

OUR WELFARE REFORM

A CALL TO A COMMITTED DISCUSSION

Welfare Reform pushes Maltese society face to face with its values. We have by now got used to the welfare system our society has developed, giving generous pension in our old age, health and other services that are largely free, and freedom from poverty to most of us.

But now there are clear signs that this, as it stands, is no longer sustainable. While fewer babies are born, people live longer. The number of pensioners is increasing, expenditure in all other services, especially in the health sector, is fast growing, while our national income is not growing fast enough to keep pace with the increased expenditure.

THREE GUIDING IDEAS: DIGNITY, SOLIDARITY, SUBSIDIARITY

The dignity of every individual is the first consideration. A good welfare system is one that respects and promotes this dignity, by creating structures and by making room to enable all, and especially the weak, to participate effectively in social life. True progress is not merely economic progress.

The human person attains this dignity above all as member of society. A just society is one where all its members can contribute to the common good, because participation, and not market competition, is the main road to personal development. A just society is one that enables its members to participate, providing them with the conditions for that to happen, such as education, health service, and support in poverty.

Solidarity reminds us of our duties to others. Subsidiarity is the other side of the coin: a reminder that we must grow in our personal responsibility and autonomy, and reduce dependencies.

NOW CHANGE IS URGENT: AND WE ARE ALL RESPONSIBLE

In spite of its many benefits, our current system might have lulled us into forgetting our duty to practise solidarity with others, through having got so used to expecting to receive everything from the state.

Most urgent is the need for the prevailing Maltese way of thinking to break free of excessive political partisanship. We too often tend, when faced with problems of national importance, to speak as if our position were the perfect one, blocking any genuine discussion in the process. We are equally prone to the temptation to act like spectators. We let time pass and refrain from taking up a position in the debate. We wait in the hope that the other side will pronounce itself first, for we fear that whoever speaks up first will be punished by the other side or by their own.

If such a short-sighted mentality prevails, pushing us into confrontation or an unending 'wait and see' attitude, it would be no wonder if our political and social leaders end up failing to achieve solutions that make sense.

COOPERATION IS NOW EVERYONE'S DUTY

All sectors of society must now work together, in a spirit of harmony and solidarity, for agreed solutions that lead to a stronger economy.

True solutions are ones that seek the common good, rather than the good of particular sectors. Leaders and members of society who seek only their own or their section's advantage will only drive us towards a society where everybody suffers. To those who are prepared to work for a climate of understanding, in which things are done for the sake of greater fairness and justice, we say, 'Blessed are the peacemakers' in this 21st century Malta.

Experts now have a duty to explain to the public the consequences of every decision being considered, its impact on the country's prosperity, on the life of different sectors of the community, and on sustainability.

Our leaders, those able to influence the opinion of a sector of the population, have an obligation to promote a sense of frankness in the analysis of issues, and a readiness to break free of old rigidities, unhelpful positions and outdated acquired rights.

Every citizen must now take an honest look at what he or she is contributing and what he or she is taking out of the system. Those taking benefits higher benefits than their due, those enjoying monopolies that go against the common good, those who strengthen their prosperity through tax evasion, those who issue unjustified certificates, or are in the habit of registering as unemployed while holding a job, those that waste, and others, must now ask if the time has come for them to switch their efforts towards consolidating a society that inspires more trust by being based on social justice.

The Church cannot, nor does it wish to, propose a magic formula... she, rather, puts forward a number of points for consideration, insisting that it is everybody's duty to take part in the effort to put our basic social services on a sustainable basis. (Synod document on *Diakonia and Justice*, 18)

In the light of these signs of the times, and of the Diocesan Synod's statement, we would therefore like to put forward our contribution towards a committed discussion about welfare reform.

WE NEED MORE INVESTMENT IN PEOPLE

Social and economic policy must go hand in hand. The social aspects of economic decisions must never be disregarded, while decisions on social policy should strictly stick to what the economy affords.

A weak society can never give us a healthy economy, and social problems have a very real economic cost which we would do well to factor in from the very beginning. We cannot solve such problems by just spending money on social benefits. We need to maintain effective social systems, relevant to the needs of individuals and those of the economy. No welfare system can function if our economy does not create more quality jobs; and this cannot happen unless we make a serious review of our present system for education and training. We equally need to take a radical look at our competitiveness, and face the sacrifices needed from employers and employees alike, for the sake of everyone's good.

The voice of the poor still needs hearing. Statistics reveal that 15% of Maltese live at risk of poverty. In any discussion on welfare in our country the voice of the poor cannot go unheard. It is not enough to pay heed only to those whose voices are strong because they have money or because they are well organized. We believe that a fair and sustainable welfare system must include everyone, as it tends to do at present. Any reform will clearly need to give special attention to the way it affects those who are already weak. We need to ask, for example, how those who are already on the brink of poverty, or young couples already overburdened with high mortgages, can afford to pay for voluntary pension schemes and meet the heavy expenses of private health care.

Any reformed system must go on helping those in need. At the same time it must avoid promoting a culture of dependency but lead, instead, to greater participation in social and economic life.

A FAMILY CENTRED WELFARE SYSTEM

The core structure that helps solidarity remains the family. In it we learn to live with others, share with them what we have and help those in need, even if they cannot pay us back.

Hence, any social and economic policy must consider its impact on the family. We need a much better balance between family life and work. Any policy that encourages women to enter the labour market must also reliably provide the social and fiscal structures that ensure that this does not happen in ways that harm the family, or the development of all its members, young and old, female and male.

WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN'S DUTY IN ALL THIS?

This is not the time for the Maltese Christian to remain passive, or to wait for things to happen, or to drift with the current.

There certainly are currents that push towards places where the Christian would not wish to go: such as a society that cares less about those who suffer, or a society ruled by lethargy when there are things that need to be done, with responsibility and sustainability. Every Christian is called upon to work, and the Christian community to pray, above all for an atmosphere of mutual understanding and clear thinking. We need this in our common quest for solutions based on solidarity and subsidiarity, and sealed with the safeguard of sustainability.

