A stylized, abstract illustration of a flame in shades of orange and yellow, with a textured, stippled appearance. The flame is positioned on the left side of the image, with its base at the bottom left and its tip reaching towards the top center. The text is placed to the right of the flame's main body.

YOU ARE THE
LIGHT OF
THE WORLD

YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Resource book for Religious Education in Years 9 to 11.

Published by the Secretariat for Catechesis of the
Archdiocese of Malta.

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INTRODUCTION

Time flies and waits for nobody! It seems just like yesterday that you started secondary school and today you are preparing yourselves for the end of secondary school examinations! Actually, this book prepares you for the SEC examination in Religion at the end of the secondary school. However, we would be losing much if we only look at Religion as an examination subject.

Religion does not only exist as a pass subject on a certificate. The reason why we learn Religion at school is not only to have a pass mark in another subject, though that is important too. We can therefore say that the principal aim of learning Religion is not only to know more about one's beliefs and culture but also so that one truly lives what one believes in.

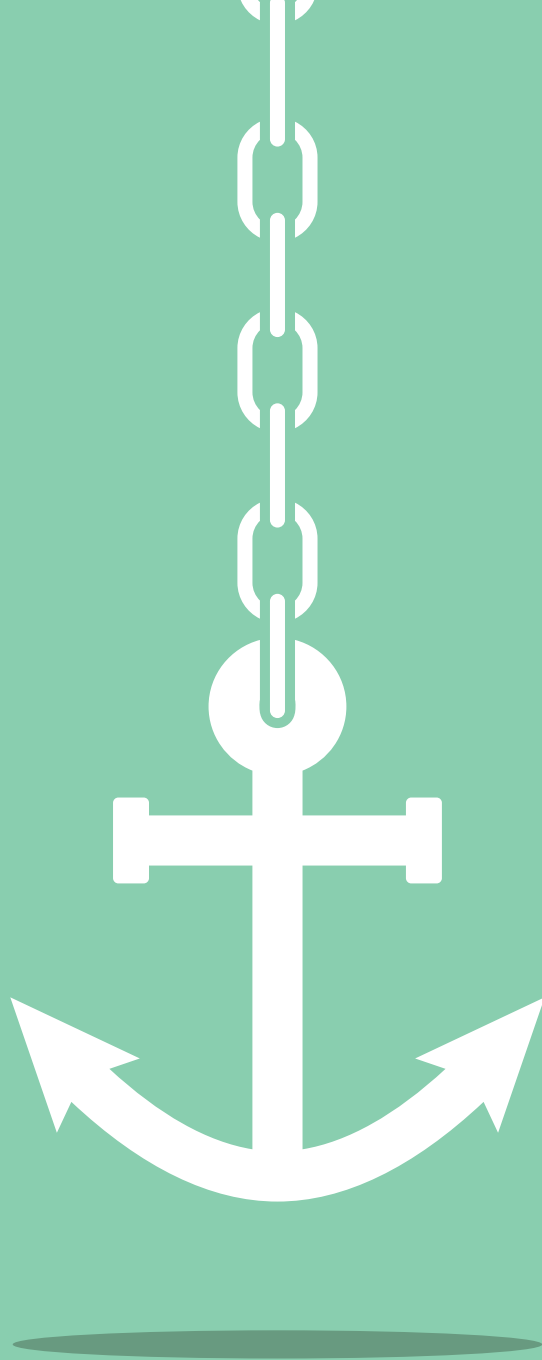
From the very beginning, man has sought to know God. If we look around us, we see that various people express their beliefs in different ways, not necessarily identical to our beliefs. These persons help us to appreciate our faith and give us the opportunity of learning about other faiths and living together in reciprocal respect, as befits the contemporary society we are living in.

We can therefore say that the scope of this book is to be a resource from which we can understand well what we believe in so that we can live it in everyday life, at peace with others. The choice of themes found in this book throw light on our life, thus helping us in the decisions we are asked to take today and also in the future.

The starting point is when we realise who we really are, by understanding the changes that are occurring in us and around us while growing up. By doing so, we will be making good use of the opportunities that come our way. At the same time, we will be meeting with decisive moments which offer us challenges, which we can overcome by taking note of those who came before us and learn from them how to face what frightens us. God's word is of great help to us in this regard.

If we understand that Religion is truly that light which leads us in this world, then we will appreciate better the value of the Religious Education we receive in our schools. This education enables us to become persons who can relate positively with ourselves, with God, with others and with creation. It is in this way that we can be called "the light of the world." (Matthew 5, 14).

Rev. Dr Carl-Mario Sultana
Director Office of Religious Education



CHAPTER 1

CHAINS

I AM AN INDIVIDUAL

The third year of the secondary school (Year 9/Form3) is exactly in the middle of the time spent in the secondary school. Time flies, but we can notice that the changes we experience now are noticeable and are occurring at a faster rate. We start what we call **Adolescence, that time of life when from children we become adults**. It is true that it is easier to see this change in our appearance but, as we shall see, the changes that are not seen are much greater than those which can be seen.

PHYSICAL CHANGES

The word **'Puberty'** means **the physical changes which occur at this period in our life, through which we develop the ability to have children**.

We may be pleased and satisfied with the physical changes, for which we have waited and wished during the last few years. On the other hand, we may be displeased when this development occurs too early or too late or when, in our eyes or those of others, certain features develop 'abnormally'. At this

time, therefore, we become more preoccupied with our appearance. There is nothing wrong in taking care of ourselves or trying to improve the way we look. Still, there is the danger that we may become obsessed with our appearance. Often we are encouraged by the **media**, such as beauty magazines, to look even more beautiful. This results in thousands of surgical interventions and operations, sometimes quite dangerous, to change or redefine certain features. There are also illnesses, like **anorexia**, where a person drastically reduces food intake and becomes exaggeratingly thin, creating serious health problems, which may even lead to death. It is interesting to note that even after losing a considerable amount of weight, the anorexic person is still convinced of being overweight.



MORAL CHANGES

The word '**morality**' means **the ability in a person to make good decisions.**

According to the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, the decisions, which we make when we are young, are based on the fear of punishment and the fear of authority. It is only when we reach the age we are now that, according to this psychologist, we reach a new stage where we understand that moral laws exist to help us live together as a social group. This means that this time we experience more changes in the way we think. For example, now, the commandments are no longer a set of rules which punish those who disobey them and reward those who obey them. Now, we can understand that ultimately, these commandments are there for our own good and that of society in general.

At this age, another change in the moral aspect is that we now understand that there is an **intention** behind every **action** we take. This means that we may do something which looks good, but actually it is done with a wrong intention. Hence, that action cannot be considered good. For example, going to mass is a good thing, but if one goes to mass to show off the new clothes one has bought, then the intention is not good and the value of the action is reduced.



Use this QR code to find more information and videos online.

SOCIAL CHANGES

At this age, we have started the process of building our **identity** by **determining what is special in us and what makes us different from others. We start discovering who we are and what roles we will adopt from now on.**

'Who am I?', 'What is the sense of this life?', 'What is my place in the world?', 'What is the value of the people around me in my life?' These questions and others like them come to our mind at this important stage of our lives. There are no easy answers to these questions; neither do they disappear when we grow up. John Carey, the popular Canadian actor, stated that no amount of money or fame can provide answers to these questions.

"... It is a great shock to find that after obtaining all that you dreamed of and more, you are not happy. You end up saying, 'No, it is not this that I should have yearned for.' I sincerely hope that everyone succeeds in obtaining everything in life to understand exactly what I am saying. In recent years, I passed through a bad time, an experience I do not wish on anyone. But, this experience has made me understand better what life is, who God is, what is real and what is not. I can also understand better what suffering is. Suffering is the way to salvation, because it is only when you understand suffering that you can be compassionate. From then on, you become a free being. This is what happened to me when I realized all this. I developed a new energy for love and a desire to be loved; to create new things and be admired for this."

THE ADOLESCENT JESUS

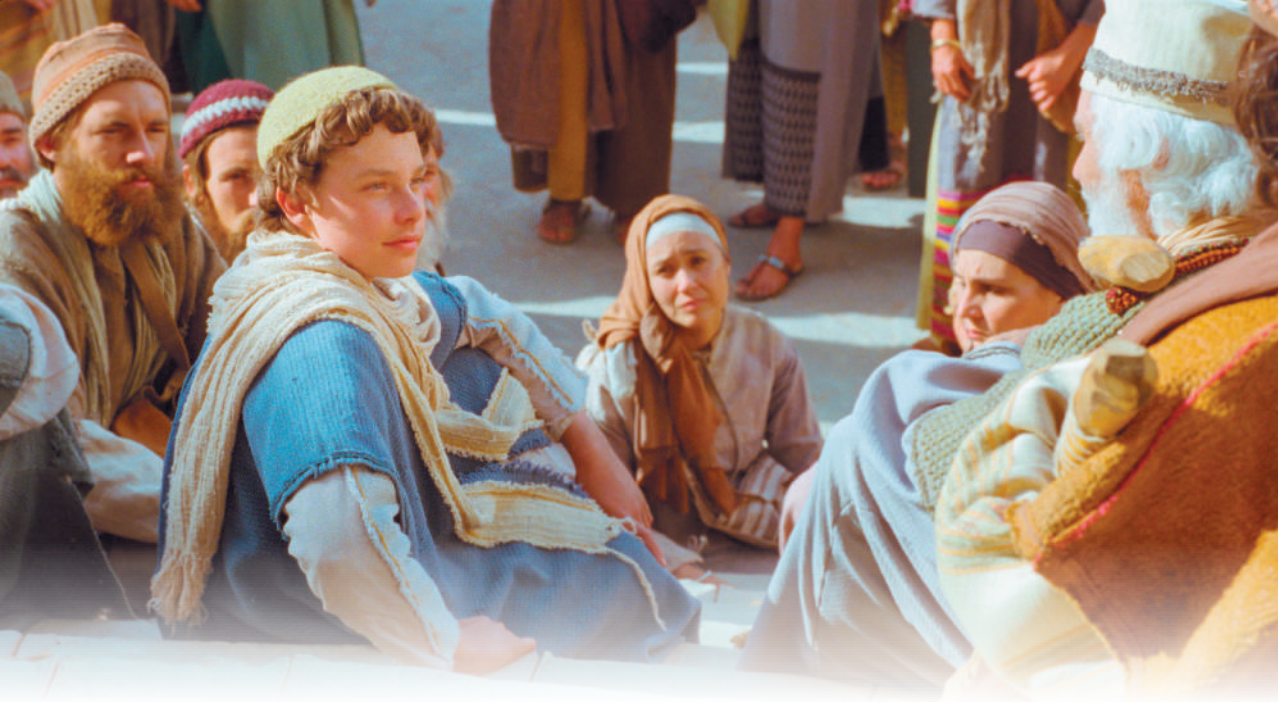
Like us, even Jesus passed through these changes and, like us, he also desired to build his identity. We see him at work building his identity in this account, mostly isolated, of his childhood and adolescence. (Luke 2, 41-52)

"Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother

treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour."

It would be interesting to take notice of the facts arising from this account.

- » In the Jewish religion there is a ritual known as **Bar Mitzvah** (for boys) and **Bat Mitzvah** (for girls) which is held when the boy is 13 years old and the girl is 12.
- » Through this ritual, those attaining the required age are given certain adult responsibilities, like, for example:
 - They become members of the religious community and can also lead some prayers.
 - They no longer are the responsibility of their parents, thus becoming totally responsible for their actions.
 - It was not a coincidence that the Evangelist mentioned the age of Jesus when this episode occurred. Jesus was still considered a child and was not old enough to be responsible for himself. That is why Joseph and Mary searched for him so assiduously!
- » It is worthwhile to note that, on this journey that the Jews made to celebrate **Easter, which is the freeing of their fathers from slavery in Egypt**, men and women did not travel together. Therefore, it is very probable that Joseph thought



that Jesus was with Mary and Mary thought that Jesus was with Joseph.

- » Jesus had this desire to be independent, to build his identity, to understand his role, and to start enthusiastically doing that which would make him different and unique.
- » Notwithstanding all this, the account of his being lost and found teaching, ends with the important phrase **“and was obedient to them”**. As we have seen, Jesus had his dreams and plans, maybe even hopes of growing up quickly, as every adolescent has. But, he still respected and obeyed those who brought him up and wished him well.
- » Jesus did not only wish to grow up in age, but worked also to grow up in *wisdom*, despite the fact that his parents were simple persons. Here, **“wisdom”** does not imply the ability of earning high marks in an examination; **it means being a person with a sense of proportion or balance, knowing your aims in**

life and being wise to make good choices in life.

- » We also read that Jesus grew in *grace*. We use the expression **“a graceless person”** when we refer to someone who, with his movements, bumps into those next to him or drops or breaks things, not necessarily on purpose, but through lack of attention. In religion, we can also understand grace in this sense, because it is all the gifts that God gives us to grow in spirit. Grace is not only that, because it strengthens our spirit to be able to care and pay attention to the needs of others.

Note that, the physical, moral and social changes, which we mentioned in the first lesson and which psychologists mention when talking about the development of a person during adolescence, are included in the three words written by Luke, the Evangelist, in his account of the adolescence of Jesus – **age, wisdom and grace.**

I AND THOSE AROUND ME

There have been so many studies on adolescence, that it is not surprising to find many discrepancies and disagreements. In the past, it was believed that adolescence brings with it sadness and anxiety. Today, many scholars say that this is not necessarily true. In fact, many adolescents live through this period in their life without too much trouble. This does not mean that there are no difficulties in certain aspects related to this age.

What we call **“self-image”**, the way we look at ourselves, is actually affected by how others treat us. It is important not to take too much notice of the attitudes and comments of others; yet, it is not easy to disregard them. Often, in order find ourselves, we end up trying to understand how others look at us.

AT HOME

If a parent passes positive comments about the child’s intelligence or, on the other hand, passes negative comments, for example, on the child’s untrustworthiness, then such comments may become part of the **“self-image”** we have talked about. It is, therefore, important that each parent is conscious of this great responsibility – the building of the child’s self image. It is something which a person carries for a long time. A person’s identity starts being built little by little, until at adolescence, the self is formed, because the individual becomes more conscious of himself/herself.

Consequently, an increase in family arguments is normal, as these form part of the adolescents’ attempts to find their identity and become no longer dependent on their parents or adults. Generally, adolescents do those things which parents and society forbid. In the past, and in certain cultures today, adolescents would only have some more years to live at home, as they would be considered adults. This is very different from what happens today in our own culture, where adolescents stay on living for another ten years or more in the home where they have been reared.

FRIENDS

During adolescence, the circle of friends gradually replaces the importance formerly given to our family. The need to be accepted by our group of friends is so strong, that we often change the way we speak, the way we dress, or wear our hair, as well as our outlook towards God and our religion. As we have seen, the way we look at ourselves depends on those around us; now that we are giving more importance to friends, our self image is affected by them.

EXPERIENCES

Finally, the way we look at ourselves is affected by what we experience. Just as the positive ways we are treated by family and friends help us to grow and live, the negative attitudes of these same people break us, the same as life experiences do. Naturally these

experiences are not always caused by people, but may happen to us suddenly, such as an illness, a disability or a grave accident. At other times, it is people close to us, such as family members or friends, who make us suffer unpleasant experiences, like being abandoned, and being physically, mentally or sexually abused. The more serious these experiences are, the more they become part of our make-up.

"If I let go of anger, pain and fear, what is left of me? The effects of abuse have always been part of me: angry, in pain and afraid. This is how I describe myself: feeling angry, in pain and fearful. What am I going to be in the future? Will I go on existing if I let go of these feelings? How can I believe that I am more than this?"

(Written by a young girl, victim of sexual abuse.)

THE CHURCH AND THE ASSOCIATIONS WITHIN IT

Jesus's reason for establishing a community we call the "Church" was to make up for the pain caused by individuals to others. The Church allays this pain through a network of people who are ready to help, listen, love and therefore, heal. The Church has always understood that its mission is to bring Jesus to people, not only by preaching and writing, but above all by action. This is visible in the smallest youth centre which unites a few youths, to national and international youth groups and associations which help people with drug or gambling problems, persons with special needs, widows and widowers, young mothers, missionaries in poor countries and many other cases.

Look up any Church organisation in the parish or in Malta and do research on the valuable work it does.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

SOCIAL MEDIA

The idea of what community means was turned upside down when, in the mid-nineties, the Internet made its gradual appearance in man's life. Up till then the word **"community"** meant **a group of people living in the same place, sharing the same characteristics or interests.**

Naturally, a requisite of a community is that members communicate or are interested in communicating with each other. Through the Internet, **communication** among people grew at a fast rate and therefore, we cannot talk anymore about one type of community where people live close to each other. This invention created what is called a **virtual community**, where communication takes place even though people live far away from each other.

The Internet gave rise to what we call **social media – the use of websites, as well as a number of other appliances through which one communicates or shares communication with others.**

Quite recently, this possibility has gained ground because one can access these appliances through one's mobile phone or watch. Today, we can hardly imagine our life without the use of, or access to these means, even for a short time.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

We say that everything in life has its good and bad aspects. Let us take our social life and education and evaluate how they can be affected positively and negatively.

ADVANTAGES

1. Social Life

The value of friendship is an important Christian value and, as we have seen, we give it a lot of importance. A high percentage of people consider that the social media has helped their social life. Many say that they have made new friends or have kept in contact with friends whom they cannot meet, like for example, friends they had at school.

2. EDUCATION

Today, many groups or communities of every type and those with common interests, use the social media to spread what is of interest to them. We must not forget that the social media has become more effective in the spreading of news than any other already existing means, such as the radio, the television and the newspapers. Indeed, today every news station or newsagency has an online facility, while others have been created to use only social means. In the face of this reality, the Church as a community and groups working within it, must make good use of the social media to deliver the message in the best possible way.



DISADVANTAGES

1. SOCIAL LIFE

Many studies have shown that, apart from the advantages which we mentioned and the many others which we did not refer to, there are also adverse effects on adolescents. The disadvantages that stand out clearly include the inability to communicate and build real and intimate relationships with others, apart from doing so virtually, the bullying taking place online and the addiction to connectivity. A research conducted by the University of Chicago showed that the addiction to social media may be stronger than that to cigarettes and alcohol.

2. EDUCATION

If, on one hand the social media is an infinite source of information, on the other hand, we should be conscious of the fact that false information abounds, since it is easy to spread fake news. It is

also easy to spread hate feelings, based on prejudices or distorted ideas about groups or individuals. Diverse studies have also shown that those who use frequently some type of social media obtain less marks in examinations, due to continuous distractions.

RELIGION AND THE SOCIAL MEDIA

In its role to seek the highest benefits for mankind, the Church examines everything that can help people, as well as, all that which is an obstacle to them, including the social media. Ever since the sixties, the Church has been speaking about the effects of the social media on people. For this reason, Pope Paul VI desired the holding of a World Day of Communication. This was first celebrated in 1967. Every year the Pope speaks on this important subject. What Pope Francis wrote on the fiftieth World Day of Communication in 2016 is very interesting:

"The Internet can help us become better citizens. The access to digital networks demands our respect towards others, whom we cannot see, but who, nevertheless, have a dignity which must be respected. The Internet can be used wisely, so that we can build a healthy society, open to the sharing of ideas."





IN MALTA

The Church in Malta has established a *Media Office* for the express purpose of rendering itself more accessible and, at the same time, to make sure that the Church's message reaches as many people as possible. It is interesting to mention, for example, an "App" which can be downloaded on the smartphone; its title is "**Malta Mass**" and it indicates the nearest place and time where a mass is said, according to where one is located.

Among the many facebook sites which are associated with religion, there is also a site called **laikos.org** in which one can find, besides all the books of the Bible, official Church documents, as well as, messages regularly sent by the Pope and Bishops.

A COMMUNITY WHICH BELIEVES

Every community has a characteristic which unites its members. But, these members do not just accept this common characteristic; they find means of communicating among themselves to strengthen this common interest. Without communication there can be no new ideas which help this community to grow and develop. The enthusiasm found in the community is bound to die if its members do not communicate.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

The Church is exactly this:

a community of persons whose common characteristic is the belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, whose love led him to his death on the cross. The word “Church” is derived from the Greek word “**ekklesia**”, which means “congregation”, or a group of persons. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul gives a beautiful example of what the Church is. He compares each one of us to a different member of the body. Each member, whoever the person is, has an important role to play . (1 Cor 12: 21-23, 27)



"The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you", nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

These words show that, contrary to what some think, the Church is not only the priests, or the Pope and Bishops, but we too, old and young who have been baptised, thereby becoming members of the Church. We, who are not members of the *priesthood* or of **consecrated life**, like monks and nuns, are called **the laity**. The Church's aim is to make a better world and better people, according to the way each person is called. Therefore, as lay people, we too have an important role in the Church, whether we choose married life or whether we remain single. There is more possibility for a single person to do **voluntary** work in Malta and even abroad. There are those who opt to work in the parish or in associations, like the *Society of Catholic Doctrine*, better known as "*Il-Mużew*".

WHAT DO WE BELIEVE IN?

It is true that we live our faith by being members of this community of persons, who have the same beliefs. This unity of faith strengthens the relationship among us. But, at the same time, faith is something **personal**, which means that each Catholic must examine his or her faith and grow in it. What is the use of holding big parties when a child



is baptised, when the same parents do not make sure that the child receives the best possible teaching where faith is concerned? What benefit is there for those who, after receiving Confirmation, are relieved that they are not going to preparation classes any more? The learning and interest must be kept alive. It is necessary to change the mentality that the learning of religion is limited only up to the time when children receive Confirmation. Moreover, the idea that only those intending to become priests or nuns have to remain interested in learning religion is wrong and should be eradicated. Indeed, there are several religious entities, evening courses, conferences and meetings



aimed at lay people who seek religious formation or perhaps deeper study at University level. The teaching of the Catholic Church Catechism is based on four pillars, which are:

1. The basic teaching as found in the Creed – the Trinity, the Church, life after death.
2. The Sacraments as celebrations of the Christian life together.
3. Morality – how the Christian should live, what is good and what is bad according to the teaching of Christ and the Church.
4. Prayer, as the communication of this community with God.

THE HOLY SPIRIT WHO GIVES THE BREATH OF LIFE TO THIS COMMUNITY

The work of the Holy Spirit and that of the Church are interwoven. After the death of Jesus, the Apostles gathered together, were confused and felt very low and totally frightened. (John 20, 19-22)

"On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'."

At the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles we find that at Pentecost, the Apostles received the Holy Spirit, so we can say that the Church was born on that day. The Holy Spirit gave birth to the Church and is still leading it, so that it will carry on with the mission of preaching Jesus Christ. This is possible through the power of the Holy Spirit, who works within us as members of the Church.

OTHER OPINIONS

In this chapter, we followed, step by step, the development of the Christian youth. First and foremost, we reasoned that we cannot separate our development as Christians from our development as human beings. Our religion does not forget who we are and what our physical, social and emotional needs as adolescents are.

We also talked about the importance of friends and our need of being part of a group, even in a virtual way through modern technology, which makes it easy for us to be only a button away from talking to somebody, who may possibly be very distant from us on the other side of the globe.

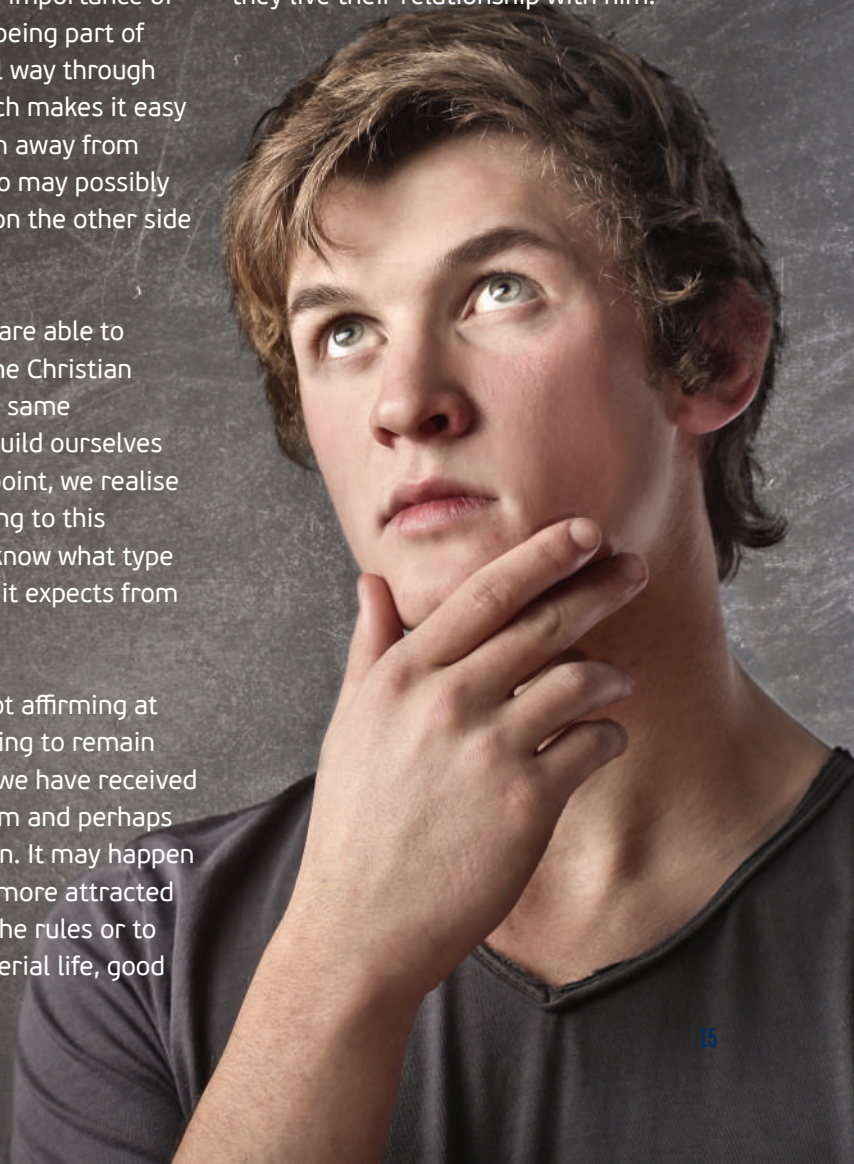
With all this in mind, we are able to understand our role in the Christian community and how this same community helps us to build ourselves and our society. At this point, we realise that if we decide to belong to this community, we have to know what type of beliefs and behaviour it expects from us.

It is a fact that we are not affirming at any point that we are going to remain Christians, even though we have received the Sacrament of Baptism and perhaps even that of Confirmation. It may happen that, at this age, we are more attracted to all that goes against the rules or to all that is related to material life, good

or bad. Indeed, it should not come as a shock to us if, at this age, there are persons who abandon the Christian community and also their belief in God.

ATHEISM

We know that even among those who believe in God, there are those who do not agree about the way they perceive him, or how they describe him or how they live their relationship with him.





Moreover, there is the possibility that we change the way we look at God at different periods in our life. It is therefore quite easy, that during these changes, one arrives at a stage where one, for one reason or another, says that God does not exist.

The word "*atheism*" means exactly this – *the lack of belief in the existence of God*. The word is made up of two Greek words, which are: '**a**', meaning '**without**' and '**theism**', which means '**belief in God**'. An atheist is a person who does not believe in the existence of some form of Spirit or Energy, which we call God who, among other things, is responsible for the creation of the world.

There are two reasons which lead people to deny the existence of God. One is that God cannot be proved scientifically, using scientific tools or instruments. Others believe that, in the presence of so much suffering and evil in the world, the existence of a powerful

and mighty '*God*', who allows all this, does not make much sense.

I EXAMINE MY BELIEFS

The questions and doubts associated with atheism are also questions and doubts of those who believe. We cannot expect to have clear answers to these questions. On the contrary, these thoughts should push believers to examine their faith, reflect and ask and, as we have already stated, keep on learning. On the other hand, we should not be afraid of these arguments. As much as God's existence cannot be proved, neither can one find proof that God does not exist. Those who find it difficult to see God's hand in creation, should also find it difficult to conclude that this beautiful and immense universe made itself.

With regard to suffering, it may be that when we were younger, we emphasised the idea that God was there to remove suffering and solve problems.

This way of thinking leads many persons to question the existence of God when they are going through suffering or difficulties and their suffering is not allayed or their problems are not solved. Consequently, they lose faith in God. Now that we are growing older, we should also grow out of the idea that God is there to bestow material gifts. We should realise that suffering is a reality and it is part of our existence. God is sharing with us all that we are going through, just like Jesus did when he was among us. Faith helps us to fight against suffering and gives meaning to what we experience.

