices or benefices by a foreign power, without the approval of the Governor, would be invalid. The Vatican instructed Bishop Caruana to suspend the choosing of new canons, so several parishes remained without a parish priest. Eventually a compromise was reached; the person receiving a bull of appointment was to petition the Governor for approval.

The Irish Members of the House of Commons, being Catholics themselves became very much interested in the Maltese dispute. On 30th June 1846, Lord Russell became British prime Minister and Earl Grey became Secretary of State for the Colonies. A new Pope had also been elected; Giovanni Mastai Ferretti was became Pope Pius IX. These changes brought more interest in colonial affairs and the Maltese dispute was taken more seriously.

The new Pope asked Richard More O’Ferrall, a member of the House of Commons to convince the Colonial Office that the choice of candidates to the bishopric and other offices by the Pope would certainly be made with the desire to make them acceptable to the British Government too. Unofficial discussions between the two parts before the final appointment to the bishopric, was a wise procedure. This was in fact done in 1856 before the election of Archbishop Gaetano Pace Forno.

The dispute surfaced again in the 1880’s. The Vatican was considering the appointment of the Apostolic Administrator Antonio Buhagiar as Bishop of Malta. The other candidate, Mgr. Pietro Pace, Bishop of Gozo, was preferred by the Governor, Sir Lintorn Simmons. After much argument, Mgr. Pace was transferred to the Malta bishopric. Mgr. Pace was known to

be an able leader both locally and in Rome, where he was kept in high consideration in the Curia.

There were no significant developments with regards to this issue up to the 1857 Lyons-Antonelli agreement. Later in the 1930's, the same issue rose once again. This time, the protagonist was a Bishop of Gozo who had to become Bishop of Malta, Mgr. Michael Gonzi.

Mort Main Law

An important intervention of the British in ecclesiastical affairs was the Mortmain Law in 1822, in order to limit the Church's right to own property. It laid down that the Church or other pious religious institution could not acquire immovable property, except under the condition that it should be sold within a year. If it were not so, the property would be confiscated by the Government. The law was drawn up because it had been alleged in the beginning of the 19th century that the Church owned one third of the immovable property in Malta and Gozo. It is interesting to note that the Church's property was owned by such scattered units as the Cathedral Chapter and the various Collegiate Chapters, parishes, religious Orders or lay confraternities. In the eyes of the Government, too much immovable "Church property" would presumably hamper equal taxation of the land.

St. John's Co-Cathedral

One of the earliest issues was the Conventual Church of St. John. As it had previously belonged to the Order, the Colonial Office considered it and all its treasures and possessions, as Government property. It was however ruled out that the church should be used for Protestant worship. These assumed rights went against the foundation deed of the church. In fact, on 23rd November 1577, Grand Master Jean de la Cassiere had laid down that if the Order left Malta, the Conventual Church would revert to the local clergy. On 13th June 1798, Napoleon handed over the church to Archbishop Vincenzo Labini, who on 30th August provisionally obtained the title of Co-Cathedral for the church. The British however, solidly maintained their claim, creating several problems. Governor Maitland ordered that the throne on the right of the high altar, previously reserved of the Grand Master, was to remain there with the coat of arms of the British Sovereign clearly displayed as a sign of his authority in the islands. Eventually a second throne was erected on the opposite side for the Archbishop.

The conferment of benefices

Although the British were certainly less anticlerical than Napoleon, some of the latter's revolutionary measures were retained. The British too were against foreign interference with the Maltese Church; they only accepted not to undermine the status of the Pope. Sometimes the Pope would have to force the Maltese ecclesiastical authorities to accept certain unpopular British measures.

The British saw to it that after the death of Bishop Labini in 1807, the bishopric would never again be occupied by a foreigner and that the right of nomination by the King of Sicily be terminated. The Maltese See was also separated from the Metropolitan of Palermo. All these affairs were negotiated with the Holy See and the results were favourably accepted by the Maltese. All male religious Orders were separated from their Sicilian superiors, without doubt at the request of the British authorities. Finally, an ordinance of 1838 forbade the appointment of any foreigner who was not a British subject to any benefice or other ecclesiastical office, unless with the consent of the Governor given after the nominee had sworn an oath of loyalty to the British Crown.