THE CHURCH AND ATHEISM

What should be the attitude of the Church in the modern world, when faced with the rapid increase of the number of people who consider themselves to be atheists, especially in the past 200 years?

Both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis talked about the necessity of *dialogue* even with people who do not believe in God. Moreover, the Popes remarked that sometimes it is better to be an atheist than a Christian in name only. Pope Benedict said that often those who opt for atheism have thought deeply about the existence of God before deciding not to believe in him. However, those who profess to be Christians, but live their life as if God does not exist, are worse than the atheists, because their way of life leads to indifference towards the faith and towards God.

Now that we have reached a time when we can reason and think, it is worthwhile to examine what place we want to give to faith in our life, while we are slowly building our identity. The way forward will not always be easy, but, we should keep in mind that our religion is there to help us find ourselves during our life journey. St Augustine says,



"There is no need to go outside yourself. Go back inside yourself. Truth lies in man's heart."

CAN I DIE INSTEAD OF HAVING TO SUFFER?

The most challenging moments in our life are those when, one day or another, we face suffering and death. Every person is different and looks differently at such moments. There are those who do everything in their power and fight to stay alive, while others look on death as the only way out of their suffering.

1. EUTHANASIA

The word “*euthanasia*” is derived from two Greek words: “*eu*” means “good” and “*thanatos*” which means “death”. This word has been used since the 17th century and, from the very first, it referred to “an easy death”, that is, an act where, to eliminate suffering, somebody is killed or left to die by not being given the care needed. Originally, this was intended for persons who were on the point of dying and who

were going through a lot of suffering. However, today, euthanasia is being given to persons who do not necessarily have terminal illnesses or who are not suffering agonising pain.

EUTHANASIA CAN TAKE THREE FORMS :

VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA occurs when the person who is sick wishes and asks for it. This type of euthanasia can present itself in two ways. It is *euthanasia* when it is the doctor who gives the fatal injection to the person. However, it is *assisted suicide* when it is the patient himself or herself who administers the injection or any other form, usually provided purposely by a doctor.



INVOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA

This happens when the patient is incapable of deciding whether to have euthanasia or not; however, it is given without the patient's consent.

NON-VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA

This occurs when, although the patient is not in a condition to decide, his or her life is terminated.

IS EUTHANASIA LEGAL?

Up to the year 2018, euthanasia became legal in the following countries: Holland, Belgium, Columbia, Luxemburg, Canada and India. Assisted suicide is legal in Switzerland, Germany, South Korea and in some American States. The laws about the age when one can ask for euthanasia vary according to the circumstances. For instance, in Holland, which was the first country to legalise euthanasia in 2002, even 12 year

old children may request euthanasia, provided they have their parents' consent. In other countries, including Malta, there are various groups lobbying for the legalisation of euthanasia.

THE POSITION OF THE CHURCH REGARDING EUTHANASIA

The starting point of the Church's position about euthanasia is the fifth commandment, **"Thou shalt not kill."** This means that one cannot take upon oneself the right to life and the power to decide who and when a person is to die. The power over life is in God's hands as He is the owner of it.

There is, as well, the often mentioned argument that one has the right to do what one wants with one's life. In the case of voluntary euthanasia, we believe that as persons, we should not refuse the gift of life which God

gives us, notwithstanding the difficult moments which life presents us with. Indeed, voluntary euthanasia is a form of suicide.

ORDINARY CARE AND EXTRAORDINARY CARE

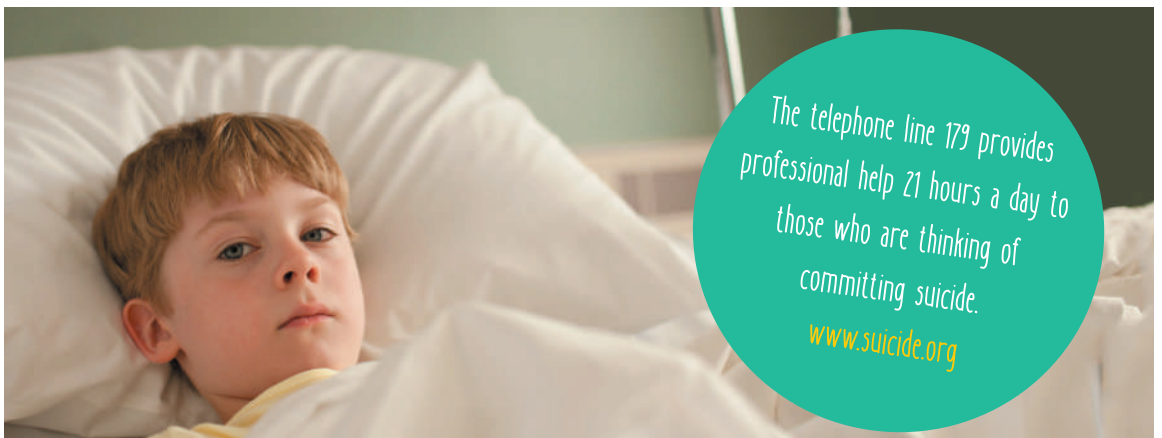
There are those who argue that the Church's position against euthanasia shows lack of respect for the dignity of those who are suffering; these portray the Church as having no mercy for these people. In fact, many refer to euthanasia as "mercy killing". The truth is totally different. First, we need to understand the difference that the Church makes between ordinary cure and extraordinary cure which the patient may be receiving. **Ordinary Cure** does not involve great expense and suffering, while offering a reasonable hope for a cure. On the other hand, **Extraordinary Cure** is the opposite of this, in the sense that it involves huge expenses which the patient cannot afford and exaggerated suffering and yet, despite all this, the possibility of a cure is little or non-existent.

The Church teaches that, while one must do all that is possible to save one's life by taking the ordinary cure that one needs, yet, one can **refuse** to take **extraordinary cure** and accept the fact that the end of life is near.

The Church also insists that one should be offered all medical options available to remove or allay suffering.

2. SUICIDE

The same arguments brought forward in the case of voluntary euthanasia apply for suicide, that is, when one takes one's life. Although as an act it is wrong, because one has taken a life, yet, it may be noted that most probably, the mental state of the one who commits suicide does not allow one to make a responsible judgement of one's action. Today, instead of focusing on whether that individual has gone to heaven or to hell, we, as Christians, should focus on helping persons who may show signs that they may be considering to commit suicide.





SUFFERING

The “why” of suffering remains a mystery. What is certain is that suffering is a reality which everyone experiences sometime or other. Something common between euthanasia and suicide is the suffering which is experienced: in euthanasia the suffering is probably physical and in suicide it is psychological or emotional. Also, in both cases, one feels abandoned by God and looks at death as a solution to end one’s suffering. In his letter to the Hebrews, probably referring to what happened in the Garden of Olives, St. Paul writes that before Jesus died he *“offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death.”* (Hebrews 5:7) . In the gospel of Mark (15 ; 34) we read that Jesus on the cross says, “Eloi,

lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Even Jesus felt suffering, as well as the sense of being abandoned, which suffering brings.

Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, spent three years living in a concentration camp during the second world war. In his book, **“Man’s search for meaning”** he says that man has dignity because he is a human being and not because he is useful. He says this, in the light of the fact that it was common for the Nazis to practise euthanasia in their concentration camps. Frankl insists that when facing suffering, **the best solution is to find meaning to the pain one is feeling.**

THE WORLD OUR HOME

THE ENVIRONMENT

The environment is all that surrounds us. It comprises all the conditions that every living being needs to be able to live. Very often, when we use this word, we tend to refer mostly to the natural environment and how people make an impact on it with their actions.



MAN'S IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT

As one can imagine, this impact can be either positive or negative. Some examples of how man affects the environment are:

- **Air pollution:** This is created by all types of vehicles such as cars, factories and gases which are released in the atmosphere. Besides producing an inferior quality of the air we have to breathe, air pollution aggravates the *greenhouse effect*. Normally, the rays of the sun which hit the earth are kept in the atmosphere by particular gases found there; thereby, the earth is kept at a reasonable temperature. On the other hand, if we release more of such gases in an artificial way through the already mentioned pollutants, the balance is lost and the world temperature rises.
- **Deforestation:** Trees consume this gas through their leaves and so it becomes their 'food'. Therefore, the uncontrolled cutting down of trees contributes also to the greenhouse effect already mentioned. The Amazon forest in South America is decreasing at the rate of more than 50,000 square kilometres every year; this is more than 150 times the size of Malta. Actually, the Amazon forest provides 20% of the world's total oxygen.

All this may lead to :

- **Changes in the climate:** These result in high temperatures, as well as more rain in certain areas and also less rain in others.
- **The sea level:** This will rise because of the melting down of huge masses of ice as a result of the rising temperatures. Also, land which is

at sea level will be flooded and submerged by the sea.

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

In the first chapter of Genesis we find the account of the creation of the world in the form of a poem. Naturally, this account is not scientific; it is a story written to show how God created the world in an affectionate and loving way and also how God gave man the role of taking care of this creation, which includes the *protection of animals* of which, nowadays we are becoming more conscious. We, Christians, find this viewpoint in this same chapter, in which we read that on the fifth day God created all the creatures of the sea and air, saw that all this creation was good, blessed these animals and said to them,

"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds multiply on the earth." (Genesis 1,22)

On the sixth day, then, the author mentions the creation of land animals, where we read that God said,

"Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." (Genesis 1,24)

On the same day we read that God created man and gave him the role of protecting the whole of creation, including animals.

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

The Church Fathers were great Christian thinkers who lived in the first six centuries after Christ. The teaching found in their writings greatly influenced the general

teaching of the Church throughout the ages in many aspects, including the environment.

They continued to build on the account of creation in *Genesis*. St Basil, one of the Holy Fathers, who lived in the 14th century after Christ, stated this in his commentary on the story of creation:

"The world is an artistic masterpiece given to us for contemplation so that, through it, the wisdom of who created it will be discovered."

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

St. Francis was born in Assisi, Italy, in the year 1181. Up to the present day, he still symbolises what the Church emphasises with regard to the love of animals and the rest of creation. He is the patron saint of animals and ecology. It is customary worldwide to hold the blessing of animals on October 4, when the liturgical feast of St. Francis is celebrated. In the *Canticle of Creation*, a prayer in the form of a song, written in 1225, a year before he died, St. Francis praises God through all his creatures, including the sun and the moon, fire and water and the whole world.

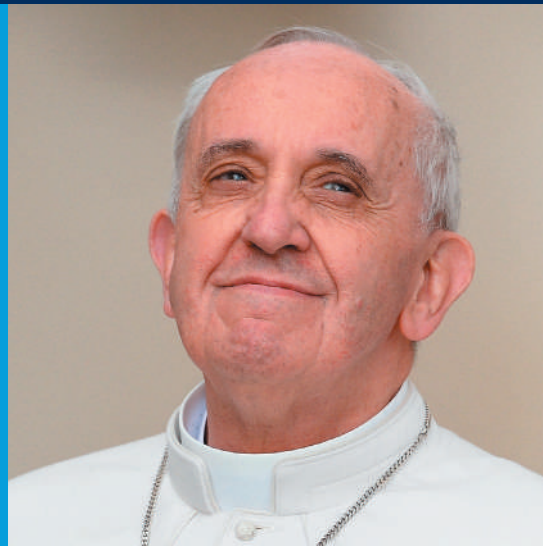
POPE FRANCIS AND THE ENCYCLICAL 'LAUDATO SI'

An encyclical is a document which is issued by the Pope, in which he writes about some aspect of the teaching of the Catholic Church. In 2015, Pope Francis wrote his second encyclical 'Laudato Si', in which he explains the urgent need of protecting our planet. It is interesting to note that, apart from the fact that the present Pope is the first one to choose the name Francis (his real name is Jorge Mario Bergoglio), the phrase 'Laudato Si' consists of two words which in medieval Italian mean "May you be praised". They are the words used by St. Francis at the beginning of the main paragraphs of the *Canticle of Creation* mentioned above.

The Pope does not address his words to Christians only, but to the people of the world. He urges us to care for our planet, which he considers 'our common home'. He insists very strongly on the need for us to become aware of the destruction that man is inflicting on himself and pleads for a radical change in various areas:

"Many things have to change course, but it is we, human beings, above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal."

Laudato Si, par.202.



CHAPTER TWO

THE CHURCH PARVIS



WHY DO THEY BELIEVE?

Joseph, a fourteen year old student, had just arrived at Malta's international airport. He had come for a week's holiday in Malta during Easter time. He had already heard how this week Malta would be packed with religious activities, but he never expected what he witnessed with his own eyes.

By the second day of his visit, he realized that during Holy Week he would see things he would never see in his native England. Everywhere he looked, he saw posters advertising pageants, passion plays and various exhibitions. Besides all this, every time he went into a cafeteria with his family, he was always greeted with the delicious smell of *kwareżimal* (a Lenten sweet), Easter eggs and *figolli* (traditional Easter

almond filled sweet pastry shapes). Since he had never tasted these delicacies, he made it a point to taste them all! He was told that these sweets were connected to Eastertide.

He was really impressed when, on the advice of a local person, he entered a church and saw it packed with statues representing scenes from the passion of Christ. His father got to know from people inside the church that those statues would be carried round the streets in a procession on Good Friday. Many other churches around the island would also hold such a procession.

That evening, before going to sleep in the hotel they were staying at, he found himself thinking about what he had seen. As a teenager, he tried to understand why the Maltese felt they had to do all this. This must be a very important week! It required a lot of effort and energy to organise the events and it appeared that such activities had been going on for years. The Holy Week had become a tradition which had infiltrated all sectors of life. This belief in Jesus had inspired the Maltese to form certain traditions which had become part of their culture.



Apparently, these traditions did not stop when the Easter festivities ended. The Tourist Office had provided them with many leaflets detailing the many activities organised in the summer, like festas, band marches and myriads of other spectacles, all rooted in religious festivities. All this made Joseph think harder. Since the Maltese hold these traditions and customs all tied to their

faith, could it be that these traditions had become just customs with only a little bit of faith, while going down from generation to generation? Joseph was a clever boy and the more he observed, the more he realised that it did not necessarily follow that culture and customs show a great faith!

What do you think?

Everything we do in life leaves its effect. This is obvious to us. And we choose to do something because we believe in it.

I BELIEVE

My dental health is important.



I DO

I brush my teeth daily.



EFFECT

I have healthy teeth.

Orderliness helps me.



I put everything in its place.



I find what I need immediately.

Jesus is important in my life.



I find time to pray to him.



I feel that my relationship with him helps me make good choices.

Give other examples:

This relationship of I BELIEVE → I DO → EFFECT can also be seen in other bad things. Let us see it in an opposite way.

EFFECT

I am overweight.



I DO

I eat unhealthily.



I BELIEVE

I believe there is no need to control my food intake.

I am not on speaking terms with my father/mother.



I do not heed what he/she tells me.



My mother/father does not understand me.

Give other examples:

We see the same things in society. Maltese society has based its customs on its beliefs.

I BELIEVE

Belief



I DO

Customs, Actions and Culture



EFFECT

The attitudes of the Maltese

All that we believe in affects our thoughts, our way of talking and all that we do on a personal level as well as on a higher level.

If we Maltese believe that we should keep our country clean (I believe), we clean everywhere (I do) and so, our country becomes clean (effect).

If we Maltese believe that Jesus makes us better persons (I believe), we do what he tells us to do (I do) and so the Maltese become persons who love and respect each other (effect).

If we Maltese believe that all that Jesus tells us through his Church is good for us (I believe), we heed the teaching of his Church (I do) and in doing so we affect every sector of our life (effect).

If our traditions and customs lose their roots, then they end up being actions without beliefs.

Who knows what impressions Joseph took with him back home? Did he see ancient customs which have no meaning, except that of a pastime or piques? Did the Maltese traditions help him to ask more about his faith? Did he conclude that, after all, it is just a commercial strategy to attract tourists? Did he feel that his country lacked something or that the Maltese were showing outwardly what they really believe in inwardly? Why do they believe?



HALLOWEEN OR SAINTS?

What is society? Maltese society is made up of all of us -- all the people living in Malta. And, every person living in Malta has particular beliefs. Everybody believes in someone or something that makes sense to them. It is certain that those who believe in God, do so because God makes sense to them. Those who do not believe in God choose to do so because God does not make any sense to them. But they certainly believe in some other thing. What is also certain is the fact that what we believe in, affects the way we live.

Let us consider those who love doing sports. No doubt, they do sports because they believe that it is very important to them. If you tell them that they are causing harm to their bodies by practising sports, they laugh at you.

They have enough proof that what they believe in, is good and beneficial and nobody can prove otherwise. And they are right. We can use the same argument when we talk about what is spiritual.

Nevertheless, there are those who do not know why they believe; neither do they have a sound basis of why they still believe. Many persons whose beliefs are not strong, end up changing these beliefs for others which they perceive to make more sense or have more proofs or are more relevant to their life.

Why do you believe in what you believe? What do you believe in? Why do you believe in it? Is your faith or belief something you only learnt about or do you have a living experience of it?

LET US TAKE A FEW EXAMPLES

| I believe that fire is hot and burns | The truth I believe in |
|--|---|
| My mother told me that fire is hot and burns | → Teaching |
| My mother showed me fire and flames | → My mother showed me fire and flames |
| Once I touched fire and proved that it burns | → Personal experience |
| Nobody can tell me that fire is not hot | → A strong faith which nobody can break |
| I believe in Jesus | The truth I believe in |
| I heard he exists, I read and heard about his life and teaching. | → Teaching |
| I was taught that he created me and loves me | → Something I learnt |
| I feel that I have built a relationship with him | → Personal experience |
| Nobody can tell me that Jesus is not really alive. | → A strong faith that nobody can break |

If what we believe in has no deep roots, it can quickly be replaced by another belief. Have you ever stopped to think why, in our country, certain beliefs and customs which have no Christian roots have become a part of the life of many 'baptised' persons?

Why do you think that holidays taken on days like, for example, St. Joseph, St. Peter and St. Paul, the Immaculate Conception and St. Paul's Shipwreck, among others, have become national public holidays?

What is your opinion of the well-known Halloween, which is replacing the feasts of All Saints and All Souls? What belief is at the back of what is affecting our attitude?

THE RITE

A rite is a series of actions which involve gestures, words or objects, done consecutively, in a particular place in front of persons or on an individual basis.

We like to do everything in the form of a ritual, especially at moments of celebrations, like for example, at a wedding. First, the promises are made and then the celebrations follow, not the other way around. Even at a simple birthday party, first there is the giving out of refreshments, then the gifts are presented and lastly, the birthday cake is cut. Generally, the ritual expresses outwardly what we feel inside.

Therefore, the celebrations in church, in which we take part, together or alone, make sense because they are based on rituals which help us understand what we are doing.

Rituals also involve many symbols or objects which have particular meanings. It is important that we know what they mean, as otherwise, we will not make head or tail of what is happening.

Try to discuss the customs which are being imported into our country from other cultures. Find out if they are really strengthening our faith or undermining it.

Look up their origins and the basis of their beliefs and discover what effects they have on our lives.

1. The feast of 'Halloween'
2. The horoscope



THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

There were great expectations when the year 2000 was approaching. Many preparations were made for spectacular displays, especially at midnight of the last day of 1999. At that moment, a new day, month, year and millenium had begun. Great celebrations were held all around the world.

What is the meaning of the number with which we calculate the years? And what do the letters AD, which we put in front of or behind the years, stand for? The letters AD mean Anno Domini, in English meaning The Year of The Lord. In other words, we calculate years from the year that Jesus was born. The years before his coming are called BC meaning Before Christ. For example, 10 years before the

birth of Jesus should be referred to as 10 BC.

It is good to be aware that recently there have been attempts to eradicate all that relates to Christian culture by using the letters CE, meaning 'Common Era' or BCE, meaning 'Before Common Era', still using the same number of years, which, as we already said, indicate the year of the birth of Jesus.

The birth and life of Jesus brought a change, not only in this sense, but also in all areas of life of millions of people during these past two thousand years. These are important events in the development of the Christian Religion:

The birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

0 AD

18 AD

Caiphas becomes the High Priest, He was the mastermind behind the plot to kill Jesus.

Pontius Pilate, another important character in the accounts of the passion, becomes governor of Judea.

26 AD

30-33 AD

On the order of Pilate, Jesus is sentenced to death on the cross. On the third day after burial, the body of Jesus is not found and he appears to the apostles and to various other witnesses.

The first writings of the New Testament and the letters of St. Paul appear. A difficult but important decision had to be taken: the word of Christ was to be delivered also to those who were not Jews. Hence, the apostles, helped mostly by the voyages of St. Paul, founded Christian communities in different cities of the Roman empire. The disciples were first referred to as Christians in Antiochia. The community in Rome, thanks to Peter and Paul, became known as the principal Christian community.

48-56
AD

The Acts of the Apostles and the four gospels were written. By the end of the second century, practically all the lands surrounding the Mediterranean became Christian, with the rulers of the communities known as Bishops. Many of these were great thinkers and writers, who formulated the Christian way of thinking. They became known as the Holy Fathers.

48-56
AD

64 - 313
AD

The Roman persecutions. The Romans had always allowed the people they dominated to practise their own particular religion, under certain conditions. However, the impressive rate at which the Christian religion spread, created fear in the Roman emperors. This resulted in a terrible persecution, lasting 250 years, against all Christians -- lay people, presbyters and Bishops. The first persecution began in 64 AD when emperor Nero blamed the Christians for the fires that raged in Rome that year. Many Christians were tortured or burnt alive. Nobody knows how many were killed, but the number was certainly great. Yet, this did not frighten the Christians of that time. In fact, Tertullian, a thinker living in those days, came out with the famous saying 'the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church'.

313 AD

The emperor Constantine gave a New Beginning. The emperor preceding him acknowledged that the persecution against the Christians had failed. Constantine, the son of St. Helena and Constantius Chlorus, put the Christian religion on the same footing of the other religions of the empire.

After a personal conversion, Constantine gradually made these important changes to the Christian religion.:

1. He made Christianity the official religion of the empire.
2. He ordered the building of a church on the tomb of St. Peter on the hill of the Vatican.
3. He instituted Sunday as the official day of rest, as from the very beginning, the Christians considered Sunday as a holy day instead of Saturday, which was sacred to the Jewish religion. They did this because Jesus had risen from the dead on Sunday and also because he showed himself to the disciples on Sunday.
4. He convened the first Council (a meeting of all the Bishops). This happened in Nicea, in the year 325.AD. The Pope's delegates and 250 Bishops attended this Council. During this meeting, among other things, the participants developed the original structure of the Creed, which we still say during mass on Sundays. In this way, the Council clarified certain false teaching which had spread.



SCHISMS IN CHRISTIAN EUROPE



As we have seen, Constantine changed the way the Christian religion was regarded. This would not have been possible if the first Christians had not held out strongly even when threatened with death. However, things did not run smoothly for Christianity.

THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

The Byzantine empire, which means the Roman empire of the east, started gaining importance. Constantinople, the capital city of the Byzantine empire, which we today know as Istanbul in Turkey, started competing with Rome in importance as well as in religious matters, including the Christian religion. This state of affairs continued for centuries, until in 1054 AD Christian

unity suffered a great blow.

THE SCHISM OF THE EAST

The word 'schism' means a separation within a community, like the Church, through lack of agreement. As already noted, the Christian communities of Western Europe, with Rome as its centre, began separating, little by little, from those of the east, with Constantinople as capital, until in 1054 there was a definite break, which still exists today, after nearly one thousand years. The western communities (Rome) started to be called Catholics and those of the east (Constantinople), started to be called Orthodox. The main reasons for the schism were:

1. Other practices: for example, in the Eucharist only unleavened bread could be used in the West, while this was not the case in the East.
2. Political and cultural problems: for example, problems about who had the power to direct and the use of language (Latin in the West and Greek in the East).
3. Different ways in which theology is explained

THE CRUSADES

Barely had 50 years passed from this schism, than the Muslim religion started increasing and threatening the Christian countries with its armies. The year 1095 saw the first of a series of Crusades – wars between Christians and Muslims regarding who should take possession of the Holy Land. These wars continued for a period of about 150 years.

THE PROTESTANT REFORM

Towards the beginning of the 16th century, the Church passed through a period of great turmoil with the creation of another schism. Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk who was born in 1483, felt that the Church of the time was not practising the values of Christ. It had become a Church obsessed with superstitions, greed for wealth and power and a far from exemplary life by priests, Bishops and even Popes. The schism occurred definitely in 1517 when Luther and those who followed him, emphasised that the Pope and the Church should not be an authority, even with regard to teaching. According to Luther, the teaching should only come from Scripture. In a few years, Luther and others who spread his teaching, amassed followers from a great number of north European countries.



RICHARD CŒUR-DE-LION IN BATTLE .



They started to be called Protestants and they are still called so today. In time, other differences cropped up among the same Protestants, and today there are a big number of different Protestant Churches.

OTHER DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CATHOLICS AND PROTESTANTS ARE:

1. The Protestants accept married priests ; this is different from the Latin Rite of the Catholic church, where priests are celibate.
2. The Catholics acknowledge seven Sacraments, while the Protestants acknowledge two – Baptism and the Eucharist.
3. Some teaching about Our Lady: as has already been stated, the Protestants hold that the teaching should be based on Scripture only. The Catholic Church officially

teaches that Mary was conceived without original sin and that she was taken into heaven, body and soul. The Protestants do not accept these two dogmas because they are not mentioned in the Bible.

All that happened during these two thousand years of history shows that Europe has its roots tied to the Christian religion. It is a pity that the Europe of today is trying to get away from its roots. It is beneficial for us to know what happened in the past and how the early European Christians, including the Maltese, cherished all that makes us Christian. Despite our differences we, as Christian people, are united in the belief of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who became man to save us and together we live love as He transmitted it to us.

A SMALL COUNTRY WITH A BIG HEART

St. Luke, the author of the episode describing St. Paul landing on our shores, described us as friendly people, who are ready to welcome everybody. In fact, in the Acts of the Apostles we find these very words,

"The natives showed us unusual kindness. Since it had begun to rain and was cold, they kindled a fire and welcomed us all around it." (Acts 28,2).

Besides being well-known for our hospitality to strangers, we, Maltese, have other values which have Christian roots.

What are Christian values?

Christian values are tied to the person of Jesus.

- in his words – all that he said and taught
- in his deeds – all that he did
- in his person – all that makes him who he is.

One of the Christian values is generosity.

Who knows how many times:

- we have taken care of strangers
- we have taken care of orphan children
- we have taken care of the aged and the sick
- we have helped and assisted those in need.



Which organisations in Malta take care of all these things? What comes to your mind when you hear the words Community Chest Fund or Appoġġ or Dar tal-Providenza or Richmond Foundation or Caritas or San Blas or Angela House or Dar tal-Kleru or Creche?

It is an honour to us that our generosity is written down for ever in the Word of God and it is also an honour that the Maltese have maintained it in our identity throughout the ages.

In Maltese history we find other opportunities when the Maltese showed great love towards others. In fact, there is a Maltese saying, which translates as follows: 'The house is small but the heart is big'.

There have been many episodes in the past when we welcomed strangers and showed solidarity with those in need. During the past two hundred years,

many Maltese left Malta and went to work in the missions because they felt the need to help the poor and needy. Have you ever heard about the Maltese Society MSSP?

Giving blood is also an altruistic act by individuals. There are many blood donors who go to the blood bank to donate blood; many have been doing so since they were young.

If St. Luke were to come again to Malta, would he say the same about the Maltese? Nowadays there are many foreign workers in Malta. Some are Christians, while others are not.

This means that:

1. Our Christian values are being challenged.
2. If we hold firm to our faith, we will not deviate.
3. If we do not know why our values are values, then they will disintegrate and give way to other life-styles.





Let us take a practical example to understand better what we are talking about.

Peter is a 30 year old man.

- he attended religious lessons at the Society of Christian Doctrine (MUSEUM),
- he was baptised, received his first Holy Communion and Confirmation,
- got married in church and still goes to Sunday mass.
-

But ...

He did all this because everybody did the same. It was a custom which was expected of him to follow. Above all, he believes that he is a Christian because he was born in Malta. If he were born in India he would have been a Hindu and if he were born in Tunisia, he would have been a Muslim. He believes that the core of his religion is not to do anything evil. He has never been an ardent churchgoer and prayer is not present

in his life. He knows the values of the Church superficially but he has never thought deeply about them.

Peter is a lawyer and employs other people. Ashley, a Swiss, is his secretary. She came to Malta looking for work, which she quickly found because she is well qualified. She is an atheist, who does not believe in God, as she has not been brought up in a religious environment. She is not a bad woman; She does her work well and is very efficient. Peter noticed that she is kind and industrious and does not harbour any bad thoughts. He realised that this woman was better than he was and this made him think. Ashley, an atheist, has better values than several Maltese who say that they are Christian. She made Peter ponder deeply: Why am I Christian? What is important? Isn't living a good life enough? Is there a difference between having faith and not having faith?

What do you think?

SHOULD THE CHURCH VOICE ITS OPINION?

It had just struck 4pm and Joanne, as usual, was on her way home from work. It was the right time to acquaint herself with what was going on around her. She switched on the car radio and, in a matter of ten minutes, she informed herself of the latest news. She noted that generally, when Parliament was going to take a decision, after the politicians had given their opinions on the matter in hand, the Archbishop of Malta and the Bishop of Gozo always declared what they thought about it.

But the story would not stop there. When Joanne would arrive home, she would check her mobile phone, and there she would find the same bit of

news on the written media. At the end of the newspaper report, she would also find many comments by readers, who would either praise the Bishops or criticise them in strong terms.

**Should the Church in Malta
intervene in such matters or not?
Is it interfering or just opening the
eyes of people?**

To understand, we have to go back to the commandment that Jesus gave to his Apostles, whom he trusted with the leadership of the Christian community. If we consult the Bible, we will find exactly, what this mission is.



*"And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation'
(Mark 16, 15)*

*"Let your word be 'Yes', 'Yes' or 'No', 'No'.
(Matthew 5, 37)*

*"Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you, cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near you' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into the streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: The kingdom of God has come near.'"
(Luke, 10, 8-11)*

Over the years, we find that Popes have stopped leaders of countries from attending liturgical services because the decisions they took were not consonant with the values of Christ.

Even today, the Church does not go along with values which go against the teaching of the gospels, just because everybody else agrees with them. What is good, cannot be labelled bad and what is bad, cannot be labelled good. Whether a thing is good or bad should not be decided by a vote of the majority. What is bad remains bad, even if the majority of the people vote for it.

If the Church is not the light of the world, the salt of the earth and the leavening of the dough, then it loses its real mission.

Have you ever looked at all this in this perspective?.



When we were young, we always obeyed what our parents asked us to do because we understood that they knew what was good for us. When we grew a little bit older, we rebelled; maybe we did not consider that what they asked us to do was really good for us. Sometimes, words like "Listen to me, for I know what is good for you," left us cold. Actually, later we realised that they were right.

When children become adolescents and grow into youths, the parents wisely understand that they cannot dictate to their children anymore. So, they change tactics: they say the same things, but in the form of advice, leaving their children with the option of accepting the advice or not. But, no parents remain silent when the children are going to take a wrong decision; they immediately make their voices heard, always for the good of their children.

Do you consider this as an act of interference or imposition?

The Church does the same. In the past, it behaved like a parent taking care of children. It dictated what had to be done. Those, who think that by voicing

its opinions the Church is imposing on today's people, are mistaken. Just follow the Archbishop's tweets and reflect whether they are words of advice or impositions.

Joanne used to read most of the newspaper articles on the internet. She felt happy or angry according to the comments passed by certain individuals, who are ill informed and who do not realise how much harm they cause. But she never stopped there. She first did her best to understand the intention of the opinion of the Bishop, her spiritual shepherd. She took her time and prayed to the Holy Spirit to enlighten her to educate herself on certain current local issues. Finally, she would also express her ideas on the media or when talking with friends or family members. She would explain how and why the Church had taken a particular position.

Joanne reasoned that, after all, she is also an important part of the Church and she has also received the mission that the early Apostles were given by Jesus, when she was baptised and when she was confirmed and promised that she would follow Jesus.



‘... AND PEACE ON EARTH’

Those who themselves have delivered or listened to the traditional sermon of a small boy at the midnight mass on Christmas eve, know that the sermon usually starts with the words: *“Glory to God on high and peace on earth to men of good will.”* These are the very words the angels told the shepherds when they announced the birth of the Messiah and Saviour which we read in the account of the birth in the Gospel of Luke.

Now we go fast-forward to the time when Jesus appeared to his disciples after rising from the dead. More than once, he greeted them with the words: *“Peace be to you”*. These are the last words he said on this earth.

What does this mean? The beginning and the end of the life of Jesus on earth are

marked by the word *peace*. Moreover, during the Last Supper, Jesus said that the peace he gives should be the weapon the Christian should use in front of all the difficulties that life can offer. We repeat these words in every mass, when the priest says, *“Peace I leave to you, my peace I give you.”*

WHAT IS PEACE?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines peace as *“the work of justice and the effect of charity.”* (CCC 2304) Therefore, peace is not just the absence of war, but much more than that. It includes, *“..... the safeguarding of the goods of persons, free communication among men, respect for the dignity of persons”* (CCC 2304) It is no wonder that the Catechism of the Catholic Church places the teaching



about Peace in the same section that deals with all that is related to the fifth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill". This is done not only because during wars there is a loss of lives, but also because Jesus condemns whoever is 'angry with his brother'. When using the word 'peace' we do not only mean the relationship among countries but the relationship among us, in our daily life, at school, at work, in the family and with friends.

IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Dr Carl Rogers, one of the main psychologists of the 20th century, says that with our behaviour we can bring out the good or the bad of those near us. He says that our behaviour may put the other person on the defensive, in the sense, that the other person retaliates and rebels when feeling the need for self defence. This will be the beginning of a process of loss of peace between the two individuals. There are four ways how this can happen:



1. By judging persons,
2. By manipulating persons,
3. By showing our superiority over other persons,
4. By treating persons as if they do not exist.

Try to think of instances when you treated somebody in this way. Or, when you were treated like this. Try to remember how you felt or how the other person might have felt.

If you have done this exercise sincerely, you can confirm that you are not on good terms with persons you have treated like this. You also know that they do not love you or admire you. You might think that it is not your fault, that it is the other person who is to blame. And then, there starts a never ending battle of finger pointing.

WAR

We can apply all this to the conflicts between one society and another, between one country and another and conflicts like those in the Middle East, which have been going on for years. As is always the case, both sides blame each other for the loss of peace.

Keeping in mind the message of Jesus, the Church, not only works tirelessly to promote peace, but has actively helped in times of war and tension in various countries and at various times. It is enough to mention the Church's opposition in every way to World War 1 and World War II. It also helped to save from certain death, thousands of Jews during the Holocaust caused by the Nazi regime.

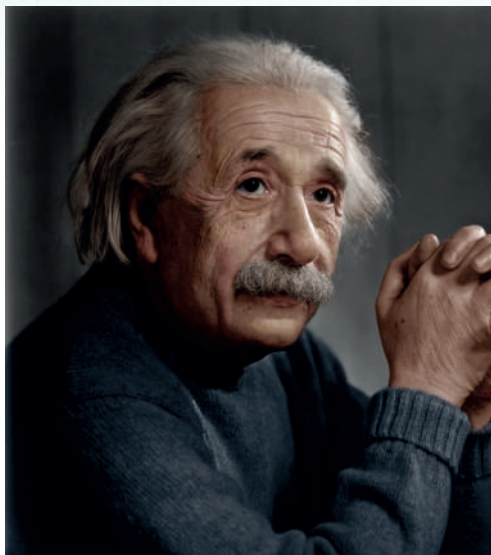
In Vatican Council II, especially in the document *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church has continued building its detailed teaching on all that is related to the process of war and peace. This was strengthened in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. This teaching is enlightened by faith and reason, its main message being the safeguarding of human life.

Among other things, this teaching emphasises:

1. The need of every citizen, along with the government, to do everything possible to evade war.
2. The fact, that when all attempts fail, each country can defend itself in a legitimate way.
3. The fact that one, for reasons of conscience, can choose to help the community in a different way during wartime, without the use of weapons.
4. The respect that should be shown to prisoners, wounded soldiers and civilians during a war.
5. The condemnation of the wiping out of a whole region by means of chemical weapons and also the race for acquiring armaments. A cache of armaments makes it easier for a country to go to war. Moreover, the billions spent on these weapons can be used to safeguard life instead of eradicating it.



IS FREEDOM THE ANSWER?



'Peace is not brought about by a show of force, but is obtained by agreement.'

This is what Albert Einstein, the German scientist known for his extraordinary intelligence, said. When we speak of peace, it is very easy for us to be deluded into thinking that we can only achieve peace if we have the best system of order-keeping forces, like the police, the army and other officials. We may think that peace can be obtained only if the community is protected from all that is new or different.

This does not mean that we do not need the order keeping forces, because unfortunately, there are those who refrain from doing bad things only because they are afraid of the consequences, such as fines or imprisonment, and not because they really respect and love others. But this is not peace, but fear. People must

live at peace with others because they honour the value of agreement, show respect towards different opinions and uphold the basic human rights and consequently, have respect for the general freedom of each individual.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Religious freedom and freedom of conscience constitute two of the most important of man's rights.

In the year 1636, Roger Williams founded the colony of Rhode Island in the United States of America. Today, it is the smallest state of the fifty states that form the United States of America. It is interesting to note that Williams wanted this community to be built on the principles of religious freedom, something which was unusual in those

days. He understood that, contrary to what it is supposed to be, religion is the source of disagreement and hate. In one of his writings, he said , *“The best Christian way to keep peace is to respect different consciences.”* To strengthen his point of view he said, *“When worship is forced, it stinks in God’s nostrils.”* Undoubtedly, many did not welcome this opinion, although today we understand how progressive it was.

THE INTENTION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

In 1945, the year when World War II ended, a number of countries founded what we today know as the United Nations. In 1948, this union formulated a very important declaration about human rights, stressing that safeguarding human rights is fundamental towards real world peace. This Universal Declaration of Human Rights consists of thirty articles. Article number 18 speaks about the right of religious freedom and says:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; his right includes freedom to,change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”



FROM WORDS TO DEEDS

There is a Maltese proverb which says that between words and deeds there is a wide gap. We know that over the years even Christian leaders did not always practise this right of religious freedom. Even today, in a number of countries it is illegal to practise a religion which is different from that of the state; therefore, as the Declaration states, it is practically impossible for one to change one's religion. Apart from this, there are countries where no type of religion can be practised.

GREAT DIFFICULTIES

We have to understand that what appears as an obvious and simple right, in reality is anything but that. It is a principle which offers great challenges. Besides, we are not only talking about this or that religion, but also about the lack of religion, that is atheism. Therefore, if we talk about the freedom to act according to our conscience, we know that, though as persons we agree about what is good and what is bad, this is not always the case. Let us take an example. I may be convinced in my conscience that abortion is wrong and therefore, it should be illegal. But not everybody is of the same opinion. Often, in a society which tries to practise religious freedom, this lack of agreement on moral principles has led to long drawn out arguments in courts of law.

Other issues which have led to controversies include the presence of the crucifix in school classes and in other public places, as well as the prayer during the school assembly.

What do you think?

THE MESSAGES OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

One of the first messages of Pope John Paul II was actually about this subject. In his message to a number of state leaders in 1980, the Pope emphasised that men's dignity requires the search for the truth, religious truth in particular, because of their free wills and reasoning. Therefore, the individual should be free to:

- Perform acts of worship in private and in public.
- Receive teaching and education in that religion, both in schools and elsewhere.
- Receive religious assistance, when necessary, in public places like hospitals or prisons.
- Not to be made to do things which are contrary to the individual's beliefs.

Because of the social nature of persons, they do not consider their religion as something internal only, but live it along with others in the community. Thus, the Pope continues to say that the religious community should be free to:

- Choose its own leaders (Bishops, priests etc).
- Offer training to these ministers.
- These leaders should use social communication means, publish books and use other means to preach their message.
- Practise their faith by organising activities to help especially those in need.



CHAPTER THREE

PEOPLE WHO HAVE SOUGHT GOD



TREASURE HUNT

Have you ever taken part in a treasure hunt? You are given a number of hints about the whereabouts of the treasure. You do not know where the treasure is. You start searching and maybe tend to lose heart when you keep failing to find it. But you persevere until you find that which is hidden.

Have you ever considered that man is searching for something in life? Ever since man started existing on earth, man always sought for something that would make him happier. Let us consider our own life. Have you ever reflected that we take decisions in order to become happier? Perhaps you bought an object, started frequenting a particular place, began practising a new hobby or took a new job to be happier. When we grow up we choose a career or enter into a relationship

hoping to feel more content. In brief, our life is a continuous search for that something that would make us happy. This is a positive attitude as it motivates us always to look for something more beautiful or better. Thus, our life develops into a picture with several different colours ... every colour denoting something beautiful that we have experienced.

It could happen that in our search for the thing that would render us happy, we take wrong decisions or decisions that are not good for us. Even during a treasure hunt, there can be a moment when we take a wrong turning, thereby moving away from the treasure. What is important is that we quickly find the right way and go on searching for the treasure.





Sometimes you meet people who are never content. They are always searching, always trying hard, always going from one thing to another and never finding peace. They move from one job to another and even from one relationship to another, and although surrounded by many good things, they are discontented. Many ask, "But what do these people lack?" Often, one finds that these people are frustrated, sad or angry. Actually, they are content with nothing in their life. Maybe, these people are seeking that thing which would make them happy in the wrong places, in the wrong things or in wrong choices, similar to one who keeps going round and round looking for a treasure but never finding it.

Perhaps, we have asked ourselves, "What makes me happy?" Perhaps, we have even found the thing we are looking for, but we realise that, though it is beautiful, we may one day lose it. This thing can be a person, an object, an opportunity, friends, a relationship etc... We believe we have found a treasure, but later we realise, either that we have not found it or what we have found will not last forever. Unfortunately, every

beautiful thing or every dearest person is not eternal. Everything on earth will one day perish. So, what is that thing which never ends and makes me happy? If I succeed to understand what that thing is or who that person is, then I have found the real treasure.

Let us go back to the treasure hunt; it will be more pleasureable and effective if the hunt for the treasure is undertaken as a group and not alone by yourself. A group discusses, agrees and plans how to find the treasure. The group is made up of different people, with different ideas and characters, all searching for the same treasure. They search for it outside themselves.

Man started to understand that everything in the world is limited and does not last forever. So, man started looking outside himself to find that which would make him really happy. He did not start this search by himself, but with others. As a result, different religions began to be formed. Each religion began with the pursuit of that which would give real peace and happiness. A religion is made up of a group of persons pursuing this search.

Of course, there are several who choose not to take any notice of what religion teaches; this means that they choose to abandon that community which gives them directions to find real happiness.

We stated at the beginning that when one is taking part in a treasure hunt, one reads the instructions, rules and hints of how to find the treasure. Neglecting to do these, renders it impossible to find the treasure, because one loses the way or distances oneself from that which is being sought. On the other hand, if one follows step by step, one arrives at the desired destination and finds what one is seeking. Perhaps one does not understand the clues, as these may seem senseless, but, by thinking about them and discussing them with colleagues, one understands them better.

This is the same experience one has with religion. Through teaching, religion gives direction to a person's life, about how to find real happiness. Religious teaching has been present for many years and is constantly developing. This is because man is still discovering and searching. It may happen that sometimes a person does not understand that which is being taught and may even think that it does not make sense. This does not signify that this individual is not heeding religious teaching, but that someone is needed to explain properly what this person, who is seeking the truth, has not understood and therefore, keeps questioning.

When we talk about faith, we are actually talking about individual experiences in the search we are

conducting. If we take the Christian Religion, we find many persons who form part of this large group of people sharing the same faith. However, each person is going through this experience in a different way; although each one in the group is walking in the same direction, not everybody appreciates the treasure in the same way. Jesus also appreciated this difference with the people he encountered. When Peter was walking on the water to reach Jesus, he became frightened and started to drown. Jesus immediately held him up and said, "*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*" (Matthew 14, 24-32). On the other hand, Jesus praised the centurion when he said to those around him, "*I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.*" (Luke 7, 1-10) and he healed his servant. This means that when one lives faith in a concrete way, one is looking for that which makes one really happy.

But, what is that treasure which is everlasting and gives real happiness?



I FOUND IT!

In the previous lesson we talked about our search for that which makes us happy. It is like a treasure hunt, where a group of people is looking for a treasure. They profess one faith and one religion and participate in this search. The treasure, consisting of the joy and happiness expected by each person, is found only if each person who is searching, follows what Jesus said, *"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you, and so that your joy may be complete."* (John 15, 10-11)

The treasure hunt's aim is fulfilled when the treasure is found. The search for it may have been long, but at the end, the treasure is found. But, where was it hidden? While hurrying from one thing to another, have we ever asked, "What am I looking for? Where am I searching? Why haven't I already found what I am seeking?"

It is when I find God that I find real joy and peace. I do not find God in things which I can easily buy or obtain. I do not find God in activities which some day will end. Finding God is like when you find something, which you like so much that you forget all your other



possessions and think only of this thing. Suppose you have bought an exciting game, a new bicycle or a new mobile phone. Every spare minute you have, you want to enjoy this new acquisition. When one discovers and finds Jesus, one looks at every other thing in a different way. This does not mean that one abandons the things one likes. Yet, at the same time, one realises that Jesus is someone who will exist forever. Once we really find him, our life takes on a new meaning.

It is not easy to find him, not because God likes to hide or likes to make it difficult for me to find him. Sometimes, it is I who make it difficult to find him in my life. Although God is supreme, I can only find him in simple things. I look out of the window and see a blue sky, a scorching sun or falling rain. I

hear a bird chirping or look at my pet, which lacks nothing. I go for a walk in the country or for a bike ride. In summer I go swimming or go out with my boat. I go abroad and admire the great and spectacular natural scenery. In the evening I look at the sky and see the small twinkling stars. I access the Internet or switch on the television and see pictures or films of big animals which one never dreams of seeing in Malta. Someone created them. They did not make themselves.

I think of the many people who love me and with whom I have spent beautiful moments. I recall my parents, grandparents or those who take care of me. I also think of my brothers, sisters or intimate friends, with whom I have done beautiful things.



*" I love only you, Lord, I want to follow only you.
I want to search for you only and I want to serve
you only.
I pray you, Lord, order me to do what you want.
I want to serve you with all my heart.
For, it is not repentance.,
But love, which is calling me to you. Lord, let me
be able to hear what you want of me.
Help me to live that which you want from me
And order me to do whatever you wish. Let us find
you, Lord,
For before we find you, we cannot rest.
For it is in you that we find joy and rest.
You have made us for yourself, O Lord
And our heart is restless
Until it rests in you."*

St. Augustine



Then there are persons, who for, one reason or another, have left a positive mark in my life. I may have felt better by what a teacher, a relative or other persons did for me or said to me.

I also find God even now, if I stop for a few moments in silence and feel my heart beating and my breath coming slowly out of my nostrils, something which I do not notice all the time. I look at myself, at all that is beautiful in me. Somebody created me. I have to look inside myself to find him, for he is inside me. I do not need to look anywhere except inside myself . This means that I can find God inside me. God created me and because I am his creation, God himself is inside me. . It may happen that through the choices I make, I am not giving God enough space in my life. Clean and clear water in a glass will not remain so if you add another liquid to

the glass. I will not be allowing space for God in my life if I fill his place with other things, which after a time cease to exist.

The Church teaches us that God is a spirit and has no body like ours. That is why we believe that God who created the world and all that is in it, is present among us. St George Preca used to pray to God thus: *"You are here and I am in you, like a fish in clear water. I live in you, I move in you, I rest in you and I cannot hide from you in any way."*

This search for God is not a one-time occurrence but a process, which every person experiences throughout life. God is so immense that it is impossible for us to understand and know God fully. We can never say that we have discovered God once and for all. However, the desire we feel to know God, creates in us the curiosity to know God more.

GOD'S FRIENDSHIP

Have you ever heard of an important person and tried to know more about this person? You may have heard about this person from friends, from the news or from the Internet. Either through curiosity or through interest, you start asking about this person. You start finding out what the person is doing. If the person is a singer, you interest yourself in his or her albums and, if it is a world renowned football player, you do not miss viewing even one of his football matches. Besides gathering information, you follow more closely what that person is doing.

When one discovers God, one becomes interested in what God has done throughout man's history. Actually, when we were young, we heard about God and we still hear of God through stories which happened thousands

of years ago. We came to know how he overthrew ancient great empires, how he destroyed populations, how he saved his people, the Jews, and how he sometimes punished them. After many centuries, he sent his Son, so that through him we would be saved. It was this Son who, himself, chose twelve apostles and sent them to teach others about him. After a few years teaching them and working miracles, he ascended to heaven. The apostles spread to many lands, preaching all that they had seen and heard from Jesus. His teaching reached also Malta through St. Paul. This teaching has been passed from generation to generation and the Christian faith has remained strong.

It is the same teaching that we hear in the classroom during religion lessons, in Church and in religious groups.





But, does what happened thousands of years ago still make sense? When I start discovering about God, my curiosity is aroused about who he is and what he has done. Just as one uses the Internet to know more about a famous personality, one may also refer to a particular book to find more about God. This book is the Bible which, at one time or another, we have used to search for a short excerpt or to read a story.

If I listen to or read a story about a famous person, perhaps I may begin to admire or to abhor that person. However, I may not be much affected, since I do not know the individual personally. On the other hand, if I learn about someone's experience which is similar to what I myself have experienced or am experiencing, probably I get more interested and affected. This is because I would be experiencing the same emotions. God communicates with me by making me meet with people and stories in the Bible, where the persons concerned passed through experiences similar to

mine.

Let us, now, read about the experiences of a rich young man; it is useful to reflect about how his story may be similar to yours.

"Then someone came to him and said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honour your father and mother; also you shall love your neighbour as yourself.' The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these; what do I still lack?' Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When the young man heard the word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions." (Matthew, 19, 16-22)

The person who asked the question to Jesus was a young man who, like all youths, was unable to answer the many questions that bothered him. Several questions which we find difficult to answer frequently come to our mind. We may, perhaps, lose heart because they may be complicated questions. That young man wanted an answer to his questions and he went to the right person who could give him a true answer. He went to Jesus and called him “teacher” because he knew that Jesus could help him. Where do I myself go when there is something on my mind? There are many choices I can make: I can go to teachers, parents or guardians, guidance teachers, priests, catechists or other adult persons who, I know, wish me well. I can even go directly to Jesus and in silence confide in him what there is in my heart.

Like that young man, we learnt many things when we were younger, and we even practise most of what we learnt. Jesus mentioned the commandments, which we know and we also know what they mean. But now, that we are older, Jesus is asking something more from us. He is asking us to follow him. To do this, we have to give something of ourselves, something which is ours. Jesus advised that young man to give

the riches he possessed to the poor and afterwards he could follow him; actually, it was his wealth which was impeding him from following Jesus. Let me ask myself: *“What is Jesus asking me to give up in order to be able to follow him? How am I harming myself or others?”* When Jesus is inviting me to give up all that is harmful, he is not doing it to punish me or to see me sad, but because he knows that I will be happier that way. However, it is not always easy to do this. Even that young man found it difficult. He calculated more on what he was going to lose than on what he was going to gain. He remained tied to his possessions. If I look at my life, I will realise that I too find it difficult to let go of what I have in order to be able to obtain much more. For instance, if I spend less time on the Internet or mobile phone, if I leave certain friends or if I do not frequent certain places, I will find that my life will be different and better. But, like that youth who went to Jesus, I prefer to hold on to what I have than live a life that makes more sense!

This story took place about two thousand years ago but we can easily compare it to what we ourselves experience. I can say that what was written so many years ago was written also for me. Through his Word, God is still talking to me in everyday life.



DEAR SON, DEAR DAUGHTER

We receive messages on our mobile phones and in e-mails and people chat online with us as well as speak to us on our mobile and home phones. Occasionally, we may even receive a birthday card or a letter with a message. It is certain that at one time or another we have received a message from someone. Today we take it for granted that we receive messages or that persons communicate with us using different ways of communications. This was not so years ago, when it was difficult to communicate, especially if the correspondence took place between different countries. In fact, Maltese people who emigrated kept the letters they received for quite a long time because they rarely received letters. Many of these letters came from their dear ones and had sentimental value.

This may be our case as well. We may still keep letters or cards which we have received from people who are dear to us. We may still keep e-mails or messages because they contain special messages or may remind us of a particular person or occasion. The message may be particular because it was written specially for us.

Even God has written a message which is a personal one for every person. As pointed out in the preceding lesson, when I read the Word of God, God sends me a personal message. I may ask, "How can it be personal, since it was written thousands of years ago and many people have read it and studied it?" The answer is that the Word of God is not like any other writing, letter or e-mail. Although it was written at



different stages, by different people, in different places and languages, the principal author is the Holy Spirit. This means that when the author was writing that particular book, he was not only writing an account, a story, a poem or a letter to the people living then, but that message would be binding and make sense to all people who would read it afterwards. The Bible comprises different forms of books because when the Holy Spirit inspired the authors, he did not dictate to them word by word what they had to write. He only inspired them with the message he wanted them to pass on. The way how that message was delivered was in the hands of the different authors of the Holy Books.

If one were to examine every message found in each book of the Bible, one could say that the message is simply the love that God has for man. The very first accounts of the Old Testament show how much God loves man by creating the world and man himself. During the rest of the first part of the book, we read how God chose his people and how he protected them during all the experiences they went through and how he showed his love for them. He sent them leaders and prophets to tell them what he wanted from them. We find this same message of God's love for each person even in the New Testament, in which we read that God sent his Son to show us by his teaching and miracles how much God wants us to be with him. This great love is fulfilled with his passion, death and resurrection, by which he saved us from eternal perdition and gave us the right to another beautiful life, which never ends.

Normally, when we receive a message on our mobile phone or an e-mail, there is no need for anyone to explain it, as it is very easy to read and easy to understand. On the other hand, when we read the Bible, we may find parts which are difficult to understand or which confuse us, because it was written at a different time, in a different context and also in a different language.

Therefore, when interpreting the Word of God, it is important to consider what was happening at that particular time when it was written and also to understand the mentality of that same time. Obviously, in order to understand what is God's message we need the assistance of people who can help.





Many arguments are aired on the media about the meaning of God's Word. But one has to be careful not to have different interpretations which lead to wrong conclusions. This is so, simply because the message is one. The interpretation of God's Word should come from those who have the authority to do so. Through its teaching, the Church shows us what God wants to communicate to us by means of different occurrences. This teaching is the result of various studies, which have come to us from saints and others who have studied deeply the Word of God.

If the Word of God has been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, then its interpretation should also be the fruit of the Holy Spirit. For various reasons, there should be a good interpretation of the Word of God. This is so, because:

- The teaching of the Church is based on the Word of God.
- God is still speaking to us today through his Word.
- We can get nearer to God through his Word.

Pope Francis has queried whether we use the Bible as frequently as we use our mobile phone. During our lives, we use diverse methods of communication by which we receive many messages. Let us turn to the Word of God, through which we receive messages that will never be deleted.

AN EVERLASTING GIFT

When you receive a nice present, you probably desire to show it to others. For example, if you receive a game, you ask your friends to play it with you. If the present which you receive is a pretty dress, you desire to wear it on those occasions where it can be seen, and you feel pleased when you receive compliments about it. If one buys a new car, one drives around in it and invites one's friends for a ride too. One, who after long hours of training, wins a medal, is sure to show it to colleagues. Even a beautiful experience needs to be shared; perhaps, after spending a holiday in a foreign country, one may enjoy showing one's friends photos of the places taken during this visit. If this person meets a world famous personality while abroad, a photo with this personality is sure to do the rounds, once the person returns home.

This is the same experience that the apostles had with Jesus. They spent three years going round with him. They saw him working miracles and teaching many people. Who knows how much time they spent together after a day of travelling from one place to another? This experience surely remained in their heart, even though they did not always

understand things. They were the same apostles on whom Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit and sent out saying, "Go to all nations preaching the good news." They could not keep only to themselves all that they received from Jesus, as the experiences they had with Jesus were too beautiful not to share. They wanted to disclose to others what they saw, heard and received.



Jesus said to his apostles, "I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you, and that your joy may be complete." (John 15, 11) And they conveyed this joy which filled their hearts to others.

This is the same joy that Jesus brings to every person. It does not mean that we are happy all the time. Neither does it mean that there will be no difficult or troublesome moments. It means that this joy, the continuous presence of Jesus within us, fills us with peace and joy to enable us to live a positive life. And, we should not keep this joy only to ourselves. We have to share it.