The religious Orders were also under supervision of their respective heads in Rome. The British intervened too in clerical affairs, sometimes with the help of the Vatican, as when it abolished some privileges such as *privilegium fori* and ecclesiastical asylum. Furthermore, the British sought to obtain influence in certain ecclesiastical appointments such as canonships and the bishopric itself.

The Oath Question

The Catholic Relief Bill of 1829 admitted Catholics in England to parliament, and excluded them only from a few higher offices. They had to take an oath by which they promised to be faithful and bear allegiance to the King and defend him against all conspiracies and attempts made against his person:

“... and I further declare that it is not an article of my faith, and that I do denounce, reject and abjure the opinion that princes excommunicated or deprived by the Pope, or any other authority of the See of Rome, may be deposed or murdered by their subjects or by any person whatsoever. I do declare that I do not believe that the Pope of Rome or any other foreign prince, prelate, state or potentate, has or ought to have any temporal or civil jurisdiction

within the realm of Great Britain and Ireland... I solemnly abjure any intention to subvert the present Church establishment, as settled by law within the said Realm, and I do solemnly swear that I will never exercise any privilege to which I am or may become entitled to disturb or weaken the Protestant religion or Protestant Government in the United Kingdom... So help me God.”

Sir George Murray, Secretary of State, ordered Governor Ponsomby, to enforce this Oath in Malta. The Governor found it difficult to carry out such instructions; and he recalled the promises made by Great Britain to the Maltese regarding their religion, and he suggested the repeal of some parts of the Oath, not applicable to Malta. It was imprudent, he wrote, to propose this Oath to the Maltese subjects, whose position was other than that of English Catholics. The Secretary of State admitted this suggestion made by the Governor and tacitly agreed.

The question was raised again in 1835 with the formation of the first Council of Government in Malta. The members of the Legislative Assembly (among whom the Bishop was to be an ex-officio member) were to take a similar oath. Bishop Caruana was invited by the Governor to take the said Oath as a member of the Council, but he refused to do so, alleging that it was a religious act. He added that he had written to the Pope to ask his views about this matter. The answer from Rome took a long time to arrive. The other Maltese did the same. But after more than two months, they took the Oath.

On 19th December 1835, Cardinal Bernetti, Papal Secretary of State, sent a dispatch to the Bishop, inviting him to abstain from taking part in a Council where ecclesiastical matters could be dealt with in a prejudiced manner against the Catholic Faith, since the majority of the members were Protestants. As to the Oath formula, the Secretary said it could not be approved.

The same question was raised more fiercely on 2nd January 1839, when the Oath was extended to all Roman Catholics holding offices under the Government. This time, the controversy assumed a public character. Among those who supported the Oath was Mgr. Salvatore Cumbo, a Doctor of Divinity and Professor of Moral Theology at the University. He published a pamphlet in which he tried to prove that the Oath was not questionable

because, he alleged, Bishops in England were still free to exercise their pastoral duties and because it was not condemned by the Pope.

The Pope informed the Archbishop that the formula had never been approved. The Pope proposed the filing of a petition to the Queen as a protest against the formula. The petition however was never done.

Following his accession to the See of Malta in 1847, Bishop Sant appointed Canon Vincent Chapelle Vicar General and Archpriest Josphe Galea as Pro-Vicar for Notabile and its district. According to the Proclamation of 10th April 1828, these ecclesiastical functionaries had to take the Oath of Allegiance and Office in the presence of the Head of Government, before starting their respective duties. They declared that they were prevented by conscientious motives from taking such an oath. The Bishop backed them in their refusal and requested the Acting Governor to ask H.M. Ministers to propose a acceptable formula to the principles of the Catholic Religion.

In December of the same year, the Hon. Richard More O’Ferrall was appointed Governor of Malta. As a Catholic, he could better understand the matter. He personally studied the question and reported the whole affair to Lord Grey, Secretary of State. He stressed that it was illegal to impose such an oath upon the Maltese. He even proposed the use of a new formula which would run as follows:

“I, N. N., do sincerely promise and swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Victoria. So help me God.”