This is what saints did: they shared with others the joy that Jesus brought them. They loved him so much that they wanted to convey this gift to others. Pope Francis said, "The saints were not superhuman. They were persons who loved God with all their heart and shared their joy with others." A person, who really and concretely shared what Jesus gave her, was Mother Theresa. Apart from understanding that God was in her during her work, she also realised that God was in each person. She used to say, "I see God in every person. When I nurse the wounds of the sick, I feel I am nursing God. Isn't it a wonderful experience?"

We should share what there is inside us with others. But first, we should reflect about how God is working in our life and what effect he is having on us. Very often we keep rushing so much from one thing to another that we have no time to stop and think. Perhaps we are passing through a difficult time and we

barely feel what God is doing within us. In such a case, can we share our joy with others? Yet, because God loves us, he will not leave us alone. God ensures that we meet with people who love us.

Pope Francis said, "Let us go out and offer everybody the life of Jesus Christ." We are not going to share the satisfying joy of having acquired something new in our lives. But we are going to share the person of Jesus Christ. This is not something rather difficult to do. What has Jesus done to show that he loves me? The simple answer is that he died for me. Therefore, to share what Jesus left in me, I have to share my life with others. Real happiness is experienced when I open up to others and do not think only of myself. In everyday life I can do very simple actions, which make sense and also leave an impact.

Here are some examples of how I open up to others. I can encourage a student who is always alone during break time to join my group. I can stand up for and defend that student who is often ridiculed by other students. I can offer help to a student who is struggling to cope with schoolwork. I can also share what I received from Jesus by lending a hand at home. When I use my talents well, I will be practising the gifts which God gave me and, at the same time, I will be making the life of others more beautiful.

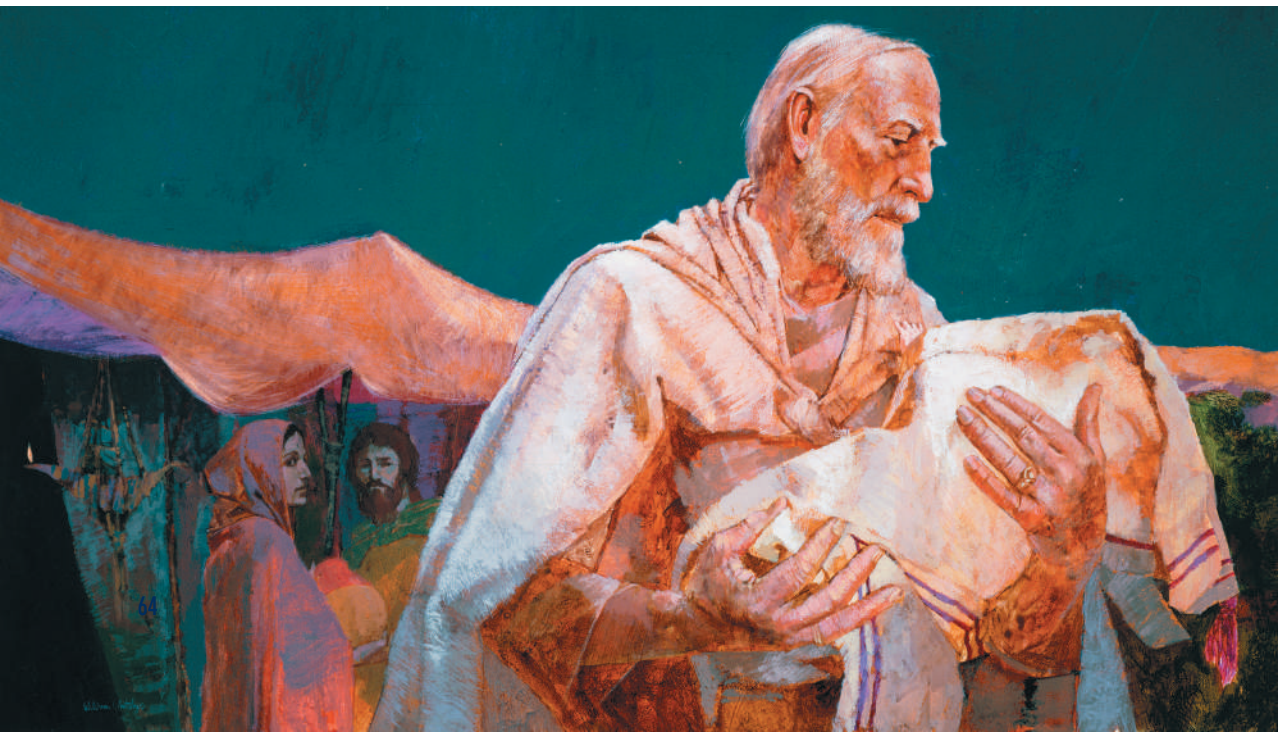
God gave us this life as a gift. Our gift to God is the way we live this life.

HE KEEPS HIS WORD

Obviously, we become very angry if we are promised something which we never get. Conversely, we put great trust in persons who keep their word. On the other hand, we hold persons who break a given promise as liars and cheats. This is the same experience that Abraham had when God spoke to him. God had told Abraham and his wife Sarah that they would beget a great nation, numbering more than the stars in heaven and the sands on the seashore. But, God gave them only one son, Isaac. Isaac became the father of a great nation, which today is known as the Jewish people, who, in time started practising the Jewish religion. Jesus, a Jew, established the Christian religion, which today is spread all over the world. But, Abraham did not always believe that God would keep

his word. He had also a son from his servant Hagar. This son generated a new nation which today incorporates the Muslim religion. Hence, it is not surprising that Abraham is called the father of all nations, for he is the father of the three largest religions in the world.

The three monotheistic religions are: the Christian religion, the Islamic religion and Judaism. They are monotheistic religions, which means that they believe in one God. There are several common points among them. These three religions believe in life after death. All their faithful assemble in a place to pray; the Jews meet in a synagogue, the Muslims in a mosque and the Christians in a church. Also, the





three of them consider Jerusalem as the holy city. Moreover, they all have a sacred book which they believe contains the word of God. Jews and Christians believe that the Bible is the only book which is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Islam also has a sacred book.

The *Koran* is the holy book for Muslims. They believe that it was revealed to Mohammed by God through the Angel Gabriel around the year 600 AD, so that Mohammed was the last prophet or messenger of Allah. Allah is considered to be the author of the Koran, which was written in Arabic and which is known all over the world, word for word, by many of the Muslims. There is only one version of the Koran, which constitutes a guide of how each Muslim should live life.

The sacred books of the Jews are divided into three sections. The first one is the *Torah*, that is, the Law. The second is the section of prophets, known by the Jews as *Nebahim*. The third section is the Writings, which in Jewish is called *Ketubin*. The Jews take the first letter of these titles –TNK – and form the word “Tanak”, which refers to all the books together, or the Bible. The Torah is the holy book. In it we find the first five books of the Bible, which make up the “teaching”, that is, what God desired from the Jews. In fact, the ten commandments are included in the Torah.

Even we Christians, have a Holy Book, which is the Bible. The Bible is divided in two sections: the Old Testament (which coincides with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures) and the New Testament.

In the Old Testament, which is made up of 46 books, we find the story of our salvation. In this section we see that God always kept his word. Thus, God promised Noah that he would not destroy the world. He promised to make Abraham the father of a big nation. God made a new pact with Moses when he gave Moses the commandments and he also promised that his people would arrive at the Promised land. To David God promised a reign that would never end. God promised salvation to his people by means of messages delivered by prophets.

Moving on to the New Testament, we note that it consists of 27 books. At the beginning of the New Testament, we read about John the Baptist prophesying the coming of Jesus, the promised Messiah. Thus, in the letter to the Hebrews St. Paul wrote that "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he also created the worlds."

We find in the four gospels of the New Testament all that Jesus said and did. Jesus promised that he would be with us till the end of time. As with every other promise that we find in the Word of God, God has kept this promise up to today. In fact, God is still present in our life and is with us in each situation we face. In the New Testament we also find the mission of the Apostles and several letters written by St. Paul and others to various communities of the early Church.

It is God who created the world, who created you and me. Because we are precious to him he will keep us ever with him. In every story of the Bible, we find that God never deserted man. However, on the other hand, man often tried to abandon God. We ourselves can also be guilty of this. But God, while respecting every choice we make, keeps showing us that he wants to be with us and also wants us to be with him.



DIFFERENCES

Which is your favourite football team? How much do you follow football matches, goals, players etc.? How keen are you? If you really like football, you are sure to follow with great interest the progress of your favourite team. Perhaps, you become angry when anyone makes fun of your team or your favourite player. You tend to feel agitated when you think that what is being said is not true or that the facts are not reported correctly. Impulsively, you find yourself defending your team. If it is not football, is there something which is close to your heart and about which you speak with passion when you are with your friends? Often, when we are discussing things with others, we realise how different we are from each other.

How often have I asked myself what makes me different from others? How do I behave with those whose opinions are different from mine? I notice that though there are similarities, there are also differences among us. There may be differences in ideas or tastes. Even family members may be different, so imagine the differences among persons who do not know each other. When I look around me I realise that I am surrounded by people who are different to me. It is not just in the body appearance or sex that there is a difference, but also in areas which are more basic. I become aware that around me there are persons with different beliefs, opinions and ideas.





Even Jesus was surrounded by persons with different beliefs and cultures. Although the Jews were not on good terms with the Romans, Jesus cured the servant of the Roman centurion. Jesus invited Matthew to follow him and also dined with Zaccheus, both of whom were publicans, even though dining with publicans was frowned upon by the Pharisees, the leaders of the Jews. While Jesus respects the freedom of everyone, he still invites each person to get to know him better. Thus Jesus gives a clear example of dialogue with persons of different opinions and beliefs. "God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Differences exist also in the diversity of persons having different skin colours, different languages and different customs. There are also religious differences. Although Malta is considered

as a Catholic country, not everybody is Catholic and not all those who are baptised are practising Catholics. Diversity offers several advantages, but it also offers various challenges, as can be confirmed by the terrible conflicts occurring around the world because of fanaticism, resulting from religious differences. In such cases, religion becomes the tool used for hurting others. On the other hand, these differences may be the reason for getting closer to each other, without interpreting such an approach as being the surrender or abandonment of one's beliefs.

The Church felt the need to appreciate this reality, a reality which is neither frightening nor conflicting. In fact, there have been occasions when the Church has shown friendly gestures towards other religions. When we speak of different religions we are referring to Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. So we are speaking of non-baptised

individuals, that is, those who are not Christians. The Church holds an inter-religious dialogue with these religions. What does this mean? The word 'dialogue' means a group of people who hold different opinions from each other. 'Inter-religious' means more than one religion. So, inter-religious dialogue means persons with different beliefs understanding and respecting each other. This leads them to co-operate with each other despite their differences.

For a long time the Church has taught that one must not come to the conclusion that through inter-religious dialogue the whole world will accept one and the same belief. The Catholic Church believes that people with deep roots in different beliefs are able to explain to each other what they believe in and to grow in understanding and respect towards each other. This dialogue will help to destroy as much as possible the walls that have been built over the years to separate different religions.

Thus, inter-religious dialogue does not mean the complete agreement of different religions, but it allows the creation of an atmosphere where they listen to and accept the opinions of each other. Neither is the aim of this dialogue to convert all those who do not believe in Christ. In fact, those who participate, still keep their beliefs. Clearly, it is not the place and time to attack the beliefs of others or to disapprove what they believe in.

Before discussing how to behave with those who hold different beliefs to ours, it would be better if we first consider how we behave towards those closer to us, or whom we meet often but who do not necessarily agree with the way we think. If we can live with those who are different from us, it will be easier to understand how to be open to people who hold different beliefs from ours.



DIALOGUE

At the time of Jesus, there were different groups, one of which was the Samaritans. The author of the parable of the Good Samaritan, gives us to understand that the Jews and the Samaritans were not on good terms. Nevertheless, Jesus made a good move when he met the Samaritan woman and entered into a conversation with her. This type of dialogue is still going on today.

In fact, the Church is doing the same by teaching, as well as by various initiatives it has taken in conjunction with other religions.

A document of Vatican Council II is *Unitatis Redintegratio*. In this document we find the principles on which ecumenism is to be built. Ecumenism is different from inter-religious dialogue.

As we saw in previous pages, inter-religious dialogue is the dialogue of the Church with other religions, whilst ecumenism concerns members of different Christian Churches and Communities. These are not different religions because they are all Christian. By ecumenism we mean “the initiatives and activities planned and undertaken, according to the various needs of the Church and as opportunities offer, to promote Christian unity” (UR4). This document suggests that ecumenism is a result of the respect for each other. There is also dialogue in which different communities explain their teachings and show their characteristics. Helping those with different beliefs helps, so that notwithstanding the differences, unity is felt better. Another aspect are the prayers where Christians from different communities come together





in the name of Christ: *"For where two or three are gathered in my name I am there among them"* (Matthew 18, 20)

Another Vatican II document lists 4 levels of dialogue between Christians and people of a different faith. This is inter-religious dialogue.

- Dialogue of life, where they live together and share amongst themselves the joys and sorrows of life.
- Dialogue of actions, where they work together to reach common aims.
- Dialogue of teaching, where expert persons in the teaching of the Church and of other religions understand more deeply the values they cherish.
- Dialogue in religious experiences, where they share among themselves what they experience when they come in contact with that which they believe in.

When this is done, we will understand each other better and learn from different perspectives. Besides, we will

be creating new friendships and will work together for the common good, thereby building a united society. Our faith is strengthened and is appreciated more when we enter into dialogue with those who profess other faiths.

Pope John Paul II worked hard in the field of inter-religious dialogue. In 1986 and 2002, he gathered about 200 representatives of different religions in Assisi. In this meeting all professed to be in favour of love and not hate. The Pope visited many countries and he took the opportunity of meeting with groups of people of different faiths and their leaders. Thus, he met the leaders of the Muslims in Turkey, Morocco and Lebanon. A very important visit was that to the synagogue in Rome, where he offered the hand of friendship to the Jewish community. In every country he visited, the Pope always urged the Christians to spread peace wherever they are and with whoever they are. He advised the Bishops of the Arabic region to always seek inter-religious dialogue with the Jews and the Muslims

and to make an effort to understand each other, to work together in various areas and promote the development of the person and of a healthy society. It was the same Pope who repeatedly asked for forgiveness on behalf of those Christians who had closed the door of dialogue with people of different beliefs.

Another person who concretely worked closely with people of different faiths was Mother Theresa. In fact, when she died, many thousands of persons went to give her a last farewell. The majority of these people were Hindus and Muslims. She was described as a person who was able to mix with people and accept the way they lived, even though she was a stranger to India. She was greatly admired because she worked mostly with Hindus and Muslims rather than with Christians. She showed great respect towards the religious beliefs of others.

We too are called to enter into dialogue with people of other faiths. It is a dialogue based on respect and on an understanding of what we believe in. To do this, we have first to understand and appreciate what we believe in, We

must do this by deeds and not by words. We have to ask ourselves how we would behave if confronted by someone who ridicules our beliefs. Or, we may ask ourselves how much we are interested in what the Church is doing nowadays. Our participation in that which is dear to us in our religion, like hearing mass on Sundays or a few minutes passed in prayer, and the teaching of the Church and Christian values, will surely help us to understand and appreciate what we believe in. Moreover, we should ask ourselves how familiar we are with the teaching of the Church. Unless we know what the Church teaches, we cannot appreciate properly what other religions teach.

In these two lessons we learnt that the Church is open to those who do not hold our same faith or are members of another Church. While respecting the individual's freedom, the Church always tries to be close to every person. This is because each person is a creation of God, even an image of God. God loves each person with an infinite love, irrespective of the faith the person professes.





CHAPTER FOUR

DIFFERENT WORLD RELIGIONS

HOW DO WE LOOK AT OTHER RELIGIONS?

RELIGIONS AND FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

Ever since we were young, we have always asked questions, which changed in quality and quantity over the years. Science has provided answers to questions like: 'How do I breathe?'. Faith has answered fundamental questions like, 'Why am I living?' Among these **fundamental questions** we find these: What is man? What is the scope of our life? What is good? What is bad? What is the scope of suffering? Which is the way to real happiness? What is death and what happens after death? Where did we come from and where are we going?

Through our questions we mature in our relationship with that Supernatural **Power** that helps us to find an answer to these fundamental questions. Hence, we grow in our faith; that is, in our experience with God. Through different religions, men share the answers to the fundamental questions of human life, which they acquire through their personal search.

For example, in Hinduism, the principal thought is about the divine mystery, that is, about any supernatural power.



The Hindus express these thoughts about who or how these supernatural powers are, through rites and reflections about life. They seek freedom from the suffering of mankind through the practice of discipline or meditation. They approach their gods with love and faith. On the other hand, Buddhism realises that this life can be an experience, during which one, through meditation on the teaching of Buddha, can achieve the state of real freedom from every egoistic and bad inclination or desire.

WHAT DOES VATICAN COUNCIL II SAY ABOUT THIS?

Through the process of globalization, nations are becoming closer while relationships among peoples are constantly being strengthened. Consequently, the Church is continuously checking the relationship between Christians and other religions. The document **Nostra Aetate** helps us to understand better how Christians should look at other religions. Before making a closer analysis of some well-known religions, we are going to study some points from this document to be able to consider them in a better way:

- The Church has always helped us to understand the importance of **unity and love** among peoples and nations. People have one Creator. So, the Church recognises all that which people have in common and that which brings them together.
- As Christians, we should always remember that Jesus is **the way, the truth and the life** (John 14, 6); in him persons can find the fullness of religious life. Therefore, in his

teaching and that of the Church which he founded, there is the whole truth.

- As Christians we should always look with **respect at what other persons believe in**. We should refuse nothing which is true in other religions. Although there may be certain aspects of other religions which are different from ours, there is often a reflection of the truth that Jesus gave us in his actions and words.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHRISTIANS WITH JUDAISM AND ISLAM

As Christians we esteem and respect the other monotheistic religions, which are Judaism and Islam. **Muslims** believe in one God, who lives and exists in himself. They look upon him as a merciful and powerful God, the Creator of heaven and earth. They consider Jesus as a prophet. Still, according to them, Mohammed is the last and greatest prophet. They also honour Mary, the Mother of Jesus. They also expect the day of God's judgement after death. Moreover, they attach much importance to moral life and adore God in a special way through prayer, the giving of alms and fasting. Because throughout the years disagreements arose between the Christians and the Muslims, the Church urges us to forget the past and together work to promote the good of all humanity, social justice, peace and freedom.

The Church gives great importance to the **spiritual unity that exists between Christianity and Judaism**. Christianity knows its roots in Judaism, as Jesus himself observed and practised this religion.

The Church recognises the fact that according to the plan of God, the origins of faith and its choice already existed amongst the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. We Christians should not forget that we received the revelation of the Old Testament from the Jewish people with whom God made the Old Pact. Because of this common spiritual heritage there should be reciprocal respect between the Christians and the Jews and, above all, there should be a brotherly dialogue as we all are real brothers because we are all sons of our Father Abraham.

WE ARE CALLED TO LOVE EVERYONE

As Christians we cannot really love and pray to God, the Father of everyone, if we refuse to treat all persons as brothers and sisters, created in the image of God. Man's relationship with God the Father and his relationship with his brothers and sisters are so intertwined with each other, that the Scripture says, *"Whoever does not love, does not know God"* (1 John 4, 8).

We Christians are therefore urged to dialogue and to lovingly work with persons of other religions, giving witness to the faith of Christian life. We are to recognise and **promote the good, spiritual and moral values which are common among us**. We should never harbour any theory, behaviour or attitude that leads to discrimination among persons or nations. We should **respect** man's dignity and all the rights deriving from it. Besides, we should answer the call to defend all those who are being discriminated against or are in any way deprived. We should be on friendly terms with persons of other cultures and be at peace with everyone to be truly the children of one Father.

Unfortunately, in the history of mankind, there have been episodes where people used religion to perpetrate atrocities against the same human race. On the other hand, at Taizé we see how different religions meet together to create a beautiful experience. This is one example among many, of how marvellous it is to **be united together and to always seek that which unites us rather than that which separates us**.



JUDAISM

THE HISTORY OF JUDAISM AND THE JEWISH CULTURE

Judaism is the origin of the three Monotheistic Religions , which are: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They are called **monotheistic** religions because all of them believe in **one God**. Judaism originated from the Jewish people, who today are found mostly in the United States of America and Israel.

Judaism started ,in the Middle East round about the year 2,000 BC. The Jews hold the origins of their beliefs as dating from the time of the **patriarchs**: Abraham, his son Isaac, Jacob and much later Moses and David. The three patriarchs lived in the Land of

Canaan, which later became known as the Land of Israel. The name **Israel** comes from the name given to Jacob (Genesis 32, 29). His twelve sons were the fathers of twelve tribes, which later developed into the Jewish nation. The descendants of Abraham became a nation, approximately in 1300 BC, after the **Exodus** from Egypt, under the leadership of **Moses**. A short time after the exodus, Moses gave the **Torah and the Ten Commandments** to his people. After 40 years in the desert, Moses brought his people to the Land of Israel, which is mentioned in the Bible as the Land promised by God to the descendants of the patriarchs.



It follows that the Jews have continuously been present in the Land of Israel for the past 3,300 years. The rule of the Israelites in Israel began with the victory of Joshua, approximately in the year 1250 BC. The period between 1000 – 587 BC is known as the **Period of Kings**. The best known kings were David, who established Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel and his son Solomon, who built the first temple in Jerusalem.

In 587 BC, the Babylonian army entered Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and took the Jews into exile in Babylon. From that time onwards, that region was governed by several empires: the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans and later on by other rulers. After the exile by the Romans in 70 AD, the Jewish people emigrated to Europe and Northern Africa, where they established a cultural and economic life and contributed much to the society in which they lived. Many Jews retained their natural culture and religion. During the first half of the twentieth

century, massive numbers of Jews went back to Israel. During the Second World War, the Nazi regime killed about six million Jews. This created the great tragedy of the **holocaust**. In 1948 the Jewish community regained the land of Israel.

It is worthwhile to notice that nowadays there are various ways in which Judaism is practised. Some of these are: **Reformed Judaism, Conservative Judaism and Orthodox Judaism**. There are also small groups with a few numbers of believers. Each group has its own practices, according to how it interprets the Jewish laws.

JUDAISM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Judaism brought new ideas about God as it was the Jews themselves who developed two ideas about God, in conformity with the mentality of the time. These ideas are that there is **only one God** and that God chooses to act in a **just** way.



Prior to Judaism, the people believed in many gods to whom they attributed human qualities but supernatural powers. The Jews believe that God is just and good. They also believe that there is only one God who not only created the universe but with whom each Jew can have an **individual and personal relationship**. Moreover, God continues working in the world, affecting all that people do. The relationship of the Jews with God is that of a pact, whereby the Jews fervently follow the Law (the Commandments) and God keeps his word to stay with them and protect them. The Jews believe that God chose them as his people to give to the world an example of holiness and good ethical behaviour.

SOME CUSTOMS IN JUDAISM

Jewish life is closely connected to **life in a community** as there are many activities that the Jews do together. They even feel as being members of the Jewish community spread all over the world. They meet in the **Synagogue**, which is a place of worship for the Jews, as well as a school and a centre for the community. The Jewish community is normally led by a **Rabbi**, who is a respected teacher and scholar and who explains sacred texts and traditions of Judaism.

Judaism is a **religion of the family**, with various celebrations starting in childhood. Thus, most of the Jewish religion is family based. An example of this is the Saturday meal, when the family meets to pray on this special day. Among the many customs and feasts in the Jewish life is the **Pesach**, a very important feast in the Jewish calendar,

The Jews celebrate the feast of Pesach to commemorate their liberation from Egypt by means of Moses and the might of God.

THE PRINCIPAL WRITINGS: THE TORAH AND THE TALMUD

The principal texts of the Jews are the Torah and the Talmud. The **Torah** is the first part of the Jewish Bible. It is the central and most important document in Judaism. The Torah refers to the first five books of the Old Testament, which are: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Jews refer to them as the Books of Moses.

The Jews believe that God dictated the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai, after they were saved from slavery in Egypt. According to them, the Torah shows how God wants the Jews to live. It has 613 laws together with the ten Commandments.

The **Talmud** is a collection of discussions held by learned Jews about the law, ethics, customs and the history of the Jewish people. Part of the Talmud consists of the written version of the oral Jewish Law and commentaries about it. The Talmud, which appeared in the second century after Christ, is studied and used in the everyday life of the Jews all over the world.

By considering all this, we can appreciate some important points in the history of Judaism and of the Jewish people. While appreciating the fact that there are many Jews embracing this religion, it is worth noting that the roots of the Christian faith are found in this religion.

WHAT DO I BELIEVE AS A CHRISTIAN?

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is a monotheistic religion. We believe in the mystery of the Holy Trinity, that is, that there is **only one God**, in whom there are Three Persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, God tried to enter into a dialogue with man to guide him to real happiness. Unfortunately, man did not seem to understand God; hence, God chose to become man in the person of Jesus. Jesus became man to continue revealing God to us and to save us from the consequences of sin. The teachings of this religion have had a great impact on the whole world, especially in the way we consider who God is and the way we look at our relationship with others.

THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANISM

In the New Testament, the Evangelists Matthew and Luke related the story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, in Judea. We then find very little about his childhood. We know that when he was twelve years old, he accompanied his

mother Mary and his putative father Joseph to Jerusalem. In the Temple Jesus said that he had come into the world to do the will of his Father. He spent his childhood and adulthood in Nazareth. When he was about thirty years old, Jesus began his public life and for three years he preached, healed persons and worked miracles. Jesus chose twelve Apostles and various disciples who followed him and helped him in his work.

At the beginning of his mission, he was in the synagogue where he was given the Book of the Prophet Isaiah to read. He read:

*"The spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to
the captives and recovery of sight to the
blind, to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."
(Luke 4, 18-19)*

Jesus stated publicly that he was the **Son of God** and spoke with the authority of God. This statement caused the Jewish religious authorities to rise



against him; they handed Jesus over to the Roman authorities to be killed. He was condemned to death on the cross, but three days later he rose from the dead and appeared to his Apostles and disciples. Before ascending to heaven he sent them to preach the good news all over the world.

The work of the Apostles was very important, for they spread the faith. St. Paul's mission was crucial for the building of Christian communities amongst pagan nations all over the Roman empire. Initially, the Christians were persecuted, especially by Roman emperors.

In the early years of the Church, there was lack of agreement on very important issues of our faith. Therefore, diverse councils were convened in order to discuss these points. Two important councils were those held in *Nicaea* (325 AD) and *Constantinople* (381 AD). In these councils the Church strove to make its teachings clear. It was at this time that the **Creed** was defined precisely. The Creed which was the result of the Council of Nicaea and of the Council of Constantinople taught that the Catholic Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. It was founded by Jesus Christ, therefore Bishops are the successors of the Apostles, and the Pope is the successor of St. Peter.

The differences between the East and the West Christianity led to what has been called the **Great Schism** of 1054, resulting in the formation of the Orthodox Church and of the Roman Catholic Church. Over the years there were other schisms in the Roman Catholic Church. One such schism from the Catholic Church that took place in the 16th century was the Anglican Reform. This reform was started by King Henry VIII who wanted the Pope to annul his marriage. It started more as a political disagreement than a disagreement about teaching. The reality of political differences between Rome and England gave way to ever-growing problems and so the Anglican Church was formed.

SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

Christians base their Christian life on the teaching which the Catholic Church calls "**tradition**". This means that the Church passes on the teaching of Jesus and his Apostles to others. This teaching is found in the Bible and in the true transmission of the teaching of the Apostles from generation to generation. Through the Creed, the Sacraments and the Magisterium, the Catholic Church transmits to all generations what it is and what it believes in.

Hence, faith is passed on to future generations through **Scripture and Sacred Tradition**. Tradition is alive and that is why the Church has



developed and is still developing. This has occurred through the authoritative teaching and interpretations made by the Magisterium of the Church, which consists of the Bishops in conjunction with the Pope.

PRAYER AND THE SACRAMENTS

God is present today through the work of the Holy Spirit who shows himself in the actions of those who believe in him. As Christians, we communicate with God through prayer, as Jesus taught us. At times, **prayer** is formal and part of the rituals which have been established for hundreds of years. Other prayers are personal and spontaneous, arising from personal needs and from praying in a group. While prayer is often addressed to God the Father, as Jesus taught us, we also use the intercession of Saints and of our Holy Mother Mary, who always leads us to her Son.

The life of a Christian is marked in a special way by the **seven Sacraments**, which are external signs of God's grace. We become members of the Church through Baptism, while the Sacrament of Confirmation confirms us with the power of the Holy Spirit. At this point, we take upon us the commitment of living the teaching of Jesus. The Eucharist gives us the necessary

strength to live the Word of God. This Sacrament is of crucial importance for the Church because it unites us with God and the other Christians and even gives us the strength to be of service to others. There are also the Sacraments which are related to healing: the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Sacrament of Extreme Unction. There are also two Sacraments which are associated with the assistance of others: Holy Orders and Matrimony.

THE TEACHING WHICH HELPS US TO ASSIST OTHERS

The relationship, which we Christians foster with Jesus by means of prayer, the Bible and other teaching, leads us to become persons **given to the service of others**, thus following the example of Jesus. The Catholic Church, guided by the Gospels, has built its teaching to help us give our share for the good of society and to make good choices in different areas of our life. As Christians we are taught to respect the dignity of each person. Above all, we are called to love and help the poor, both those who suffer material poverty, as well as those who are afflicted with spiritual or psychological poverty. We are in duty bound to work for the good of the community and to respect the natural environment which God has given us.



ISLAM

THE HISTORY OF ISLAM

Islam is a monotheistic religion, as Muslims believe that there is only **one God** who is called **Allah**. The word 'Islam' means '**submission to God's will**'. The Muslims believe that the Islamic religion has always existed. This faith has been transmitted to man by prophets, among whom there are Abraham and Moses. Muslims consider Jesus as a great prophet but not greater than **Mohammed**, who according to them, is the last and greatest prophet. Mohammed was born in Mecca, South Arabia, in the year 570 AD. He was a very spiritual person and used to spend hours in meditation on Mount Hira.

Muslims consider the **Koran** as a sacred book. In 610, while Mohammed was meditating on the mountains, the Angel Gabriel appeared to him. During the

rest of his life, Mohammed kept having these revelations, which he wrote down. He believed that God had chosen him as a **messenger** and he started preaching what God revealed to him. The message of Islam is simple and clear: there is no other God except Allah and life should be a pilgrimage of submission to God's will.

During the year 622, Mohammed asked his followers to emigrate to **Medina** because they were being persecuted; he soon joined them there. The voyage is called the **Hegira**, which is considered such an important event, that the Islamic calendar starts in 622. Within the space of ten years, Mohammed's followers grew so much in numbers that Mohammed could return and conquer Mecca. From that time onwards, his followers began to look upon him as the true and last prophet of Allah. Mohammed continued to lead his community till his death in 632.

When the Prophet died, he left an Islamic community numbering about one hundred thousand Muslims, who started to be called the Islamic State. There was a schism among these Muslims when the question arose of who should lead the State after Mohammed. As a consequence of this schism, two sections emerged: the **Sunnis** and the **Shiites**. This has been the greatest and oldest schism in the history of Islam. Both sides agree about the fundamental principles of Islam and follow the Koran, but there are differences stemming from their dissimilar historical experiences and their political and social development, as well as from the various ethnic groups. Today, Islam is the second widespread religion in the world, with more than one billion persons practising it.

WHO IS GOD TO THE MUSLIMS?

'Allah' is the name given by the Muslims to the **supreme and unique God**, who created and rules everything. Allah is everywhere and is omnipotent; he has

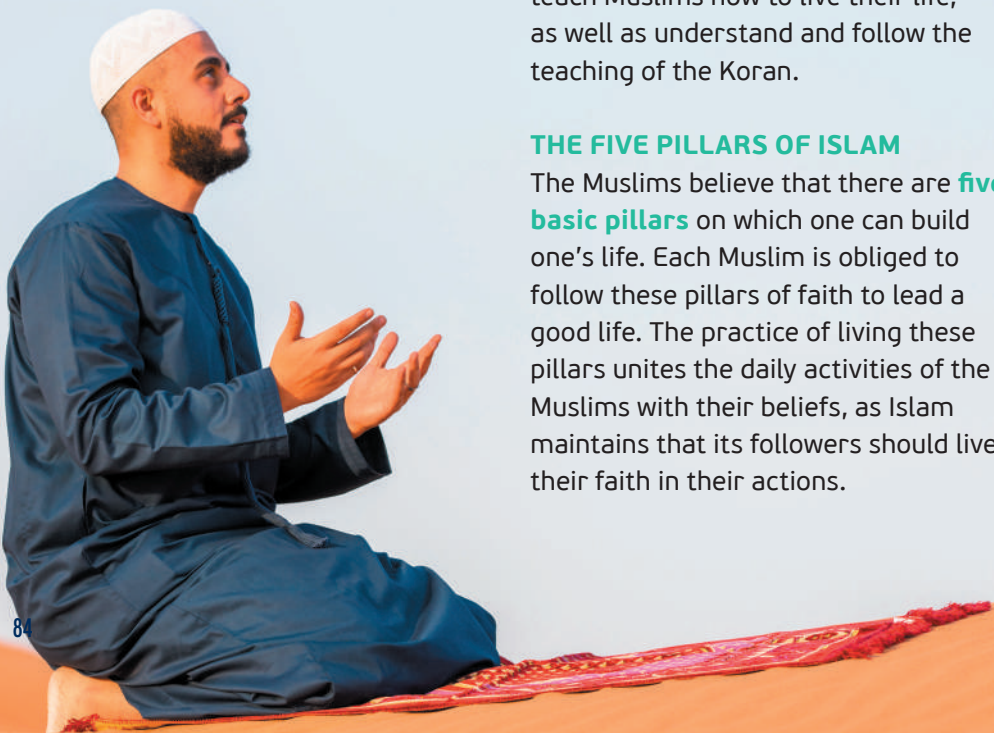
always existed and will always exist. He knows all that can be known. He has no shape or form and cannot be seen or heard. Allah rewards and punishes but he is also a **merciful** God. Those who believe can approach and get near to Allah by praying and reciting the Koran.

THE PRINCIPAL WRITINGS: THE KORAN AND THE HADITH

The Muslims base their laws on their holy book – the **Koran**—which is held in great respect by Muslims because it is the holy word of God. The Koran was revealed by God to Mohammed in Arabic. Muslims believe that the present text was established a little time after the death of the Prophet. The Koran was written in an old Arabic dialect and contains 114 chapters. It is sometimes divided into 30 parts to make it easy for Muslims to read during the month of Ramadan. Muslims also find guidance in the **Hadith**, which is the record of the writings about the life of the Prophet Mohammed. These documents were written later by disciples who had been close to the Prophet. These writings teach Muslims how to live their life, as well as understand and follow the teaching of the Koran.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

The Muslims believe that there are **five basic pillars** on which one can build one's life. Each Muslim is obliged to follow these pillars of faith to lead a good life. The practice of living these pillars unites the daily activities of the Muslims with their beliefs, as Islam maintains that its followers should live their faith in their actions.



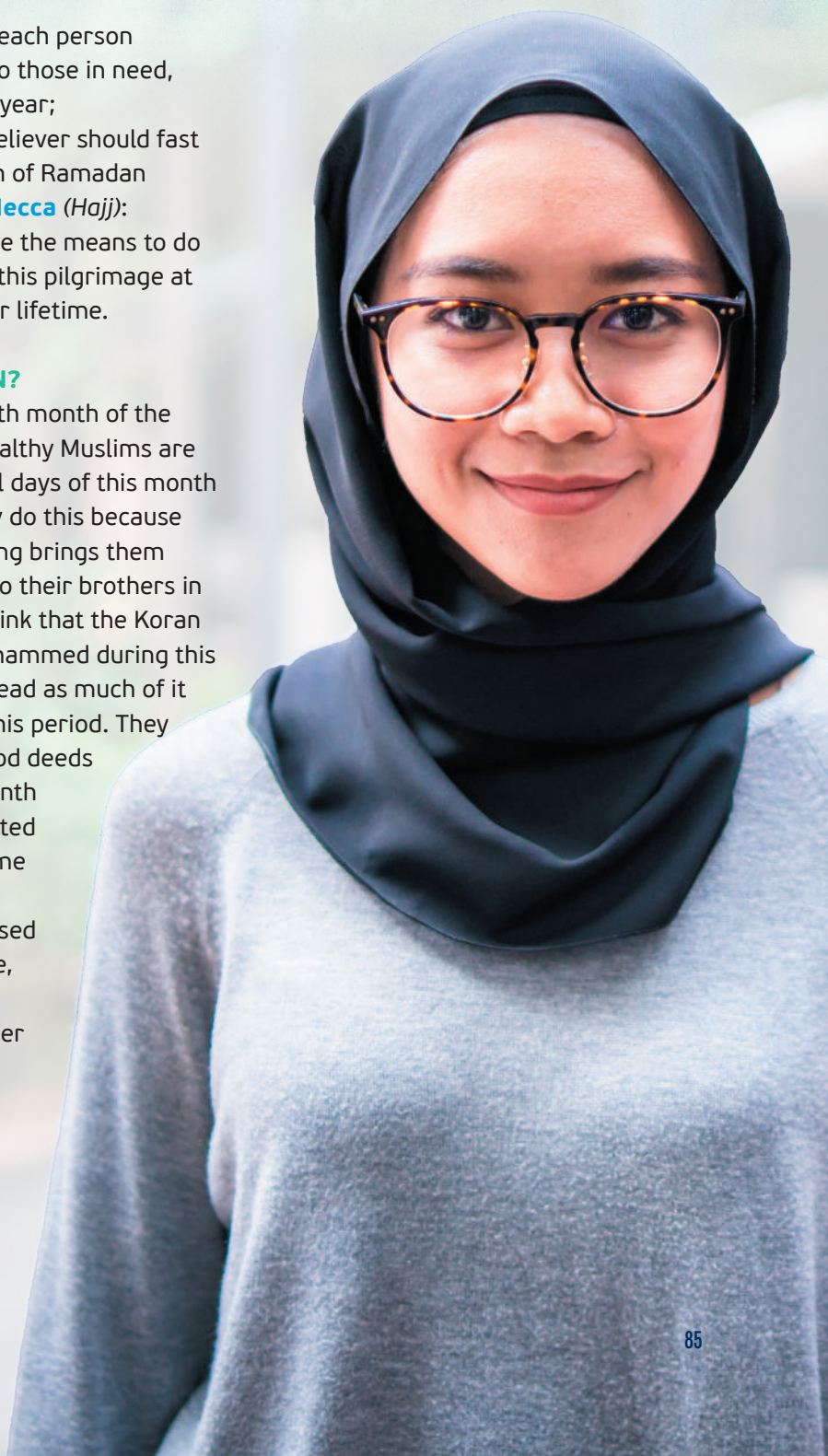
THE FIVE PILLARS ARE:

- **Faith in one God** (*Xahadah*): a person sincerely embraces the creed of the Muslim faith;
- **Prayer** (*Salah*): each believer should follow the prayer rituals five times a day;
- **Charity** (*Zakat*): each person donates money to those in need, generally once a year;
- **Fasting**: every believer should fast during the month of Ramadan
- **Pilgrimage to Mecca** (*Hajj*): Muslims who have the means to do so, should go on this pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime.

WHAT IS RAMADAN?

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. Healthy Muslims are obliged to fast on all days of this month during the day. They do this because they think that fasting brings them closer to Allah and to their brothers in need. As Muslims think that the Koran was revealed to Mohammed during this month, they try to read as much of it as possible during this period. They also believe that good deeds done during this month are more compensated than at any other time of the year because this month was blessed by Allah. At this time, **mosques** (places where Muslims gather

to pray) are filled with people who go there to pray. These prayers are an opportunity for Muslims to meet at the mosque every day, thereby improving relationships in the Muslim community.



HINDUISM

THE STORY OF HINDUISM

Hinduism is the religion of the majority of the people in **India** and **Nepal**. In fact, about eighty per cent (80%) of the Indian population consider themselves as Hindus. It is practised by more than nine hundred (900) million people all over the world. Hinduism appears to be the **oldest religion** in the world. It is also closely related to other Indian religions: Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism.

Contrary to most other religions, Hinduism does not have one founder or one book. During its long history there were **many personalities** who taught different teachings and wrote diverse spiritual books. For these reasons, Hinduism is very often referred to as a family of religions rather than one religion.

The name 'Hindu' is derived from the Sindhu which is a complex of rivers. The word 'Hindu' was probably used in the 15th and 16th centuries by the natives to distinguish themselves from populations of other traditions and religions. The people, going by the name of 'Hindu' had particular cultural customs, like cremation and also particular food styles.

GOD IN HINDUISM

Most Hindus believe in a **Supreme Spirit** called **Brahman**, from whom many other gods emanate. Brahman is also known as '*Trimurti*', three gods with three main functions:

Brahma – the source of all creation;
Vishnu – responsible for all the good things on earth;
Shiva – the giver of life.



Brahma



Vishnu



Shiva

Hindus consider God in various ways: a majestic king, a parent, a friend, a lad, a pretty woman or even a fierce god. One can relate to god in the form one wishes. Hence, the same person can be attracted to Shiva, Brahma or other gods.

MAIN PRINCIPLES IN HINDUISM

DHARMA AND THE CASTE SYSTEM

Dharma is the force that keeps everything going and takes care of nature. For example, it grows crops, makes the sun shine and sees that everything works well. Besides, Dharma gives persons the opportunity to behave morally well, according to age, sex and social position. Each person has his or her own Dharma, because Dharma also refers to the responsibility a person carries according to class

and a person's stage in life. The Hindus believe that a person is born in a particular social class, an idea which has its origins in ancient times. Presently, we find four classes or castes, which are:

- **Brahmans** – the intellectuals and the priests who celebrate the religious rituals;
- **Khsatriya** – the noble people or warriors, who traditionally hold power;
- **Vaishyas** – the merchants or ordinary people who produce, engage in commerce and earn their living;
- **Shudras** -- workers, who traditionally serve higher classes. These include manual workers, artists and clerks.



'KARMA', 'SAMSARA' AND 'MOKSHA'

'Karma' is a word which is used not only in Hindu but in various eastern religions. 'Karma' means 'action'. It refers to the law which states that every action has a reaction, which occurs either immediately or in the future.

Good actions or actions in harmony with Dharma produce good effects while bad actions produce bad effects.

Hindus can rise to a higher caste and be nearer to Moksha if they commit good acts, according to their Dharma. This can be accomplished through a process of re-incarnation, which is called '**Samsara**'. This is a continuous cycle in which the soul is re-born in various forms: the human form, the divine form or that of an animal. Freedom from this cycle of re-incarnation is called '**Moksha**'.

MAIN WRITINGS: THE VEDAS

The main Hindu writings are the **Vedas** and their supplements which, as we know them today, were formed between the years 1200 – 200 BC. Veda is a word which means 'knowledge' These writings discuss Dharma, which can be considered as a code of behaviour, 'law' or 'duty'. The Vedas are the oldest religious texts which reveal truth to the Hindus, who believe that these texts were given directly to scholars by god and passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth.

The Vedas are made up of four composite parts. Each Veda has four sections arranged chronologically. The Hindus hold these texts in great respect because they reveal something about the nature of 'Brahman' while showing them how they should behave in this life to achieve 'Moksha'.



BUDDHISM

BUDDHISM AND ITS HISTORY

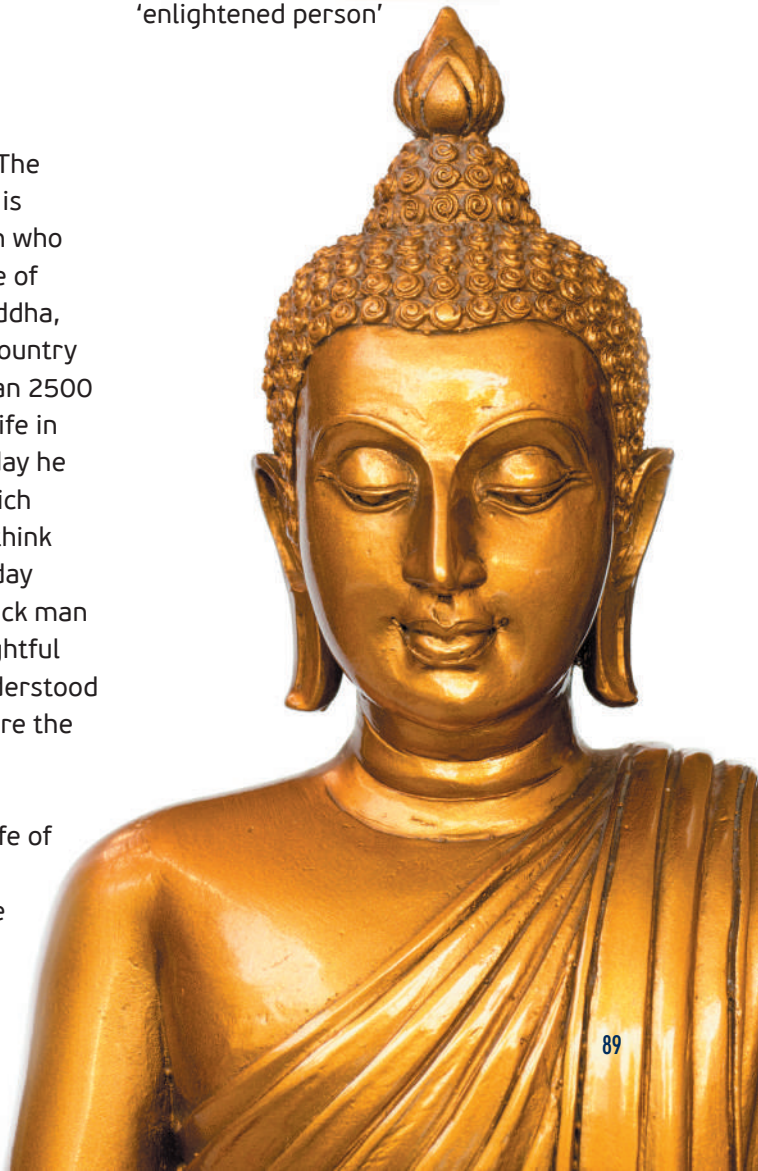
Buddhism is a spiritual tradition which focuses on spiritual and personal development and the **acquisition of knowledge for life**. There are about 376 million people following this teaching all over the world. Buddhists seek to reach a state of **illumination** or **wisdom** which is called '**Nirvana**'. They follow the example of Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who underwent this spiritual voyage in the 6th century BC.

The word 'Buddha' means the **enlightened** person, who has understood the essence of life. The history of Buddhism, therefore, is built on the experience of a man who wanted to understand the scope of life. **Siddhartha Gautama**, Buddha, was born in a royal family in a country today known as Nepal, more than 2500 years ago. He lived a luxurious life in a royal environment, until one day he went through an experience which changed his life and made him think about the meaning of life. One day Siddhartha met an old man, a sick man and a corpse and became thoughtful about what he had seen. He understood that sickness, age and death were the inevitable destiny of people.

So, he decided to abandon his life of luxury and live like a hermit. He started living in poverty and the

most rigid self-discipline, but he still was not happy with this life. Siddhartha therefore, decided to follow the '**middle road**', a balanced life, without luxury but also without poverty.

It is said that one day, while Siddhartha was sitting under the Bodhi tree (the tree of knowledge), he fell into deep meditation and reflected on the experiences of his life. He became an 'enlightened person'



or a person who understood what is important. Buddha was happy to live in that state of illumination, but he also realised that he had to share with others the wisdom which he had acquired.

In time, various people began to discover the teaching of Buddha and follow it. Different schools (that is different forms of ideas) of Buddhism cropped up. However, all of them have a common aim: to help persons to arrive at the true wisdom, essence and scope of life, that is, to be enlightened.

THE MAIN BUDDHIST BELIEFS

Buddhism focuses on **spiritual and personal development**. Buddhists do not believe that there is a god with whom one can relate personally. Various Asian Buddhists accept the fact that there exist various gods or supernatural entities who can give help and protect. However, many Buddhists are of the opinion that there is no proof that god exists. So, they do not feel the need to discuss his existence.

The Buddhists believe that the way that leads to illumination or total awareness is found in **leading a good moral life, meditation and knowledge**. They also believe that life is never ending, as individuals are re-born and experience suffering in different lives. Yet, when

one is alive, one realises that it seems as if everything has an end and that suffering and uncertainty are a part of life. Hence, in the teaching of Buddha, we find ways how to behave in the face of suffering and even how to stop suffering.

IMPORTANT WRITINGS

The '**Tripitaka**' or '**Canon Pāli**', which means 'the word of Buddha', is one of the most important Buddhist texts, as it includes not only the speech of Buddha, but also the teaching of his students. Among the principal teaching in Buddhism there are the Four Noble Truths which contain the core of the teaching of Buddha. It was these four principles that Buddha was contemplating under the Bodhi tree.

Often Buddha is compared to a doctor, because the first Noble Truth recognises that the problem of suffering in life is something we are born with. The second Noble Truth concludes that the cause of this suffering is the genuine wish that pushes us to always want, to always expect more. In the third Noble Truth he states that there is a cure for suffering and in the fourth Noble Truth Buddha states that in order to achieve freedom from suffering, man has to follow eight guide lines: '**The Noble Eightfold Path**'.



THE 'KARMA', THE 'SAMSAARA' AND 'NIRVANA' IN BUDDHISM

As we have already seen in the section on Hinduism, Karma is the concept which is present in diverse eastern religions. Although it carries different meanings, the teaching about **Karma** explains that our past actions affect us either positively or negatively, while our present actions will affect our future. What we sow today, we reap tomorrow.

Early Buddhist writings suggest that not everything we experience is the result of past actions. It could happen that we go through experiences because of material events which affect us. However, Buddhism does not doubt that we can solve every type of suffering through the Buddhist teaching at the moment it occurs.

The word 'Karma' means 'action', which occurs as a result of our intentions. Good actions which lead to good results are based on generosity, compassion, goodness or knowledge. Intentions which are opposite to these, such as greed, hate and others, are the cause of bad results.

Buddhists believe in '**Samsara**', which is the cycle of life, death and re-birth. According to the actions in previous lives, one can be born as a human, an animal or in the form of a spirit or a god. If one is born a human, then it is considered an opportunity for one to work to escape the cycle of Samsara;

this escape is called 'Nirvana' or illumination. If one has reached Nirvana and dies physically, according to the Buddhists, one is not re-born. When Nirvana is attained, the Buddhists appreciate and accept the Four Noble Truths.

In this chapter we saw different beliefs in other religions. We could appreciate that many times there are common values which can be found in different religions. Amongst these we find 'The Golden Rule'. This is a moral principle which tells us that we should treat others in the same way in which we would like to be treated. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus explained to his listeners that all that was written in the Jewish Law and in the prophets about morality can all be summed up in one rule: *"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets"* (Matthew 7, 12).

The Golden Rule is undoubtedly the most common universal ethical principle in history. The Golden Rule is found in many cultures, religions, ethical systems, philosophies and indigenous cultures. Therefore, it is very important. This rule shows the profound unity between human beings, even though they come from very different human experiences. Therefore, the Golden Rule is not only ideal for the relationship between people, but also for the relations between states, cultures, races, sexes and religions.

DOES EVERYBODY SUFFER?

At one time or another everyone experiences suffering. All religions attempt to give a sense to suffering and help people to accept it and learn from it. Monotheistic religions have similar reflections about the evil and root of suffering.

JUDAISM, EVIL AND SUFFERING

According to the Jews, evil originated **from the first sin of man**, as is written in the book of *Genesis*. God is held to be omnipotent, merciful and just and can intervene through miracles. God has given every one a free will, which provides one with the liberty to choose between good and evil. Hence, persons are free to make their own moral

choices. They can choose whether to obey God's commandments or not; they are rewarded or punished for their actions.

The **Tenakh** teaches that suffering can be a part of a test of faith for a person to assess whether that person is following God's commandments, even in moments of trial. The Tenach also holds that suffering may be the penalty for sins. God can heal suffering, through which people can get closer to God.

People do not always understand suffering. The Jews, however, believe that people should do their utmost to overcome and ease suffering.



JUDAISM AND LIFE AFTER DEATH

When early Jewish scripture was written, many Jews believed that on dying, all persons descended into a dark place called **Sheol**. When the Jews came in contact with other cultures, this belief developed and absorbed the teaching on **Gan Eden** (that is the garden of the prize or heaven) and **Gehenna** (that is the state of loss or hell). Then, Sheol became a place of purification or waiting, before the individual is sent either to Gan Eden or is completely destroyed in Gehenna. Many Jews believe in **life after death**. They think that persons have a soul, which one day goes back to God. It was during the time of the Pharisees and the early Rabbis that the teaching about life after death was further developed. The early Rabbis taught that those who lived according to **halakhah would be rewarded after death**.

Further teaching about life after death included the idea of **judgement, which would occur after the coming of the Messiah**. Some say that body and soul will re-unite, while others say that the soul is eternal. Judaism teaches that what is important is how a person lives. What happens after death should be left in God's hands.

CHRISTIANITY, EVIL AND SUFFERING

As is written in the book of Genesis, Christians believe that **evil is the result of man's disobedience**. We call the power of evil **Satan** or the **devil**, an angel who became an evil spirit through disobeying God. Together with others, devils cause evil and temptation. We believe that all persons have inherited

the tendency to be proud, which is also called **original sin**.

God gave humans a free will. He showed people how to lead a good life and follow the teaching of Jesus. Yet, God still gave **humanity freedom of choice**. God remains present in the life of men, especially when they are undergoing suffering, which is the result of bad decisions and choices which they or others have taken. It is because of God's continuous presence that Christians should trust in God. Christians should look upon suffering as a preparation for heaven, because in moments of suffering, persons become united with Jesus Christ, who suffered to pave for us the way towards the Father.

There are three ways how Christians answer the problems of evil and suffering in the world: **love, prayer and the sacraments**. We Christians pray God to enlighten the minds of those who make decisions, so that suffering can be eased. We also pray to him to help us bear our suffering and help others in their suffering. Sometimes, God reveals himself in the healing of suffering. The Sacraments always give us strength, especially the Eucharist, during which we offer our joys and sorrows. The Eucharist also empowers us to endure our suffering.

CHRISTIANITY AND LIFE AFTER DEATH

Christian belief in life after death is based on **the rising of Christ from the dead**. Christians believe that the death and resurrection of Jesus are part

of God's divine plan for men. Through his death on the cross, Jesus paid the price of men's sins and restored the relationship of humanity with God.

Christians believe that after death they are taken into the presence of God and they will be **judged** according to how they have lived their life. After this personal judgement, which happens immediately after death, there will be a **Universal Judgement**, when a definite sentence will be given at the end of time (KKK 1038). The Catholic Church teaches that after death there is a state called '**purgatory**'. It is a place for those who die in grace and are friends with God, but are only imperfectly purified. They are assured of eternal salvation, but after death, go through this purification to obtain the necessary holiness to enjoy the joys of heaven (KKK 1030). Because God gave men a free will, there is also a state for those who refuse God – this is called **hell**.

ISLAM, EVIL AND SUFFERING

Muslims believe that they should live their life in submission to the will of Allah. Many Muslims are of the opinion that they have a free will, in the sense that they are responsible for what they do in a particular situation. They can choose to do good by being guided by Allah. However, the majority of Muslims do not believe that they have an absolute free will, because God can intervene in their lives at any time and he can also work miracles. Many Muslims believe that suffering may be **caused by man's egoism**, which leads to wrong decisions. They feel that

they can overcome suffering in their life and allay the suffering of others by following the Koran. Many also believe that suffering is a test given by God to prepare them for heaven. Others say that it is a way how God punishes them for mistakes they have committed. The Koran says that God forgives everyone who repents his sins sincerely. Muslims are expected to follow the examples of justice, mercy and God's forgiveness towards other persons. To some Muslims, suffering is a blessing; if it is lived with patience and the sufferer remains strong in faith, then there is a reward after life.

ISLAM AND LIFE AFTER DEATH

Islam teaches that there is life after death. Allah decides when a person is to die. Many Muslims believe that when they die, they remain in their graves until the **Day of Sentence** comes. On that day they are taken out of their graves and brought in front of God to be **judged** about how they lived their life on earth. Those who have committed more good deeds than bad ones, enter **Heaven**, a place described as 'a garden of eternal joy' and a 'home of peace'.