The proposed formula was accepted by the British government for the people of Malta.

The establishment of the Diocese of Gozo

An outstanding episode of co-operation between the Vatican and the British took place during the long campaign of the priests and people of Gozo to establish a separate diocese from Malta. It was one of the major religious events during colonial rule in which the British co-operated with Rome in a very exceptional way.

The establishment of an independent diocese for Gozo and Comino was first unsuccessfully requested on 30th October 1798, just after the expulsion of the French from Gozo. On 30th December 1836, the Gozitans tried again. Governor Bouverie made it clear that he was “not averse from recommending such request to the favourable consideration of His Majesty, [keeping] in view the spiritual advantages of the Gozitans.” Yet further progress was halted by Archbishop Caruana and his successors who were reluctant to accept a diminishing of their pastoral care.

The question was again taken up in the 1850's by Fr. Pietro Pace, a young Gozitan priest who was to become Archbishop of Malta later in 1889, and (Sir) Adrian Dingli, an eminent Gozitan. Through British co-operation, they succeeded in reaching their aim.

It became clear to all in 1860 that the Vatican had understood the necessity of a separate diocese for Gozo, and that the opposition of the Maltese Archbishop was unjustifiable. The Vatican, however, was unwilling to take a decision without a clear approval by the British, with whom they were then trying to keep the best of relations due to the question of the Italian unification. That approval was sought on 12th September 1860. Lord Russell, the Foreign Secretary, immediately communicated the request to the Colonial Office which in turn asked Governor Le Marchant whether he had any objection towards the appointment of a Bishop for Gozo. On 25th October, he drafted his approval.

After further considerations, the Colonial Office conveyed the approval to the Foreign Office. Notwithstanding the many difficulties created in similar circumstances closer home, the Foreign Office decided to pose no problems. On 21st November 1860, Lord Russell acceded to the proceedings and duly informed the British representative in Rome about the whole matter. Early in December, the British approval was passed over to Cardinal Antonelli, the Papal Secretary of State.

Only after this clear acceptance did the Vatican begin to tackle seriously other related problems. The Vatican finally conceded to the wishes of the Gozitans and on 16th September 1864, Pope Pius IX created Gozo and Comino a separate diocese directly subject to the Holy See.

Shortly afterwards, the first bishop Mons. Michele Buttigieg, invited the Sicilian Jesuits to run the Seminary and a boarding and day school. This was inaugurated on 4th November 1866 and it soon achieved a considerable reputation. The sons of the best Gozitan families and many bright students from Malta and Sicily attended this school. Boys were prepared for priesthood or to sit for the matriculation examinations. For almost half a century, the school, which still survives, had a particular influence in the social and intellectual life of the Maltese.

Burial Laws, 1869

As part of a move to improve sanitation in Malta, on 3rd May 1869, burials were prohibited from taking place in towns (Valletta, Floriana and Cottonera). Up to that time it had been customary to bury any person owning a grave (or a member of a religious society owning graves) in the churches of the Three Cities, Valletta, Mdina and Floriana to be buried in that grave. This situation was unhygienic and inconvenient. During the 1890s, the government attempted to extend the prohibition of burials within villages and other towns but discussions met with greater resistance than in 1869 and were shelved.

Ecclesiastics in the Council of Government and the 1870 referendum

The quest of the Maltese for self-determination is rooted in the Declaration of Rights of 1802. The Church had an active part throughout the history of the Maltese Islands, so officially or though certain members of the clergy, it was involved in the quest for political rights during the 19th century too.

The first political agitation under the British was led by William Eton, a British civil servant. According to Eton, the Constitution desired by the Maltese at that time, while allowing the Church a separate assembly, excluded it from taking any decision, even ecclesiastical, without the participation of the lay element of the proposed Consiglio. Anticlericalism was evident in his thoughts.