Those who commit more bad deeds than good ones are sent to **Gahannan**, or hell, a place of physical and spiritual suffering. Muslims consider Allah as merciful and compassionate; so, not all bad actions are punished. There are, however, some sins that cannot be forgiven. These include the sin of idolatry. Muslims believe that life is a test and they try to do as many good deeds as possible.

HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM

THE ANSWER TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND SUFFERING AND OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

In eastern religions there are similar concepts about such topics as evil and suffering and also about life after death. In some aspects we see a similarity with our Christian faith, but in other aspects there is a big difference, and even aspects which do not agree at all with the Christian faith. It is worthwhile to note the differences, especially those which developed in Buddhism, a religion which was founded and developed after Hinduism.

HINDUISM – EVIL AND SUFFERING

In Hinduism evil is considered to be that state **when goodness is not present or is ignored**. Hinduism refers also to 'bad' things which are necessary in order to obtain a cosmic balance. Hindus believe in karma or the 'intended action'. Many of them believe that much suffering **is the result of their own actions**. They clarify that suffering is not a question of retribution for the evil that they do, but an opportunity from which they should learn. If Hindus show no compassion and mercy towards the needy, they themselves suffer 'bad' karmic consequences. Sometimes, certain things happen that are not the result of an action taken by man, like natural disasters. Some Hindus attribute such events to 'games of the

gods', which cannot be understood. Others think that natural disasters are necessary for world balance. There are still others who believe that natural disasters are a consequence of the bad actions of humanity and the bad treatment of the planet.

The Bhagavad Gita (a Hindu writing) urges readers to detach themselves from the world because the greed for material goods and man's own instinct detract from the freedom of the cycle of re-incarnation. Persons are to do the most possible good and the least possible damage to be able to get out



of this cycle of re-incarnation. Each Hindu should act without violence towards every creature. It is the duty of everybody to stop people from doing wrong and to help them to 'see the light'.

THE BELIEF IN LIFE AFTER DEATH IN HINDUISM

Many Hindus believe that humans live in a cycle of death and birth called '**samsara**'. When persons die, their atman, or soul, is re-born in another different body. Some believe that the re-birth occurs immediately after death. It is also believed that the atman may for some time stay in 'heaven', called 'Swarg' or in 'hell', called 'narak', where one enjoys or suffers according to the life one has led. Afterwards, one is re-born.

Many believe that good or bad actions determine the re-birth of the atman. One can be re-born in the form of an animal if one has repeatedly failed to learn when in the form of a person. Living life, according to the teaching of the Hindu writings, will eventually lead to '**moksha**'. Many Hindus affirm that good merits are achieved by following 'dharma', or a person's duties. The Bhagvad Gita describes four different ways how 'moksha' is achieved:

- **karma yoga**: actions and their consequences;
- **bhakti yoga**: growing in pure love for god;
- **jnana yoga**: a form of meditation, leading to liberation;
- **meditation**: the union of the mind and the soul to God, through one's breath and also other ways.



UNDERSTANDING



Some writings describe 'moksha' as the atman being absorbed by Brahman, from whom atman is thought to have originated. Other Hindu writings describe moksha as personally living in the presence of God.

BUDDHISM AND SUFFERING

Buddhism considers suffering as **a natural aspect of life**. Buddhists do not believe that people are bad, but generally they accept the notion that people create suffering through greed, anger and their own ignorance. The **Four Noble Truths** are the summary of the teaching of Buddha and speak about suffering and solutions to it.

There are many forms of suffering. In Buddhism there are three main types of suffering. The first one is linked to old age, sickness and death. This is a suffering of 'ugly experiences',

including unrequited desires. Buddha also teaches that suffering goes deeper than these three factors. It is also caused by constant change, in the sense that people continually lose things and situations that are close to them. People sometimes suffer because they are not satisfied, they are not 'enlightened'.

Buddha understood that the primary reason of suffering is 'desire'. Suffering is also the result of greed, ignorance and hate. Buddha affirms that suffering can be overcome if one follows the guide lines he ordered for Buddhists (the Eightfold Path). These guide lines should be lived contemporaneously and not one after the other; they will lead to clarification or 'light'.

Buddhists believe in 'karma' or intended action. They try to commit good deeds, like being generous and compassionate. They avoid bad actions, like being greedy

or hating. Their actions determine where they are going to be born in the next life. Through meditation, Buddhists can reach a state of pure love which manifests itself in being merciful towards others.

BUDDHISM AND LIFE AFTER DEATH

Life exists in a cycle of death and birth, called '**samsara**'. When one dies, one's energy is transformed into another form. Through good deeds, like ethical behaviour, the development of concentration and understanding, Buddhists hope to achieve clarification or ensure a better future for themselves.

According to the deeds committed in previous lives, one is born as a person, an animal a phantom or a god. Actions done with bad intentions may result in being born an animal or in a state of hell. Being born a person is an opportunity for a Buddhist to stop the process of re-incarnation. This freedom from samsara (the process of re-incarnation), is called **Nirvana**. Buddhists believe that when a person becomes enlightened and dies physically, the person attains Nirvana, thereby obtaining freedom from the cycle of samsara. Enlightenment is achieved when one understands the Four Noble Truths and comprehends various realities. In Buddhism the greatest miracle is the transformation of an 'ordinary' person into an 'enlightened' person.

Questions about why suffering and evil exist in the world, and about what there is after death, are among the fundamental questions which all human beings ask. Everyone would like to understand better and to find an answer because this helps the person give more meaning to life.

Here we saw how world religions answer these questions. We saw how monotheistic religions have a similar way of answering these questions, while eastern religions have similar answers to each other.

At the end of this chapter one can say that it is important to appreciate what other religions believe. Moreover, it is important to value how his or her religion helps the human being to get to the whole truth. It is also important that one searches throughout life and asks for more information from other persons, from books and from good websites which can help him or her to understand these and other fundamental questions in a deeper way.

We saw how certain basic principles for living a good life and avoiding what is bad - as we find in Hinduism and Buddhism - are similar to some aspects of the Christian faith. However, aspects like reincarnation, are absolutely contrary to the Christian faith of the resurrection from the dead.

CHAPTER FIVE

A REAL FRIEND



VALUES

Nick and Samantha were on their way to the square, when they saw Jake coming towards them, rejoicing in the brand new wireless speaker which was emitting glorious sound. They remarked to Jake, "What a trendy speaker!" "How much is it?" asked Nick. Jake was quick with another question, "How much do you think it costs?" Samantha also tried to guess its price.

In life, we are continuously evaluating the different objects we see around us, valuing them according to their quality

and their benefit to us. We do the same with people, animals and all the other creatures; we evaluate them according to their importance.

HUMAN VALUE

In the book of Genesis, God showed us how he created all creatures and saw that everything was good. But, when he was creating man, God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them and gave them dominion over all creatures whilst blessing them.



God gave us the faculty of evaluating everything and everybody. In fact, in the second chapter of Genesis we find, *"So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was the name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field."* (Genesis 2, 19 – 20)

VALUE OF THE GOSPELS

We need these values in our life to live in harmony as human beings. We need them to relate better with ourselves, with others and with our environment. Values indicate the importance of a thing or action, thereby helping us to choose the best actions or the best way to cope with different circumstances in life.

In the Bible we find a list of values which God passed on to the human being. Along the centuries God showed different values which human beings could use in their actions so that they live better lives. Among these values we find: love, honesty, compassion, forgiveness, justice and peace. These and many other values make the human being more complete.

AGAPE

In the Gospels we find a long list of values founded on the Law of Love of Jesus: Agape. The Gospel values are the basis of Christianity. They provide the structural basis of the Social teaching of the Church as they go further than the personal relations of each value in itself. The Gospel values make more sense as they all originate from the love of Jesus. The values of: respect for life, the dignity of each individual, faith in God, honesty, compassion, forgiveness and pity, service, equality, simplicity, justice and peace are some of the Gospel values. They all make much sense as they all are the result of God's love towards us – 'Agape'.

Agape is the highest form of Christian love. Jesus uses this word 'Agape' to describe the love among the Persons of the Holy Trinity. This is the same love with which Jesus ordains that we love each other. *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* (John 13, 34-35) It is a love that seeks nothing for itself but only seeks the good to be shared with others. It would be wonderful if we, as Christians, appreciate the value of Christ's love for us and share it with others and all of creation.



RESPECT IN DIVERSITY

The word **respect** is derived from the Latin word **respicere**, which means 'looking back at'; it means the capacity of looking back at someone or something to appreciate better the person or thing. The word 'respect' means **the ability of appreciating the qualities and skills of a person, acknowledging in a holistic way the value a person or an object holds.**

Respect for somebody entails that you look at the good qualities of a person and you protect the sentiments and feelings of the person. If you respect someone, this also means that you respect yourself, because you will be wishing that others will do the same in your case. Respecting others involves treating others with love and also caring for yourself and for others.

God created man and made each person different. Our God is creative for he did not create one man and then

made photocopies of him. No, God made each of us different and unique; no person is like another. Even twins, who are most likely to be similar to each other, are two different persons. The value of each one of us is priceless, because we are unique and are valuable to God. God created this diversity in all creation and so, we should learn to respect this diverse creation.

DIVERSITY

Just imagine the tediousness and monotony if a fruit and vegetable seller sells only one type of fruit or vegetable or a pizzeria offers only one kind of pizza. Imagine life being like that, without any choice! Life will be a complete bore. This fact should teach us to respect and appreciate the **diversity** around us. We should choose ways and bridges to unite us rather than walls to separate us. In the Pastoral Constitution of Vatican Council II, **Gaudium et Spes** we find:

"If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

Mother Theresa of Calcutta



"In diversity there is beauty and strength."

Maya Angelou,
Authoress and Poetess



"Respect and dignity should be shown to those who think and act differently from us in social, political and religious matters. In fact, the more deeply, through courtesy and love, we come to understand their ways of thinking, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them.... Any kind of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, colour, social conditions, language or religion must be curbed and eradicated as being incompatible with God's design."
Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World) Vatican II, 1965, # 27-29

Often, people seek uniformity and they love routine, because it gives them a sense of security and peace of mind, with no risks involved. But, if things remain the same, people would

not mature and die. Diversity carries its own risks, but on the other hand, it opens people to new cultures and friends, as well as new and different experiences, which **make their lives more beautiful and colourful**. Once someone stated, "The beauty of the world lies in the diversity of its people."

This is truer today more than ever. Never in the history of the world have people had the opportunities of being closer to each other than today. We have never been so connected to each other as we are today, through various means of communication, the **Internet** and the ever more efficient means of transport. With so much access and so many different people, there is a growing need for us to learn to live together like brothers and sisters, at a global level.



REAL CHRISTIAN RESPECT

During the Second World War, the world passed through a human and economic catastrophe. Unfortunately, Europe was the continent that suffered most damage and hostilities in this war that led nowhere. Many persons paid the price of the holocaust and concentration camps. Once again, at the end of this war, **there was the wish for a guarantee that never again would there be such a disaster.**

Robert Schuman, helped by some courageous people, did his best to do away with extreme political differences by entering into dialogue with the authorities concerned and working hard to set up the European Union. Pope Pius XII also worked tirelessly for unity among peoples; in his writings he outrightly condemned fascism and communism and promoted the use of dialogue.

DIALOGUE

Between the years 1925 and 1935, Pope Pius XI chose Bishop Angelo Roncalli, who later became Pope John XXII, to be the Apostolic Visitor to Bulgaria. His episcopal motto was 'Obedientia et Pax' – Obedience and Peace – virtues he kept and practised throughout his life. At that time, Bulgaria confessed the Orthodox religion and was not on good terms with the Catholic Church. While Bishop Roncalli was there, an earthquake hit

a town not far from where he lived. Thousands of families lost their homes and were hungry. The Bishop bought large amounts of bread and other necessities and gave them to those stricken by the earthquake. He also donated large sums of money to these people to rebuild their homes. On the strength of all this, the relationship between the two Churches improved and they became friendly.

On the 12th October 2016, Pope Francis met a group of German Lutheran youths at an ecumenical meeting,





where they discussed the differences that exist between the Lutherans and the Catholics. This meeting is still remembered because of the question Pope Francis asked the youths: "Who is better, the Lutherans or the Catholics?" He himself then answered, **"It is better when we are together."**

GOD ENTERS INTO A DIALOGUE WITH HUMANS

During the whole story of salvation, God entered into a **dialogue** with various Biblical characters. It was a plan of regret, forgiveness and change of heart, in which God urged



the Jewish people to turn back to him. Ever since original sin, God gave man the opportunity to regret his sins and go back to him and also **promised a Saviour** who would offer his blood for the forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26, 28). Because man is created in God's likeness, **God continues to offer forgiveness and tries to enter into a dialogue with man** until man cleanses himself of sin and recognises God.

"Wash yourselves; make yourself clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." (Isaiah 1, 16-18)



Where there is forgiveness, there is the highest grade of respect a person can experience. This is the way our God chooses to forgive us. It would be wonderful if we share with others what we receive from God. Jesus expects us to imitate him in the way we love those persons whom we do not particularly like, those whom we find it difficult to forgive, much less enter into a dialogue with. *"Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent' you must forgive."* (Luke, 17, 3-4)

I ACCEPT JESUS IN THE INCARNATION

Incarnation is that act of grace whereby **Jesus took on the nature of man in unity with his Divine Person, and so became man.** Jesus is both God and man. The Divine Person became united with human nature. Human actions and qualities are evident in the course of the life of Jesus. His Godlike qualities are present on particular occasions, like his rising from the dead, the forgiveness of sins and the miracles he worked, always in the name of God. This union is called **"hypostatic"** which means that **the two natures are not mixed but are united without loss of separate identity, forever.**

In the beginning, God created everything well, but man, tempted by the devil, the master of lies, egoistically opted against God by sinning. Man, a creature made by God, goes against God. When one thinks about the ungrateful behaviour of man's action, one realises how great was this offence against God. This offence was great not because the sin in itself was great, but because it was an offence against God, the Creator and Lord of everything and everyone. Man alone could not atone for this great damage; it had to be a God-man to offer atonement. That is why Jesus, who is God, 'was incarnated', that is became human like us, except for sin, to undergo this mission of salvation for us.



THE PROMISE OF A SAVIOUR

Exactly after man's first or original sin, **God promised a saviour who would redeem all creation** from the grip of sin and death. (Genesis 3, 15) God also promised Abraham the fatherhood of a big race, out of which the saviour would come. (Genesis 17, 19). He promised David that the saviour would come from his issue. (2 Samuel 7, 12-13). Through the prophet Isaiah, God promised:

"Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." (Isaiah 4, 17) Through the prophet Micah, God made it known that the saviour would be born in Betlehem: "But you O Betlehem Ephrathah who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient times." (Micah 5, 1)

Finally, God sent his angel Gabriel to announce to Mary the enactment of this great promise: *"In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favourite one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by the words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will*

name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your words.' Then the angel departed from her." (Luke 1, 26-38)

God became man, like us in everything except sin: **Verbum Dei caro factum est** – The Son of God became man. God does all this to save mankind from sin and death. In his first letter St. John confirms this when he writes:

"Everyone that commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil." (1 John 3, 8)

Indeed, we should be very grateful to God for his unending love to see us liberated and united with him in heaven for ever.

OPEN TO THE SENTENCE OF THE GREATEST CRIMINAL

The Jewish Teacher or **Rabbi**, as he was called, was a well esteemed and respected man in his community; he sought to be popular and be the centre of attention, for his living depended on his disciples. He was a studious person, well versed in the Law. He used to have a house or a suitable place where the disciples could live with him during their course of study. The disciples usually were healthy men, over fifteen years of age, and could afford to pay a fee to the Rabbi. It was the disciples themselves who sought a good Rabbi to study the Law – the **Torah** – with him. Many of them aspired to become Rabbis themselves in due time.

JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES

However, it was Jesus himself who chose twelve men who were not great scholars; moreover, **he called them friends** and not students. He had no fixed abode but travelled from place to place. He did not teach them the Torah only but also preached the news that the kingdom of God on earth had come. Jesus had more disciples than any Jewish Rabbi had; among these disciples there were

also some women (Luke 10, 38-42) and children. (Mark 10, 13-16) He was not limited to healthy men who could pay, but was even the friend of the poor and the sick. (Mark 1, 40-46)

Jesus did not fill his disciples' heads with the 613 Jewish laws that are found in the Torah, but taught them only one law, "*Love each other as I have loved you.*" Jesus asked his disciples not to be selfish in anything, to carry their cross every day and not expect to be praised or served. His disciples were even sent to preach the Gospel themselves, not only to the Jews but to the whole world. He promised he would be with them





till the end of time. Jesus went against all the prejudices of his time . He was open to strangers (Matthew 8, 5-13), to the physically sick (John 9, 1-12), to the spiritually ill (Mark 2, 1-120), to women (John 4, 4-42) and to children, for whom he worked hard to see that their dignity was respected (John 8, 1-11). All this resulted in Jesus being considered an inferior teacher for some people of his time.

JESUS WAS DIFFERENT

Because of these non-traditional attitudes of Jesus as a Jewish Rabbi, the leaders of the Jews, among them the Scribes and the Pharisees, started being faced with opposition from their followers, who noticed the great difference between Jesus and the other Rabbis. (Mark, 1, 22) They greatly feared that they would lose

their popularity, their respect, as well as their means of living. They began to seek every opportunity to catch Jesus teaching a heresy, (Mark 12, 16), (Luke 10, 25-37) so that they could get rid of him quickly. (John 11, 45-57). They went to great lengths to condemn him, even going so far as to lying against him in front of the Sanhedrin.

Jesus, God who became man like us (was incarnated), from the very beginning became the **friend of the poor and the sick, of women and children**. Through his death, **he made all sinners friends with God**, even those who wanted to be his enemies. He was **sentenced to death** and treated like a criminal and **through the harsh sentence of the cross paid for our redemption**.

I DO NOT CALL YOU SERVANTS BUT FRIENDS

Friendship is a reciprocal affectionate relationship among persons who love each other. Real friends are those persons who are ready to share the love in their hearts with those who depend on them. In everyday life, we depend much on friends near to us, from whom we expect trust and support. Obviously, they also expect the same love from us.

JESUS OUR FRIEND

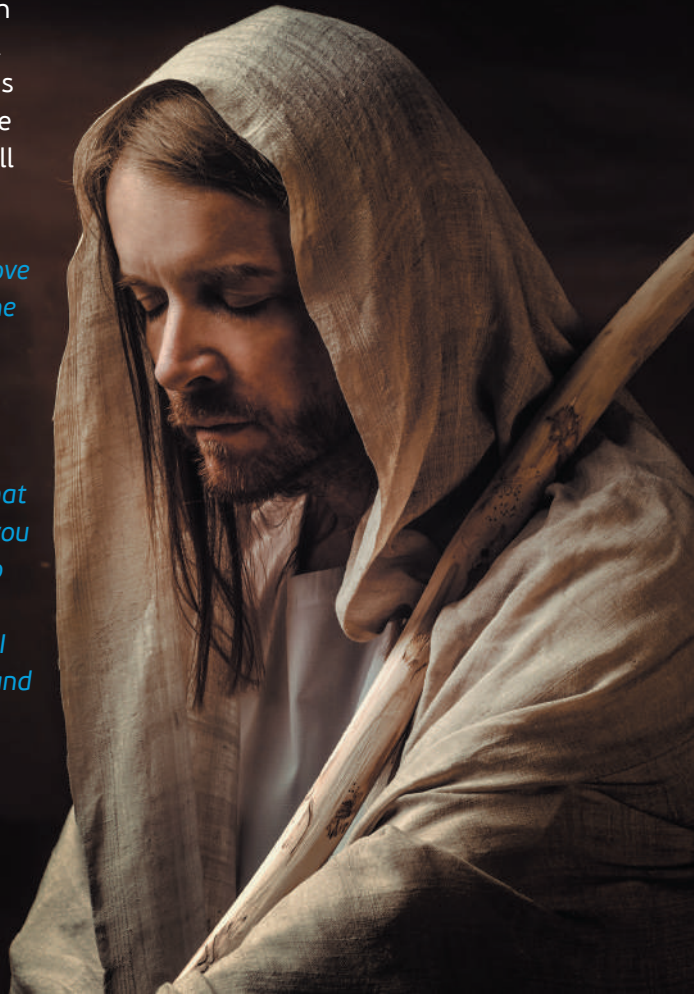
We frequently refer to **Jesus as our friend** because we know that he wants what is best for us. We depend on him as our friend, for he himself said that without him we can do nothing. This is evident in the way he was ready to die for his friends, thereby giving them all that his Father had given him.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and

bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

(John 15, 12-17)

Jesus had a unique mission, given to him by God the Father, to once again befriend man with God. To accomplish this mission, Jesus was ready to lay down his life for his friends, not only on the cross but even throughout his life. This total **self-giving of Jesus** showed



itself during his mission as a teacher, a leader and a saviour.

JESUS AS TEACHER

The quality of a **teacher** stood out in Jesus. He taught with conviction and his teaching was special and full of kindness. (Luke 4, 22) So much so, that the crowds were astonished and were ready to stay with him for days. (Mark 8, 1-9) He was prepared to teach anytime and would not lose an opportunity, like when Nicodemus went to visit him at night (John 3, 1-21) or when he wanted to rest a little, but parents brought their children to him. (Mark 10, 13-16) His teaching was not targeted towards one special group or towards the good only (Mark 2, 17), but was open to everybody, especially to sinners and all those emarginated by society. (John 4, 1-39).

JESUS AS A LEADER

Jesus showed his qualities as a leader when he started his mission by obeying the will of his Father. He also had the good sense to **choose** simple persons from different walks of life at that time. His group of apostles ranged from simple fishermen to tax collectors and even Zealots. (Mark 1, 17-19) This group was built on sacrifice, prayer and intimate friendship. Jesus had the courage to send this group before him, two by two, to spread God's word. (Matthew 10)

The mission of Jesus reached its climax when he gave himself totally on the cross. Only he could be our **saviour**,

saving us from the yoke of sin and the clutches of the devil. As a saviour, he not only died for us but also rose from the dead after three days, because as St. Paul writes *"And if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain."* (1 Corinthians 15, 14) With his rising from the dead, his teaching took on a different meaning. God showed us that man had now reached the peak of life to which he had been called from the very beginning of creation, that is **to be united forever with God**.

In his Apostolic Exhortation 'Rejoice and Be Glad', Pope Francis acknowledges man's frailty and tries to persuade each Christian that holiness is not unattainable. It is the strengthening of our frailty by God's mercy. He invites us to practise the same qualities of Jesus, specially the **beatitudes**. Thereby, we get nearer to our destination in eternity, in union with our brothers and sisters, the saints and with God.

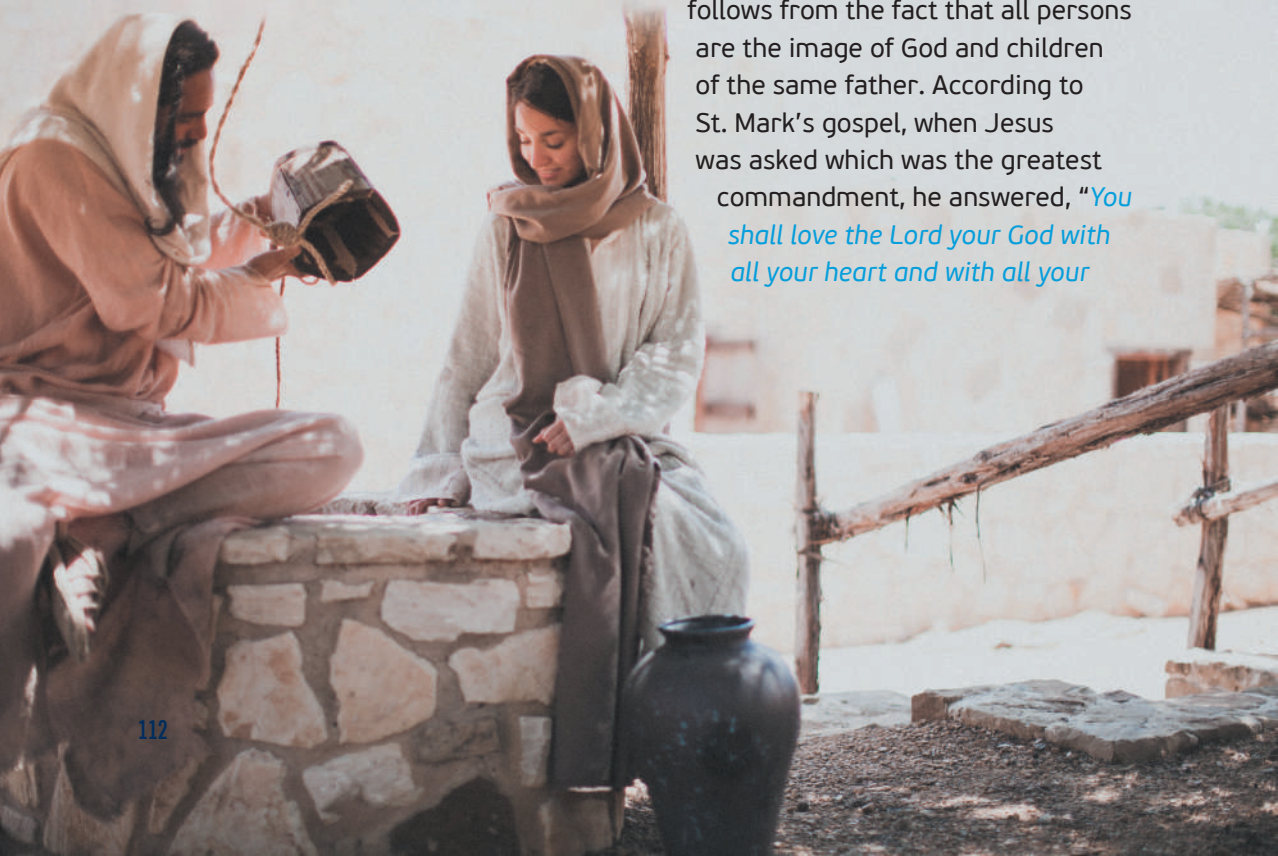
The Pope explains that the **criterion of holiness is simple; we cannot separate the love towards God from the love towards others**. He also reminds us of the words of Jesus, *"Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."* The Pope reminds us that if we want to grow in holiness, we should not stop only on imitating Jesus and relying on our capabilities but we need the grace of God to work within us, as well as prayer on our part.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

In the Gospel of St. Matthew we find the well-known episode when Jesus cures the servant of the centurion. In this extract, we see Jesus going out of his way and against the Jewish mentality, which we at times also suffer from, to do good only to those close to us. Jesus overcomes these ideas, which bring disunity and injustices; he helps a person who is not a Jew, a Roman who is considered to be the enemy. Moreover, Jesus praises the faith of the Roman centurion who has asked him to heal his servant (Mt. 8, 5-13). In the gospels we also find that Jesus meets Nicodemus, a genuine Pharisee, who is seeking the truth (John 3, 1-21). He does not mind accepting the invitation of Martha and Mary, two of his disciples, when they invite him to dine with them

(Luke 10, 38-42). Neither does he refuse to eat at the house of Zaccheus, who is emarginated by society (Luke 19, 1-10). Among the many miracles he works, Jesus heals the devil-possessed child of the Cananite woman, considered to be a gentile (Mark 15, 21-28). These episodes and many others show that, when dealing with persons, Jesus erects no barriers or frontiers, which separate or segregate religions or human beings.

In the parable of the Samaritan (Luke 10, 25-37), the Samaritan breaks down the taboos of prejudice, racism and social class to offer a hand of mercy, generosity and solidarity. In this parable Jesus wants to emphasise the fact that our neighbour is every person who is in need, no matter who the person is, no matter the race, colour or religion. This follows from the fact that all persons are the image of God and children of the same father. According to St. Mark's gospel, when Jesus was asked which was the greatest commandment, he answered, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your*





soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". (Mark 12, 29-31).

In John's gospel, Jesus says, *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13, 34-35). So, how can we alienate anybody once Jesus has made it so clear that we should love each other as he has loved us and as much as we love ourselves? From these passages, one cannot but help notice that Jesus favoured human and religious freedom. For Jesus, it does not matter in what you believe or who you are but that you are the image of God, a human being.

Vatican Council II had this to affirm about religious freedom: *The Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This*

freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power in such manner that no one is to be forced to act contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits. The Council further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself." (Dignitatis Humanae 2)

This declaration also states that because persons are endowed with dignity, reason and free will, they are called by their own nature to seek the truth and live it. This puts upon the individual the personal responsibility of seeking the truth all life through. Man's answer to God should be based on his free will.