The movement was revived in 1832 by the formation of the Comitato Generale Maltese, led by Camillo Sciberras and Giorgio Mitrovich and included representatives of the clergy. Owing to its pressure, the advisory Council of Government, an institution suggested as early as 1813, was established in 1835. As in 1813, the Archbishop was to be one of the official members but, as the Vatican counselled him not to take part, he declined his seat.

Of the eighteen members who were to form the Council of Government according to the 1849 Constitution, eight were to be elected directly by the people. Three of those elected were ecclesiastics. As a result, Church-State issues, previously discussed privately, could now become public with the consequence that maintaining of good relations could be in danger. This is what happened during the discussion of the Criminal Code and this eventually led to the exclusion of the clergy from the Council.

Governor Gaspard Le Marchant reasoned that the Church's presence in the Council was not necessary, as "thirteen out of eighteen members of the Council being Roman Catholics, there is not the slightest ground that any just and reasonable claims that the Church, could under any circumstances, fail to be attended to." However, after a lot of pressure from various quarters, the Colonial office submitted the question to a referendum. The majority was found to be in favour, and by letters patent of 29th April 1870, ecclesiastics were readmitted to the Council, though no more than two could be members at the same time.

Marriage Question

Church-State relations were further tried during the discussions on the Marriage question. The validity of marriages, even as a legal contract, was in Malta based on the Canon Law, as enacted in the Council of Trent. In 1889, the Simmons-Rampolla agreement had affirmed that a marriage between two Catholics or between a Catholic and a non-Catholic would only be valid if celebrated according to the rites of the Catholic Church. All other marriages remained subject to Civil Law.

The Colonial Office did not agree and decided to settle the question by specific legislation binding all colonies. On 27th June 1892, the Foreign Marriage Act declared valid those mixed marriages contracted under certain conditions; this implied a breaking of the former agreement. Nothing happened initially, but on 6th March 1896, the Governor informed the Archbishop that the Foreign Marriage Act would be valid for Malta too. Three huge meetings of protest were organised on 8th, 15th and 22nd March. The British began to fear that the agitation would endanger public peace and the matter was allowed to drop.

B. The politico-religious crisis of the 1930s

Between 1921 and 1964, Malta three times obtained her own parliament and Self-Government, though with limited competence. Twice the Constitution was suspended by the British after serious conflicts in which the church had been conspicuous.

In 1930, the faithful were notified by the Bishops that it was mortal sin to vote in the forthcoming elections for the pro-British Prime Minister, Lord Strickland, his party, or his allies, the Labour Party. A conflict between Strickland and two secular priests appointed to the Senate by Bishop Caruana, arose because of the support of the Reverend Senators for the pro-Italian opposition. The conflict escalated and Strickland found almost the whole secular clergy serried against him. The Bishop was reluctant to act against Strickland, until the latter protected two Franciscan supporters of his party against the anger of the notorious Fascist Italian Visitor of the Order, Padre Carta. Padre Carta wanted to transfer Fr. Guido Micallef to Sicily because he was a sympathiser of Strickland. Strickland questioned whether an Italian could order a British subject to leave British territory because of his political opinions and his support for the Constitutional party. So Strickland opened criminal proceedings against Padre Carta, accusing him of being a Fascist.

The investigation of Mgr. Robinson was another significant episode in this struggle. The British Government asked the Vatican to conduct an independent enquiry and Mgr. Robinson was chosen to conduct the enquiry. The British hoped that Mgr. Robinson would blame the clergy for all the political trouble that there was in Malta. Strickland proposed an Anglo-Vatican Concordat to Mgr. Robinson, which however was never signed.

Mgr. Robinson's report was so hostile in criticising Strickland's administration that the Vatican did not want to publish it. Instead the report was communicated to Strickland who published it in newspapers in Malta and Britain.

The Bishop's pastoral letter of 1930 was the most controversial incident in this struggle. The letter forbade the Maltese from voting for candidates harmful to the Roman Catholic Church, but only for candidates who offered assurances to safeguard Catholic religious welfare. The effect of this letter was to limit electors to voting for the Nationalist party.