That is precisely why no one should be forced, against one's will, to embrace any type of faith. God revealed himself and redeemed all of creation through Jesus; yet, he never presses anybody to follow him, because the act of faith is in itself a voluntary act. God invites man to enter into an intimate relationship with him but it is up to man to co-operate with him and choose how. Hence, the principle of religious freedom helps to create an environment, in which persons may be invited to embrace the Christian faith willingly and profess it by their actions throughout life.

Religious freedom has great implications on our daily lives. It affects a wide range of characteristics, which are necessary to build a strong and vibrant society. In a globalized world,

religious freedom is not only an act of tolerance but is even a bridge joining different communities to work together. Religious freedom creates spaces for cultures, norms and values which support free societies, thereby fostering general prosperity which is bound to result in less social poverty. At the same time, the skills and qualities of each individual and of different communities are enhanced.

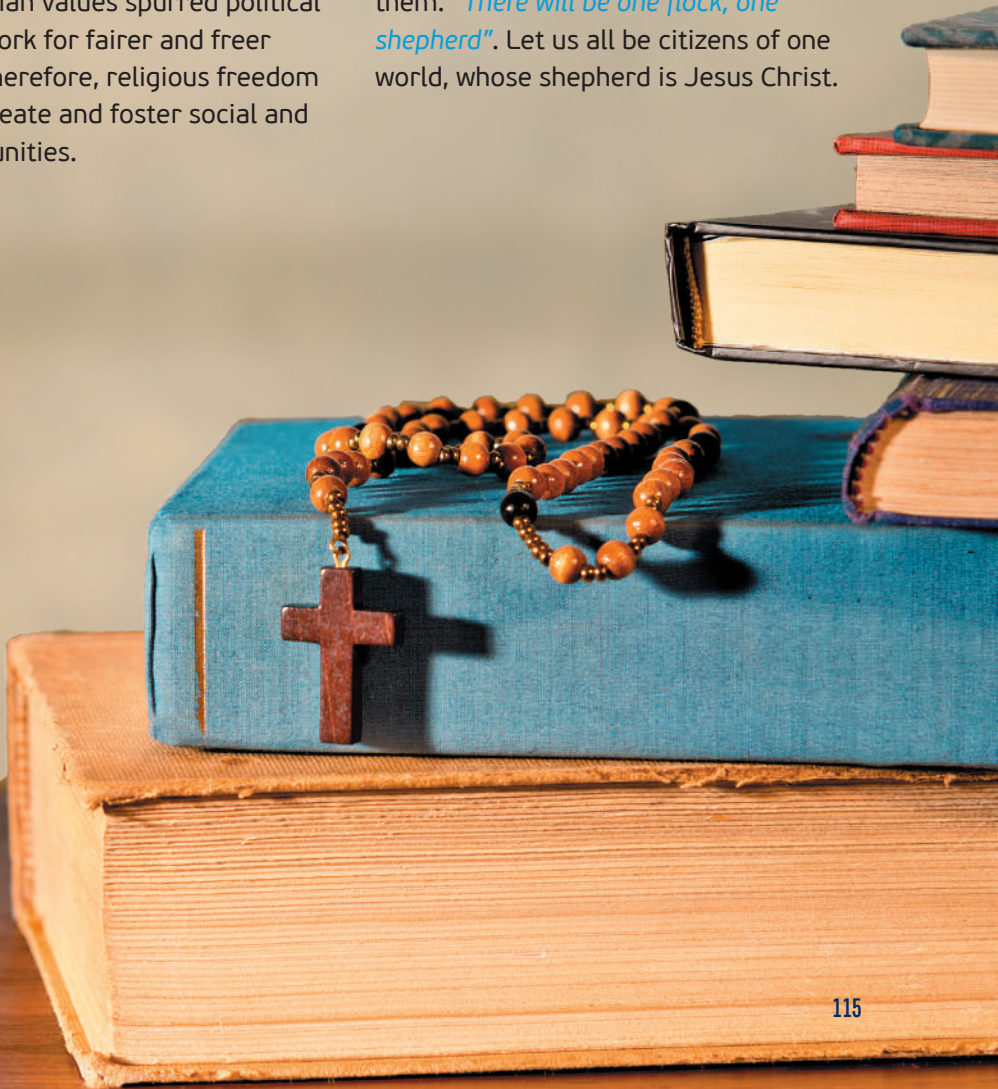
The practice of religious freedom also leads to the granting of civil rights. Unfortunately, in those countries where there is no religious freedom, there are no civil rights. In the 21st century there are still several countries, where millions of persons are threatened because they hold principles or religious /civil beliefs which are different to those

dictated by the State. Yemen, North Korea, Tibet, China, Cuba, Chad and Iran are a few of such undemocratic countries.

The Catholic Church has always sought to inculcate Christian values in families. Since its beginning, Christian families and communities have been open to all, even to pagans or gentiles, as St. Paul used to call them.

These communities developed and created social, civic and legal systems that went hand in hand with their beliefs. These communities always kept their values and passed them on from generation to generation. By time, these same Christian values spurred political parties to work for fairer and freer societies. Therefore, religious freedom helped to create and foster social and civil opportunities.

Pope Benedict XIV in his encyclical **Caritas in Veritate**, Charity in Truth, shows how the challenges brought by globalization should be overcome. He also explains how charity is the pillar, on which society should be built. The Pope reminds every Christian to pray to God with open arms, keep in mind God's love for each and every one of us, keep the commandment 'love your neighbour as yourself', be open to others and work harder for more justice and peace. The hope of those who follow Christ, the King of all nations, lies in the unity of all brothers in one family, sons of the same Father, where there is no distinction between the rich and the poor, between white and coloured, between us and them. *"There will be one flock, one shepherd"*. Let us all be citizens of one world, whose shepherd is Jesus Christ.



MISSIONARY LIFE

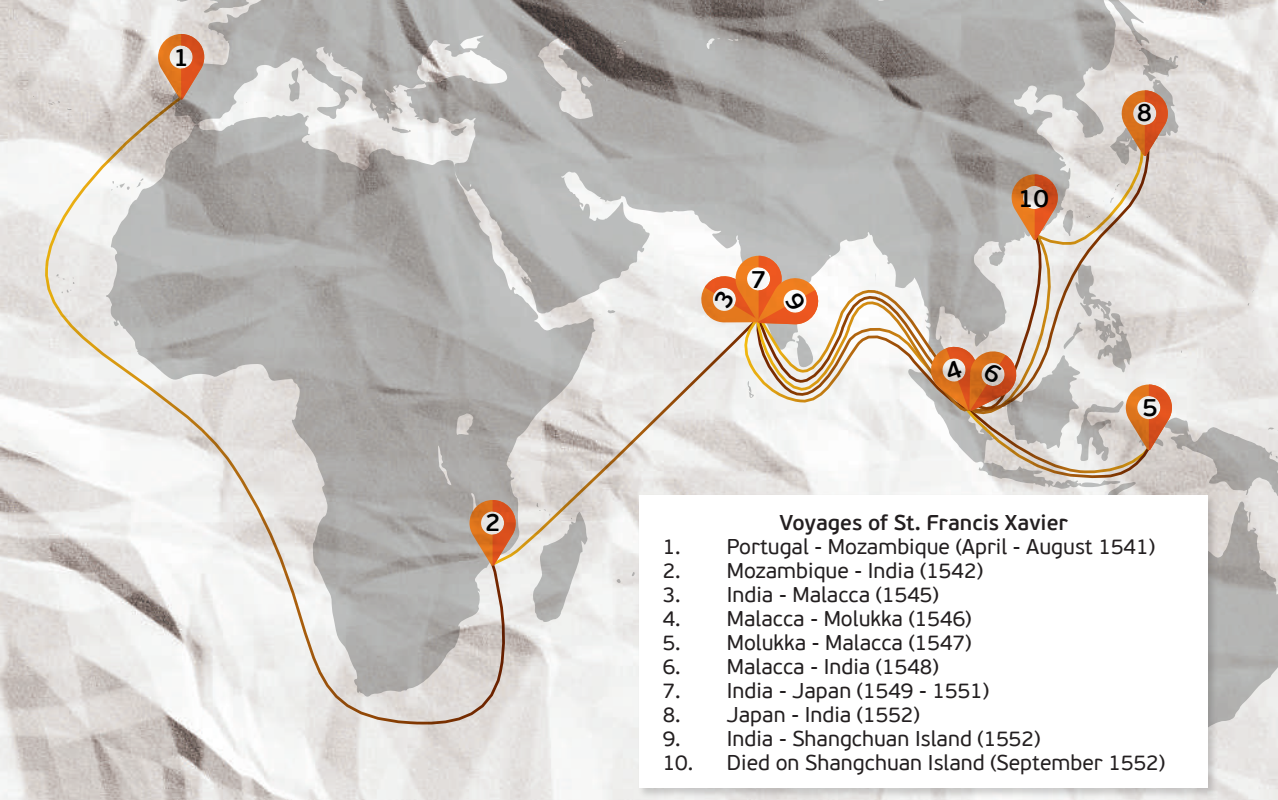
The Apostles followed the same precepts that Jesus had taught them. From the very beginning, they strove to convert people to proclaim Christ, not by using undue force or pressure but by the sweetness and the power of the word of God. In the Acts of the Apostles, we find Paul, the first of them all, working hard to take the word of Jesus to the gentiles and the pagans. St. Paul undertook three big voyages in the Greek and Roman worlds for love of the Gospel. In his letters, besides describing his work with different peoples, he wrote messages of courage and warnings to the communities he had established. After being ordered by Jesus, before he rose to heaven, all the other Apostles went around the world preaching the Gospel, teaching and baptising in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit those who wanted to accept Jesus, (Mt 28, 19-20)

Over the centuries the missionary spirit continued to grow and get stronger. Unfortunately, there were circumstances when this missionary spirit became

impure, especially in the case of Catholic kings or leaders, who were only interested in acquiring power over the people they ruled and also seizing their possessions.

However, missionaries worked hard during several centuries to preach Christ everywhere in the world, using no pressure and also respecting the religions and cultures of the places they visited. One of the many missionaries who are well-known for their tireless work, is Matteo Ricci, who learnt Chinese and took on the Chinese culture to be able to make Christ known in Beijing, as well as inside the imperial palaces. St. Francis Xavier worked in Japan, Borneo, the Maluku Islands and he also wished to go to China. Today he is considered as the second greatest missionary after St Paul. On the other side of the world, we find Father Martin de Valencia, one of the Twelve Apostles of Mexico, who were living witnesses of the respect, with which different cultures should be treated.

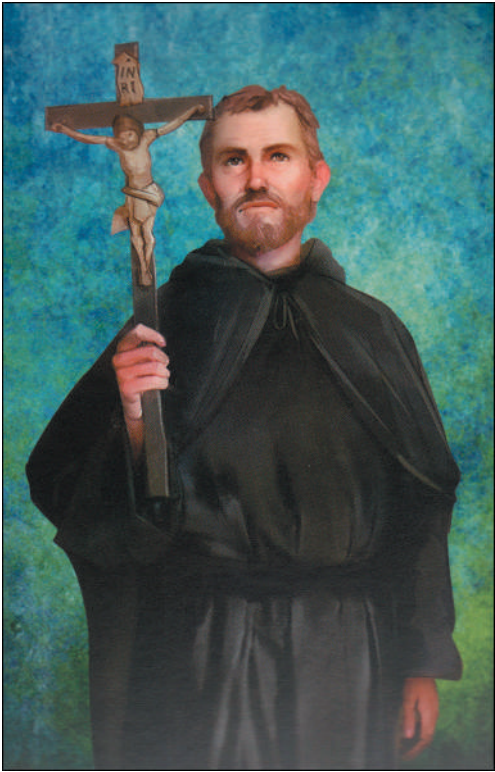




- Voyages of St. Francis Xavier**
1. Portugal - Mozambique (April - August 1541)
 2. Mozambique - India (1542)
 3. India - Malacca (1545)
 4. Malacca - Molukka (1546)
 5. Molukka - Malacca (1547)
 6. Malacca - India (1548)
 7. India - Japan (1549 - 1551)
 8. Japan - India (1552)
 9. India - Shangchuan Island (1552)
 10. Died on Shangchuan Island (September 1552)

ST. FRANCIS XAVIER

St. Francis Xavier was a Jesuit missionary and one of the co-founders of the Society of Jesus. He was a great friend of St. Ignatius of Loyola and one of the first seven Jesuits who took the vows of poverty and chastity at Montmartre, Paris in 1534. He led a mission across the Portuguese empire in order to spread evangelisation in Asia, and mostly in India. Later, he voyaged to the islands of Japan. He was the first missionary to visit Japan, Borneo, the Malaku Islands and neighbouring regions. He did his best to learn the native languages, something which was not easy to do. However, more difficult than this, was the opposition he had to face from some of the local leaders. In fact, in these regions he did not have the same success as he had in India. St. Francis was on the point of extending his missionary work to China, but he died on the Chinese island of Shangchuan. It is deemed that St. Francis baptised more than a million persons in these countries.



ST. FRANCIS XAVIER

MATTEO RICCI

Matteo Ricci was an Italian Jesuit and one of the founders of the Jesuit missions in China. Ricci started his missionary work in Macao, China, in 1582. He was the first European to enter the city of Beijing in 1601 and he was invited by the Emperor of China, as he had heard of Ricci's knowledge in astronomy and science. Through his friendships and conversations with dignitaries of the country, Ricci succeeded to convert to Christianity many Chinese, including high officials of the Chinese empire. A notable part of his work among these people was the help he provided in the translation into Latin of Chinese sacred texts, as well as of classic Confucian ones. He never tried to impose his beliefs on the Chinese people or on their culture. He first tried to learn their culture and traditions and then, in a masterly manner, he tried to make them Christians.



MATTEO RICCI

Frey Martin de Valencia

Frey Martin de Valencia was a Franciscan monk who was born in Spain in 1474. He worked for a long time in Valencia, from where he took his name. When he was 50 years old, he was chosen to lead the first mission in Mexico, along with another twelve Franciscans. He worked for the conversion of the indigenous Mexicans, in what has been called "a spiritual conquest." This was a time of suffering and penitence for Father Martin, as he worked, especially, for the evangelisation of the young. In 1532, after eight years in Mexico, along with eight other Franciscans, he planned to go and evangelise in the Far East, in the Pacific Islands, something which, unfortunately, he failed to do. So, he remained living in Central Mexico. Near the end of his life, he retired to a cave in Amaquemecan (Amecameca) and dedicated his life to prayer and meditation. He impressed the people of that city to such an extent, that there were many conversions. He died in the land of Mexico on 21 March 1534.



FREY MARTIN DE VALENCIA

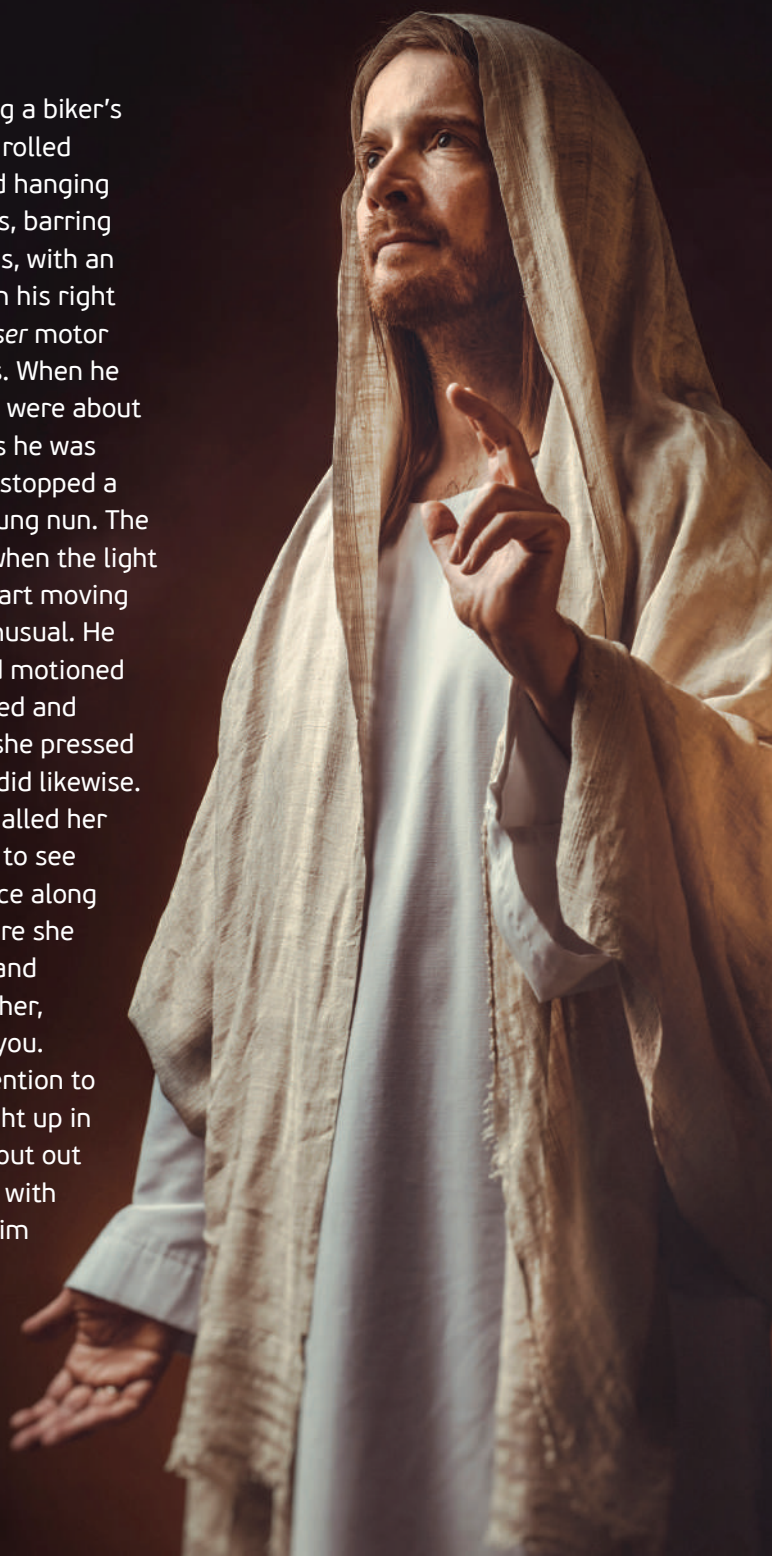


CHAPTER SIX

AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANS

WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?

A well-built young man, wearing a biker's leather jacket with the sleeves rolled up, with long wavy hair, a beard hanging down to his chest and his hands, barring his fingers, covered with tattoos, with an earring in the form of a cross in his right ear, was proudly riding his *cruiser* motor cycle minding his own business. When he reached the traffic lights which were about to change to red, he stopped as he was supposed to do. Near him also stopped a car driven by a shy, smiling, young nun. The young man looked at her and when the light turned green and they could start moving again, he noticed something unusual. He rode his bike alongside her and motioned her to stop. The nun was startled and instead of pressing the brake, she pressed the gas pedal. The young man did likewise. He caught up with her and signalled her again to stop. The nun decided to see what he wanted rather than race along headlong without knowing where she was going. The youth stopped and got off his motorcycle. He told her, "Sister, excuse me if I startled you. But, I wanted to draw your attention to the fact that your dress is caught up in the car door and is flapping about out of the car." The nun turned red with embarrassment and thanked him warmly, saying, "Bless you, dear brother! Have a good day!"





The nun in the story was deceived, as we sometimes are. As we say, **"appearances deceive"** or in Italian, *"l'abito non fa il monaco."* The nun was wary when she saw how he was dressed, but when she heard what he had to say, she changed her mind about him. Communication among us does take place not only by words but also by various other ways: the way we dress, the way we behave, the way we talk and the tone of voice we use, our facial and hand gestures and several other things. All these show what kind of persons we are, what message we want to convey to those around us and how we want others to see us.

Look at the mirror for a few minutes and ask yourself, "Who am I? How do I want others to see me? From the way I look and from my behaviour, what message do I relay to others? What do others think of me from my appearance? "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (Psalm 139)

By just giving your name and address, you are not revealing exactly who you are. You have to be sincere and say exactly what you like to do, what you like to read, what your hobbies are, where you like to spend your leisure time, who your friends are, what you like to wear and many other things that distinguish you from others. Above all, do you pay more attention to the way you look on the outside or to the way you are on the inside? Both are important, but the latter is more important than the appearance. Do I apply the **value of respect** to others only or do I respect myself as well? . The respect towards my body should be given a great value. I show that I am respecting my body when I eat what I require to be healthy and do physical exercise frequently, among other things. But this is not enough.

The day I was baptised, my body became the Temple of the Holy Spirit. My body became the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, how much more should I respect my body and my thoughts!

Many times, one builds an opinion on hearsay without ever trying to evaluate the situation. Such a person has a weak character and changes directions like a weather-cock, according to what others say. **A good opinion is only formed after deep thought, experience, advice and maturity.** I cannot form a good opinion, whatever it is, based only on what others say. The first opinion which I should form concerns myself as well as the message I want to give to others. Do I have a too high opinion of myself? Do I have a balanced opinion of myself or is it a low one? Am I ready to accept myself as I am, without ever being open to what I can change or arrange for my own benefit, regarding both my appearance and my behaviour towards others? I should be very cautious when passing judgement on others. Only good can result when I express constructive opinions about others; however, serious consequences follow destructive opinions.

JESUS WAS AN ASSERTIVE PERSON.

(Matthew 16, 13) "When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Here we see Jesus himself wanting to know who people said he was. He did not want to know out of curiosity, for as God

he knew everybody and everybody's thoughts. He wanted to know people's thoughts about him to see whether his message was being understood well. "Some say John the Baptist, some Eliah, some Jeremiah or one of the other prophets." It is clear that they compared Jesus to a prophet. So, people saw in Jesus something special. Who do the people around you think you are: someone who cares about nothing, someone who is afraid of no one, someone with a generous heart?

"But you, who do you think I am?"

Jesus asked them. Simon Peter promptly told him, "The Messiah, the Son of the living God."

And I myself, who do I say that Jesus is? A prophet? A friend whom I sometimes remember and sometimes swear by? Someone without whom I cannot live? What place does he occupy in my life? Do I have a sense of gratitude towards Jesus or do I remember him only when I need him? Jesus never forgets you. (Isaiah 49, 16) "Look! I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands."

A BROKEN CRUCIFIX

The first time we find the word “Christians” in the Bible is in the Acts of the Apostles: 11, 26.

“For an entire year, they (Barnabas and Paul) met with the church and taught a great many people; it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.”

Christians, or Catholics as they are often called, are followers of Christ. All baptized persons are temples of the Holy Spirit and also Christians or disciples of Christ. All Christians together make up the Catholic Church, the body of Christ. St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians compared the Church to the mystical body of Christ. *“You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a member of him.”* (1 Cor 12, 27)

The Christian should not be a hypocrite or a whitewashed tomb, like the Pharisees, who did things solely to be admired by people. The Christian must do everything for the glory of the Lord. The Christian must not be idle where the Word of God is concerned, but must always be enthusiastic to perform good deeds. The Christian must not hold any hostile feelings towards others. Christians cannot receive the grace of God unless they are ready to forgive. St Augustine used to say that whoever does not forgive is like a person who drinks poison and expects someone else to die! As Christians, we receive forgiveness and mercy from God; similarly, we ourselves should forgive others.



"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, if another member of the Church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'" Matthew 18, 21-22

Number seventy seven is an infinite number. It means that as Christians there is no limit to the number of times we forgive. The Christian should not lose heart but, if necessary, should even go against the current. It is not always easy to overcome the obstacles that come our way, but we Christians should be filled with hope and enthusiasm for the future.

What is grace? Grace is a gift given to us by God without our meriting it.



The Christian must have a strong and firm faith founded on the teaching of Christ and the teaching of the Church. Although it is prudent to question what is going on around me, I should not always expect an answer or solution for everything. Instead, I should always seek help or guidance from those who are competent to give me good advice.

Christians should never hate but should try to love all persons: not only those who are familiar to them but also unknown ones, for. St. Paul says that through Baptism we all become brothers and sisters in Christ.

Christians have no labels tied to their backs proclaiming that they are Christians; they are identified by the way they act, speak and behave. The prayer of St. Francis guides us to become persons worthy of being called Christians. It is a humble prayer by a humble saint who always sought the will of the Father:

*Make me an instrument of your peace,
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master grant that I may not so
much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to
eternal life.*

What is the work of the disciples of Christ? St. Theresa of Avila, a Doctor of the Church, compared the body of Christ to the body of man. St. Theresa wrote:

"Christ has no body but your body. He has no hands or feet but yours. He has your eyes to see mercy in this world. He has your feet to walk and do good. He has your hands with which to bless the world. With your hands, your feet and your eyes, you are the body of Christ. Now, Christ has no body but yours. He has no hands or feet, but yours. Your eyes are his and with them he sees mercy in this world. Truly, in the world, Christ has no body but your body."

In this poem St. Theresa wanted to explain that the Christian should be like Christ everywhere. As Christians we have a special mission, that of being the hands and feet of Christ. We should also be the voice of Christ and give hope, love, help, shelter, support and consolation to those in need. In this way, we will deserve to be called disciples of Christ.



THE MAN-GOD WITH US

He was still a child when Jesus showed his relationship with his Father. St. Luke tells us that when he was twelve, Jesus went with his parents to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. This feast commemorated the coming of the Jews out of Egypt and their freedom from slavery. It was celebrated with the eating of unleavened bread and roast lamb, as the Lord had ordered. When the feast was over, Jesus remained in Jerusalem without the knowledge of his parents. After three days searching for Jesus, they found him in the temple. His mother, being very worried, asked him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been looking for you in great anxiety." Jesus was quick in answering her, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

Jesus used to talk often with his Father through prayer. We find him doing this throughout his life. Jesus preferred praying on his own, as the Gospels tell us. (See Mark 6, 46; Mark 1, 35; Matthew 14, 23; Luke 6, 12; Luke 9, 28; Luke 9, 18 and John 6, 15.

- Jesus also prayed at his baptism (Luke 3, 21-22).
- He prayed when he chose the twelve (Luke 6, 12-13). He prayed at his Transfiguration on Mount Tabor (Luke 9, 28-29).
- He prayed for young children (Matthew 19, 13-15).
- He prayed during the Last Supper (Matthew 26, 26, Mark 14, 22-23).
- Jesus thanked his Father before the miracle of the multiplying of the bread and fish (John 6, 11).
- Jesus prayed for himself, for the disciples and for all before entering Jerusalem (John 17, 1-26).
- Jesus prayed on the cross (Luke 23, 34, Matthew 27, 46, Mark 15, 34, Luke 23, 44).
- Jesus prayed after rising up from the dead (Luke 24, 30).





Undoubtedly, the most striking moments are when Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane and before he brought the dead Lazarus to life. Jesus always prayed before performing any miracle. It is evident that he wanted the Father to be present while performing any miracle. The harshest moment for Jesus happened in the Garden of Gethsemane because, being truly God and truly man, he knew what pain he would have to suffer; he also knew that he was going to die even for those persons who would make him suffer so much that he would die. At this moment, Jesus prayed God for mercy. St Luke informs us that Jesus prayed so earnestly and was suffering so much, that drops of blood appeared to trickle down his cheeks. Finally, he resigned himself to the Father's will and kept doing so till his death on the cross. *"Thy will be done"; "Forgive them as they know not what they are doing"; "It is finished"*.

Jesus felt the need to talk to his Father at every moment of his life. How much more do **we need to talk to our Father**

in heaven during our life! In past years we have already learnt about the different types and ways of praying but, without any doubt, spontaneous prayer should form a large and important part of our daily life. Jesus himself told us, *"When you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, so that they may be seen by men. Most certainly, I tell you, they have received their reward. But you, when you pray, enter into your inner room, and having shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."* (Matthew 6, 5-6) When we pray, we should be all there and meditate on what we are saying and praying to the Father. Our faith should be strong. We should not lose heart when we are not given what we pray for. Neither should we lose hope or put obstacles in the way of our faith or in all that we believe in. On the contrary, we should leave everything in God's hands, like Jesus taught us by his own deeds and prayers.



Above all, Christians should always show great love towards the Father in their **behaviour** and even in the way they **dress**.