Because of this Pastoral Letter, the British suspended the election and the constitution. This act was illegal and unconstitutional as the constitution could only be suspended in stress of war or on grounds of emergency touching public safety and the defence of the Empire.

The 1930 pastoral letter was confirmed when elections were again announced in 1932, but was withdrawn just a few days before the elections after Strickland's apology to the Pope. Strickland however was still beaten at the polls during that election.

C. The politico-religious crisis of the 1960s

The other politico-religious crises arose in the 1950's due to the differences between the MLP leader Mintoff and Archbishop Michael Gonzi. These two protagonists of 20th century Malta were constantly at loggerheads, a fact which impacted strongly on the political situation in Malta. The Church opposed Mintoff's proposal of Integration with the United Kingdom because the interests of the Catholic religion would not be safeguarded.

In 1958, the Labour government resigned, and the 1947 Constitution was suspended. Gonzi openly criticised Mintoff's integration proposals and also denounced violence and riots by Labour supporters; Labour party newspapers criticised the Church leadership.

The Diocesan Junta, formed of lay Catholic organisations such as Azzjoni Kattolika and MUSEUM, was set up. The Junta soon became the Church's secular arm in the struggle against Mintoff.

On 31st July 1960, the MLP, which was already an affiliate member of Socialist International, announced that it had joined AAPSO (Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organisation). Since the Church regarded AAPSO as a Communist front, Archbishop Gonzi regarded the MLP's membership as proof that his fears about Mintoff representing a Communist threat for Malta were well founded. The Pastoral Letter for Lent of 1961 categorically condemned the MLP's affiliation with AAPSO.

Ecclesiastical sanctions against the MLP followed. Sanctions included interdiction of the MLP officials and the party's newspapers. Toni Pellegrini resigned as MLP secretary and formed a pro-Church Christian Workers Party. In a Pastoral Letter read in all churches, the

Church declared that those voting for the MLP would be committing mortal sin; general elections were overshadowed by these ecclesiastical sanctions and the MLP lost the 1962 and 1966 elections. There was reconciliation between the MLP and the Church in the late 1960s. In 1971, after the MLP was returned to power, the process of secularisation began in earnest.

D. The role of the Church in Maltese society

Since the end of WWII, Malta had witnessed a demographic explosion and a slow economic and financial revival. These changes gained momentum after Independence and caused a social upheaval in all sectors of Maltese life. Slowly but surely, the Church embarked on the mammoth task to bring the local ecclesiastical structures in line with the teachings of the Vatican Council and the demands of modern society. A host of new pastoral structures were set up to shoulder the task. The Church's contribution to society in present-day Malta includes the services Caritas (Malta) has long been offering for the rehabilitation of drug addicts and to educate the community about the untold harm caused by drug abuse. It also includes charitable institutions such as Homes for the Elderly, Girls' Hostels, Children's Homes, Homes for Persons in Distress, and Homes for Persons with Disabilities. Furthermore, the Church is giving shelter and/or assistance to many of the refugees reaching our shores.

In her efforts to offer the kind of pastoral leadership called for according to the signs of the times, the Church in Malta is encouraging Catholics to strive towards a collective effort to create a society inspired by the highest ideals of justice and peace, and marked by special attention to the needs of the less fortunate members of the community.

This appeal is also linked to the Church's warnings about the negative effects of the strong winds of secularism, materialism, consumerism and hedonism, which are reaching our small central Mediterranean archipelago too.

During the past few years, agreements have been reached between the Church and the State about: (a) the transfer to the State of such immovable property in Malta as is not required by the Catholic Church for pastoral purposes; (b) Church Schools; (c) the re-incorporation of the Faculty of Theology within the (State) University of Malta; and (d) State recognition of Civil Effects to Canonical Marriage and to the decisions of the Ecclesiastical Authorities.

These agreements, the products of a long but constructive dialogue, strengthened the relations between the Church and the State and permitted the Church - especially following the agreement on Church property - to concentrate better on its pastoral mission.

The Maltese people's appreciation of the services the Church is providing in these and other areas is evidenced by their continued generous support to sustain them and to help them respond adequately to today's needs.