Our love should be real love – *agape* – not a fragile love resembling a weak reed swaying in the wind. Our love should be like that of Jesus, who loved immeasurably, unconditionally and without any prejudice. He discriminated against nobody. On the contrary, he accepted everybody and helped those who were emarginated, like thieves, sinners who committed adultery, publicans and the sick. The word '*agape*' is derived from the Greek and is found in the New Testament. It refers to love, but it requires more commitment than filial love (the love we show to our brothers and sisters and friends). *Agape* requires absolute faith, commitment and good will. It is the limitless love of

God the Father for us and the Church. This type of love is well explained by St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. (Corinthians 13, 2-8)

We can achieve this only by frequently receiving the Eucharist. Our Christian life is complete when we receive the Sacraments, which are all graces given to us by God the Father. We should not be disheartened when things do not go as we expect them to. Neither should we abstain from the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, as with them we will building a bridge between us and God and between us and others, a bridge so strong that nobody can destroy. Through the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, we will be strong enough to face all that life offers us and with all our hearts, we can tell our heavenly Father, "Let your will be done."

THE ACTS OF MERCY

Pope Francis decreed that the period between 8 December 2015 and 20 November 2016 was to be dedicated to **mercy**. Pope Francis wanted the motto to be “*Let us be merciful like the Father*”, a motto inspired by a small verse from St. Luke’s gospel, “Be merciful even as your Father is merciful” (Luke, 6, 36) This motto invites us to live the virtue of mercy, following the example of the Father, who asks us to forgive and offer limitless love. Mercy is one of God’s characteristics and is found in the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Catholicism and Islam.

WHAT DOES “MERCY” MEAN?

The word *mercy*, in Latin, *misericordia* is made up of two Latin words: *miseriae*, which literally means *misery* and *cor* which means *heart*. So, the two words together mean mercy coming from the heart towards those in need. We can show this mercy in two ways: in a spiritual way (the Acts of Mercy dealing with the soul) and in a corporal way (the Acts of Mercy dealing with the body). According to Pope Francis, these **Acts of Mercy** prod our conscience, which sometimes goes into deep sleep when confronted by both material and spiritual poverty.





THE SPIRITUAL ACTS OF MERCY (DEALING WITH THE SOUL) IN EVERYDAY LIFE

1) Give good advice to the doubtful

One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is Counsel: I counsel or give good advice to persons who are in doubt. First and foremost I should seek the help of the best counsellor – the Holy Spirit. I can perform this act of mercy by giving hope to those who have lost hope and showing that I am at the disposal of those who need my advice.

2) Instruct the ignorant

I cannot apply this act of mercy if I myself am not fully aware of facts or of what is going on around me. I can practise this act with those who are younger than me and who need my help. We must not forget that the best teaching is done by example. It would be incongruous if I teach one way and act in a different way, because I will not be delivering the right message.

3) Admonish the sinners

“Admonish” means giving advice or cautioning a person who is saying or doing something wrong. As Christians, we are in duty bound to care for the way others are living and not to shut our eyes when someone close to us starts leading a bad life. This advice must be given in a loving way.

4) Comfort the afflicted (sad)

In the book of the prophet Isaiah we read, *“As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.”* (Isaiah 66, 13). This act of mercy invites us to look around us for those who feel sad, and pick out those who need to talk, need to be heard or need a word of encouragement and hope. It also asks us to visit relatives or friends who are grieving the death of a dear one and to try to comfort them.

5) **Forgive offences**

In the prayer *Our Father* we beg God, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." There is no limit to my forgiveness, just as I expect God to forgive me endlessly.

6) **Bear wrongs patiently**

Patience is one of the gifts which the Holy Spirit gives us. Sometimes we find it difficult to be patient with others. This act urges us to bear with others. St. Bernard used to say that if Christians had nobody to bother them, then they should go looking for such a person and on being successful, should pay that person with gold as then they can practise patience.

7) **Pray God for the living and the dead**

When we pray for others, we get closer to God and also to the persons whom we love and for whom we pray. We should

keep remembering our dead relatives and pray for them, "Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen."

THE CORPORAL ACTS OF MERCY (DEALING WITH THE BODY)

1) Feed the hungry

This act of mercy urges us to be always ready to give others what they need. This act reminds us of when Jesus gave himself to us as bread in the Eucharist. (John, 6, 51)

2) Give drink to the thirsty

Water is needed by everyone and everything, as nothing lives without water. Although access to water is a human right, more than a billion persons do not have access to it. This act of mercy obliges us to use water properly and responsibly without wasting it.



3) Clothe the naked

This act reminds us that not everybody is lucky like we are. There are people who are so poor that they have nothing to wear. What for us may be extra, may be vital to others. We should make good use of the special containers in bring-in sites, which are spread all over the island, by placing in them clothes which we no longer use. In this way we will be clothing those who are naked.

4) Shelter the homeless

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and Joseph looked for a place where Jesus could be born in Bethlehem. All the inns were fully booked, but at last, someone gave them a place where animals were kept. This act of mercy urges us to be hospitable and show respect to foreigners.

5) Visit the sick

This act of mercy encourages us to open our hearts to the suffering of those who need rest, support and company. We should visit them at home or in hospital and spend some time with them. This is an opportunity to grow in our humanity and to strengthen our faith.

6) Visit the imprisoned

As Christians we should not forget those who are serving a sentence in prison. If we cannot visit them, at least we should not judge them. This act of mercy includes also those who live alone and the elderly living in homes for the elderly.

7) Bury the dead

We are here invited to reflect on how we may care for those nearing their death, on the love we should show towards the memory of those who have died and on our prayers for their repose.

TAKE CARE OF NATURE

Pope Francis added another act of mercy which touches both the body and the soul: the care of creation.

This act of mercy invites us to contemplate God's creation with gratitude. In this way, through each and every created thing we discover something which God wanted to give us.



THE POWER OF THE TRINITY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHRISTIAN

We start every Christian prayer with the sign of the cross, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This is also the prayer with which we became members of the Church at Baptism. It is a beautiful prayer, which is worth saying before everything we do in everyday life. But, who are the three persons in one God in whom we profess to believe? And, how can the love among them be reflected in our life?

The three persons in one God, or the **Holy Trinity**, are: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Their

love for each other is so immense that they cannot be separated from each other.

When we proclaim our faith through the Creed, we begin: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, who created heaven and earth." God the Father created man. We also say, "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord," who saved us. And we also say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life", the Lord who sanctifies us with his gifts, fruits and charisms (spiritual talents).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (paragraph 258) states "Each Divine



Person performs according to His unique personality. Thus, in accordance with the New Testament (1 Corinthians, 6), the Church declares, *'God is the Father from whom all things originate, is the Lord Jesus Christ from whom all things are and is the Holy Spirit in whom all things are.'*" This is called the **Economy of God**, the three Persons together. It was Jesus himself who revealed God as being the Father, amazingly so, not only because he is the Creator, but also because he has always been **Father** in a relation to his only Son who, in turn, is a **Son** only in relation to his Father. *"No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone else to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."* (Matthew 11, 27) The Evangelists mention two solemn instances in the life of Jesus, which are his Baptism and Transfiguration. At the Baptism of Jesus, we read about *"the spirit of God*

descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" (Matthew 3, 16-17). At the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor, *"a bright cloud overshadowed them and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.'*" (Matthew 17, 5). In John's gospel we read that Jesus said, "I and the Father are one." (John 10, 30)

The third Person of the Holy Trinity is the **Holy Spirit**, who is in unity or one nature with the Father and the Son and who is "adored and glorified with the Father and the Son". In his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul wrote, *"No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit."* (1 Corinthians, 3). It is through the Holy Spirit that we faithfully believe in and *"know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent."* (John 17,3).



St. Irenaeus says that without the Holy Spirit no one can see the Son of God and without the Son no one can go near the Father, because knowledge of the Father and the Son and knowledge of the Son of God only come through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has been from eternity working with the Father and the Son for the implementation of the plan of salvation. From the very beginning to the end of time, when God sent his Son, he also sent his Spirit. The Son and the Holy Spirit always carry out their mission together and they never separate themselves.

The love among the Trinity is reflected in the life of a Christian when the latter shows love towards others. This results from the gifts, fruits and charisms which are given to us Christians by the Holy Spirit and which we are obliged to practise. In the first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul says, *"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but there is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues."* (1 Corinthians 12, 4-10)

All this is the work of the same one Spirit, who bestows these gifts as he pleases. These are called charisms or, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (paragraph 2003), special graces of the Holy Spirit. The purpose of these graces is the welfare of the whole Church, as they foster the love which helps the Church to grow.

The sequence that is read on Pentecost day starts with the words: *Veni, Sancte Spiritus* (Come, Holy Spirit). These three words invite the Holy Spirit to come, just as he descended on the first disciples at Pentecost. This sequence is a testimony of the power that the Holy Spirit donates. It also refers to the Holy Spirit as light and goodness. In some stanzas, we pray the Holy Spirit for forgiveness and also declare the wish of Christians to receive grace and eternal joy. On March 15, two days after his election, Pope Francis had a meeting with the Cardinals, to whom he stated that the need existed for "All of us together, pastors and members of the faithful to strive to respond faithfully to the Church's perennial mission: to bring Jesus Christ to mankind and to lead mankind to an encounter with Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life and is truly present in the Church and even in every person." The scope of the words of Pope Francis is that we, baptised persons – marked by the seal of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity – have the responsibility and the duty to have a deeper relationship with the Lord. The more we get to know the Lord and the teaching he imparts to us through the Church, the more we will be able to deliver him to others.

WHAT BREAKS MY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Jimmy, who was an old man, used to go to hear the first mass every morning, after which he would return slowly home. As soon as he entered the church, he would look at the Blessed Sacrament and say in his heart, "Here I am, Jesus. I have come near you again." This was Jimmy's nice habit, which he repeated every day. However, one day Jimmy fell ill and could not attend mass anymore. He lived alone and there was nobody to help him. Then, one morning he heard a voice saying, "Jimmy, today I have come to visit you." It was Jesus himself who had come, in order to take Jimmy with him. Jimmy took his last breath and went to meet the Lord he had loved so much.

As we have learnt in previous lessons, communication between man and God takes place through prayers, either prayers learnt by heart or spontaneous ones that come from the heart. However, there are several occasions when the individual not only does not pray, but even acts contrary to what God desires from human beings. Indeed, it is the individual who cuts off the communication with God in many different ways. It is easy to build a strong and lasting relationship with God; and it is just as easy to break off this relationship – obviously always on the part of the individual. Besides the Commandments which, in his infinite

love God has given us to guide us, there are the, so called, seven deadly sins. The seven deadly sins are pride, greed, envy, anger, lust, gluttony and sloth. A virtue is a good thing while its opposite is vice. We can consider the seven deadly sins as vices.

First and foremost, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Paragraph 1849) defines sin as "an offence against reason, truth and right conscience. Sin is failure in genuine love for God and neighbour, caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds



the nature of man and injures human solidarity.” St. Augustine defines sin as “a word, an act or desire which is against eternal law.”

A sin can be venial or mortal. A **venial sin** is when one “in a less serious matter, does not observe the standard prescribed by the moral law, or when one disobeys the moral law in a grave matter but without full knowledge or without complete consent” (Paragraph 1862). This sin can be reparable by charity. On the other hand, **mortal sin** “destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God’s law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him” (Paragraph 1855). For a sin to be mortal, three conditions together must be met: it is mortal when its object is some grave matter, who commits it has full knowledge of the act and does it with deliberate consent (Paragraph 1857).

The seven Mortal sins are also called the *roots of sin*, because other sins and horrible vices are derived from them.



SIN / VICE

THE VIRTUE OVERCOMING

THE CORRESPONDING VICE

| | |
|----------|---|
| Pride | This can be overcome by humility |
| Greed | This can be overcome by spending wisely |
| Lust | This can be overcome by purity and chastity |
| Anger | This can be overcome by patience |
| Gluttony | This can be overcome by eating and drinking moderately |
| Envy | This can be overcome by love in doing things related to God |
| Sloth | This can be overcome by being active in God's things |

PRIDE is the way one thinks of oneself highly without caring for anybody else.

GREED is when one always wants to amass material things without caring for the needs of others.

LUST is an uncontrollable passion for sexual desires.

ANGER is uncontrollable rage and hatred for others.

GLUTTONY is eating and drinking in excess and without control.

ENVY is an unreasoning wish for particular things and experiences that others have.

SLOTH IN DOING GOD'S THINGS occurs when one stays away from God's things, like the Sacraments, and lives in general idleness, without trying to make use of or improve one's talents.

We need the help of our defender, the Holy Spirit, to fight against the evil spirits of this world, which are always ready to insinuate themselves in our lives and hamper us from leading a good life, by doing everything to make us sin and take up evil vices. How can we avoid this? It is not easy for us not to fall into temptation or to give up a vice. Normally, we would need someone to guide us, but firstly we have to admit that we have a serious problem. As soon as we do this, we start on the way to recovery from an illness that has been ruining us. To be completely free from these vices, we have to pray hard and receive frequently the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. A vice can be eradicated only with the help of the Holy Spirit, as well as by practising the virtue opposite to that particular vice. In this way, we will again become full disciples of Christ.

I GROW IN FAITH

I cannot be called a Christian simply because I received the Sacrament of Baptism. I have to live throughout my whole life the Baptism which I received when I was a baby. In practice, this means that to be a Christian, I have to be a disciple of Jesus and follow him. I have to take on the character of Jesus. At Baptism, I receive the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit and at Confirmation these make me stronger. The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord. These **gifts** empower the Christian to take on a character similar to that of Jesus.

WISDOM: A Russian proverb says that the wise person has long ears, big eyes and a short tongue! Real wisdom comes from the Holy Spirit and is the fruit of a spiritual experience of love with God. To be wise means looking at everything with the eyes of God. The more you

love God, the more you see things with God's mind and heart. Many saints lacked schooling and intelligence, but they were so wise that many people consulted them for spiritual direction. A few of these saints are St. Francis of Assisi, St. Joseph of Copertino and St. John M. Vianney.

UNDERSTANDING: It is not easy to understand why the just person suffers while the sinner enjoys life. Neither is it easy to understand why we pray and our prayers are not granted. No science or philosophy offers a sufficient explanation.





We can start to understand a little, only if we have a strong gift of understanding. It is only if we have the gift of understanding that we can understand the Beatitudes (Matthew 5, 3-12) and the Gospels.

COUNSEL:

Through this gift we understand and choose that which God wants from us at particular moments. It is because of this gift that Jesus decided to heal even though it was a Saturday. Sometimes, we are also faced with difficult choices in our life such as, for example: do I go to hear mass or stay at home looking after my ailing mother?

FORTITUDE: The spiritual power given to us by the Holy Spirit enables us to face temptations, attacks by the devil, life trials and obedience to the will of God. This is the power with which St. Francis tamed the wolf of Gubbio and Padre Pio bore the pain of the wounds of the Passion without ever moaning or

complaining. It is the power of the Holy Spirit which helps us to remain honest in our work, not to talk unnecessarily against others and forgive those who harm us.

KNOWLEDGE : Knowledge is not that type found in books but is learnt only by one's direct experience with God. An example of this gift is that of the thief crucified on the right hand of Jesus. He was no scholar or theologian, but he had the gift of knowledge when he asked Jesus to remember him in his kingdom.

PIETY: We are invited to spend all our time in an atmosphere of *children of the Father* who is in heaven; consequently, we are encouraged to pray a lot. To be a Christian filled with this gift means to be a Christian occupied with a life of prayer. This gift makes us mature in our relationship with others, because, if we live our life as God's children, we look at others as also being God's children, and therefore, our brothers and sisters.

FEAR OF THE LORD: This gift does not mean being frightened of the Lord but fear of the Lord. It is the fear of children who love their father so much that they fear his loss. The book of Sirach has beautiful words about this gift, *"The fear of the Lord delights the heart, and gives gladness and joy and long life."* (Sirach 1, 11-16; 18; 20).

CARDINAL AND THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

The cardinal virtues are four: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. The theological virtues are three: faith, hope and charity. These three virtues are called theological because they deal directly with the relationship of the Christian with God. By himself, the Christian cannot acquire these virtues, because it is God's grace that instils them and makes them grow. To receive them, the Christian has to pray for them to God, be open to receive them and co-operate with the grace they bring in order to make them grow.

FAITH: In the Catechism of the Catholic Church we read that faith is "the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief, because he is truth itself." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1814). The Christian must cherish all that Jesus taught us, like our Lady Mary "who treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." (Luke 2, 19) Our faith should be in Our Lord Jesus Christ and in the Church.

HOPE: The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines hope as "the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1817) In the Old Testament, hope is best portrayed by old Simeon, who was in the temple when Mary and Joseph presented Jesus. (Luke 2, 29) For us Christians, hope has only one name: Our Lord Jesus Christ; it is around his figure and his teaching that we need to build our teaching on Christian Hope.

CHARITY: About charity or love, the Catechism of the Catholic Church says that it is the virtue "by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbour as ourselves for the love of God." (Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraph 1822) Jesus himself taught us, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. Love your neighbour as yourself." (Matthew 22, 37; 39) When we love God, we are giving him a chance of giving us his love, filling us with his love, thus enabling us to love others with this love.

Out of these three virtues, only love/charity continues to exist in life everlasting. Love is the bridge between this life here on earth and life everlasting. In the after life, we will not need faith, as we will see God face to face and not just believe in him. We will not need hope, as the promise would have been fulfilled and we would be living it.

I COMMIT MYSELF TO HELP SOCIETY

As baptised persons we are obliged to commit ourselves to the welfare of the society in which we live. An English proverb states, "Charity begins at home." In the previous lesson we learnt that charity or love is the highest of the theological virtues, and our commitment should start with those who are nearest to us.

In one way or another, we always take stock of our lives keeping in mind the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. If we were to examine our lives according to them, it would be easy for us, with a few exceptions, to pass the test once we

observe them. Often, the law tells us what not to do so that life in the society we live in, will be as calm as possible. But, there is a difference between what we should not do and what we are obliged to do in our society. There are many who are blind and deaf to the needs of society because, as they themselves lack nothing, they think that the life of everyone else is the same as theirs. Such persons are deaf, blind and dumb to the needs of society.

If we, as true Christians, were to consider the Beatitudes seriously, we would find that they speak about present realities.



"When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

(Matthew 5, 1-12)

To be **poor in spirit** means to depend on God. These people do not need many material goods to be happy and have real joy. Only God gives real joy. Therefore, these people are always ready to help and give to others to see them happy.

To be **mournful** means to be sad when people are cruel to others. Sad persons are sorry to see people who are hurt, and so they do their best to make others happy. They are helping to make the world a better place for everybody. Mother Theresa used to say that not

everybody is able to do great things, but everybody can do small things with great love.

To have a **meek heart** means to be gentle and kind-hearted. It does not mean that you let others ride roughshod over you, but it means that you are kind in words and deeds. It also means that you use the talents which God gave you to help others.

Being **hungry and thirsty for justice** means sharing with those in need. Justice means being fair .

When you are **merciful** you forgive and do not punish or revenge yourself on those who have hurt you.

This is how God has mercy on us. He is the Father who forgives us and protects us with his everlasting love. In the prayer *Our Father* we say, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who trespass against us." We are to show



kindness towards those around us in the same way that God shows mercy towards us.

To be **pure in heart** means not to be selfish. Those who are pure in heart do not do good for personal gain. When they give and expect nothing in return, they are performing an act of love which helps them to find real joy.

To bring **peace** means being instrumental in bringing peace to the world, as God desires. We are unable to do this unless we ourselves are at peace with God and with those around us. This is not easy to achieve because, as human beings, we find it difficult to forgive those who hurt us. Our first reaction is not to make peace but to pay the person back. Anybody who succeeds to bring peace will have solved a problem without violence.

Being **persecuted** means that one is treated unjustly because one has chosen to follow Jesus to obtain happiness. One may be mocked for choosing to love and show mercy or for striving to bring peace and justice. But Jesus promised that those who choose to follow him will enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Beatitudes are a sort of programme of life for every Christian disciple of Jesus, as they shape the identity of each Christian. With them we can establish how we can live our Christian commitment in every sphere of life. The call of us baptised persons is this: we should serve our call with courage, perseverance and determination, being strengthened by the words of our Master: *"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* (Matthew 28, 20).



CHAPTER SEVEN

CHALLENGES



THE FALL

God hates rebellion! He repudiates those who go against his own law, those who associate themselves with the concept of anarchy, which leads to all sorts of disorders.

The prince of all rebellion is Satan, the devil, known also as the 'father of deceit'. Although it does not show physically, rebellion affects our society. There is no need to look far to see this; it is sufficient if we take a look at small children who, from a tender age, confront their parents; or at rebel artists who go against everything and everybody; or even at extremist groups who oppose each government or authority. Satan is the personification of rebellion. It was Lucifer's rebellious action that led to his being thrown out of heaven and thus, becoming known as Satan.

MAN CHOOSES EVIL

There are various excerpts in Scripture which relate this episode that **tarnishes all of God's good creation**. The devil, using his free will, decides to rebel against God and does not accept God as the Lord of everything. *"And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world*

- he was thrown down to the earth, and the angels were thrown down with him." (Revelations, 12, 7-9)

In the account of the third chapter of Genesis, amid the atmosphere of harmony, peace and love, there explodes the fearful **tragedy** that turns everything upside down. With his free will, man decides to believe the devil, represented by the serpent, and to go against the word of God. Man decided to rebel against God's law.

The tree of good and bad knowledge is just a symbol to represent the potentiality of a person choosing what is right and what is wrong without obeying anybody's orders. In other words, it means that one takes the place of God and lives as if God does not exist. This is the core of the sin of the first humans and of every other sin. One who sins is saying 'No' to God's power and will and is placing oneself above God, forgetting one is God's creature and trying like Satan to become equal to God.





BROKEN HARMONY

The **consequences** of the rift between man and God were really terrible. The harmony, peace and love that existed between man and God were shattered once and for all by sin. Man distanced himself from the source of unity and started on a life of detachment, separated himself from the source of life and began the journey to death.

First and foremost, by sinning, man **got separated from God**; he also **got detached from himself**, *"Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves."* (Genesis 3,7) Here, nudity is the symbol of frailty and lack of security; therefore, they could not bear to appear frail in front of each other. Man, also **separated himself from others**. *"The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."* Instead of shouldering his responsibility, he blamed her, the very person who should have been, *"bone of my bones"*. (Genesis 2, 2-3)

In the following chapters, Genesis continues to expose this rift among persons, for example, in the passage where Cain kills his brother Abel. Through sin, man gets detached from creation and brings disorder: *"thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you ... by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread ... in pain you shall bring forth children..."*

and your husband shall rule over you." (Genesis 3, 18) Sin throws man into a sea of disorders and instead of harmony, peace and love man creates for himself separation, disorder and death.

It is because of the rebellion of Satan as well as Satan's hatred for humans, that we today are experiencing his bad fruits and consequences. The Prophet Isaiah describes the reaction of people to the fall of Satan, after God threw him down to hell for ever. *"Those who see you will stare at you, and ponder over you. 'Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who would not let his prisoners go home?'"* (Isaiah 14, 16-17) According to Isaiah, these people are describing the results of the devastation that Satan created in the world after the commitment of sin.



THE DEVASTATION CAUSED BY SIN

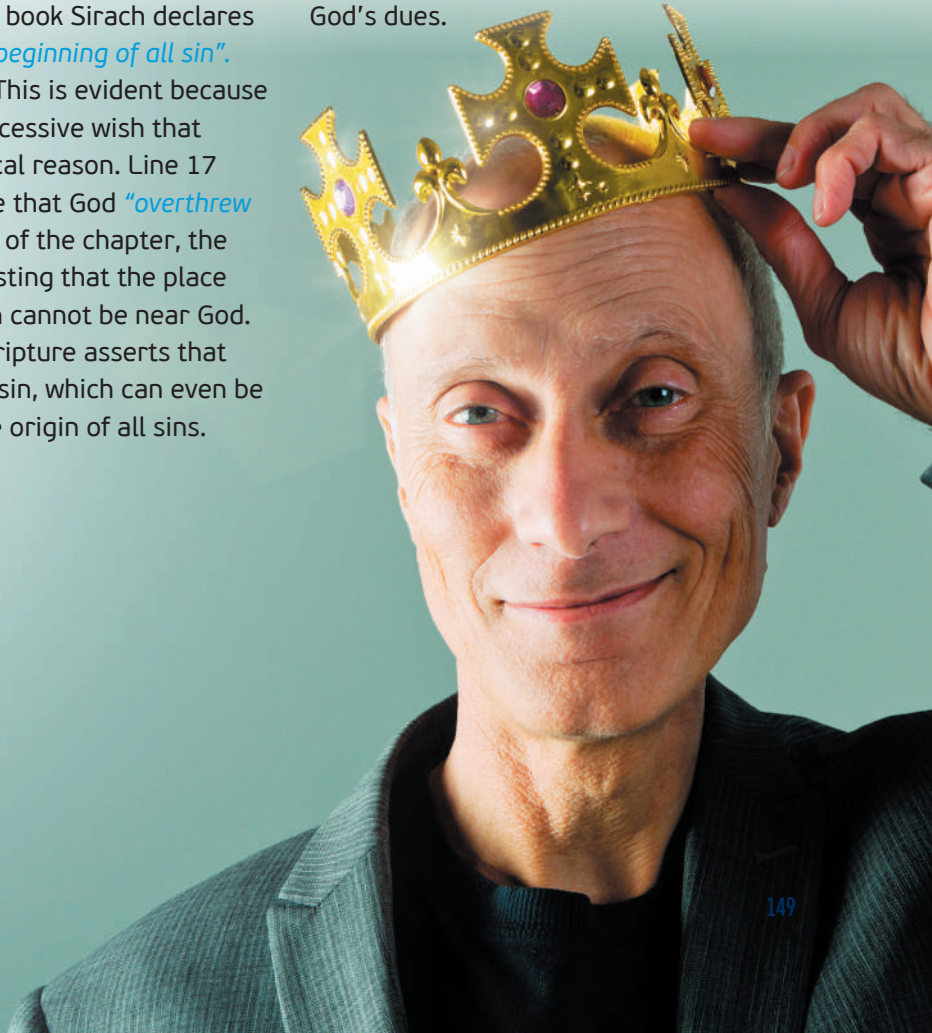
Genesis' account of the tree of knowledge and the fall of man shows how man, using his free intelligence, is always anxious to better himself and to be superior to everybody else, including his own creator. The experience of sin exposes how this unrestrained greed for knowledge leads to the loss of all control of reason and increases the elements of pride and superiority.

HUMANKIND'S PRIDE

The author of the book Sirach declares that "*pride is the beginning of all sin*". (Sirach 10, 15), This is evident because pride is like an excessive wish that overrides all logical reason. Line 17 continues to state that God "*overthrew kings*". In the rest of the chapter, the author keeps insisting that the place of a proud person cannot be near God. Consequently, Scripture asserts that pride is a special sin, which can even be referred to as the origin of all sins.

SIN AND ITS CURE

At the beginning of Christianity, the Church presented Christians with a list of **seven capital or mortal sins** from which all other sins derive. Each one of these sins listed hereunder, has its roots in the wish of man to have more and his desire for excess. Each sin goes against the Christian rule, which is love towards God and towards others. The Seven Capital Sins are: Pride, Greed, Envy, Anger, Lust, Gluttony and Sloth in God's dues.



The **cure** for these sins is the renewing of the heart, so that it acts according to the law of God. This new heart can only be gained through God's power. *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."* (Ezekiel 36, 26-27)

Therefore, the only hope for humanity is the grace of a change of heart, which acts according to the direction of the Holy Spirit who works in us.

Sin has **gravely reduced** man's dignity and esteem. Man has ceased being in a state of harmony and has been overcome by uncontrolled egoism. Man has been tyrannical with nature, destroying it and abusing it in an egoistic and destructive manner. He has also abused other persons in work practices, in property deals and in economic and social situations.

THE CONSEQUENCES

As a consequence of the sins committed by humanity, the world is in a state of sin, expressed by St. John as *"the sin of the world"*. (John 1, 29) These words also refer to the evil influence which is exerted on persons by community groups and social structures, built by sinful individuals. (Refer to CCC 408)

The sin of the first persons is called **original sin**, as it is the root from which each sin has originated and has flourished in the world. We can say that from the third chapter of Genesis onwards, the Bible, in a sense, is one whole story of sin and infidelity. Sinning reached the abyss of evil with the killing of innocence itself, the killing of him, who alone is good and holy – Jesus Christ. Original sin grew and became a destructive monster, which encompassed in itself all other evil – the sin of the world.

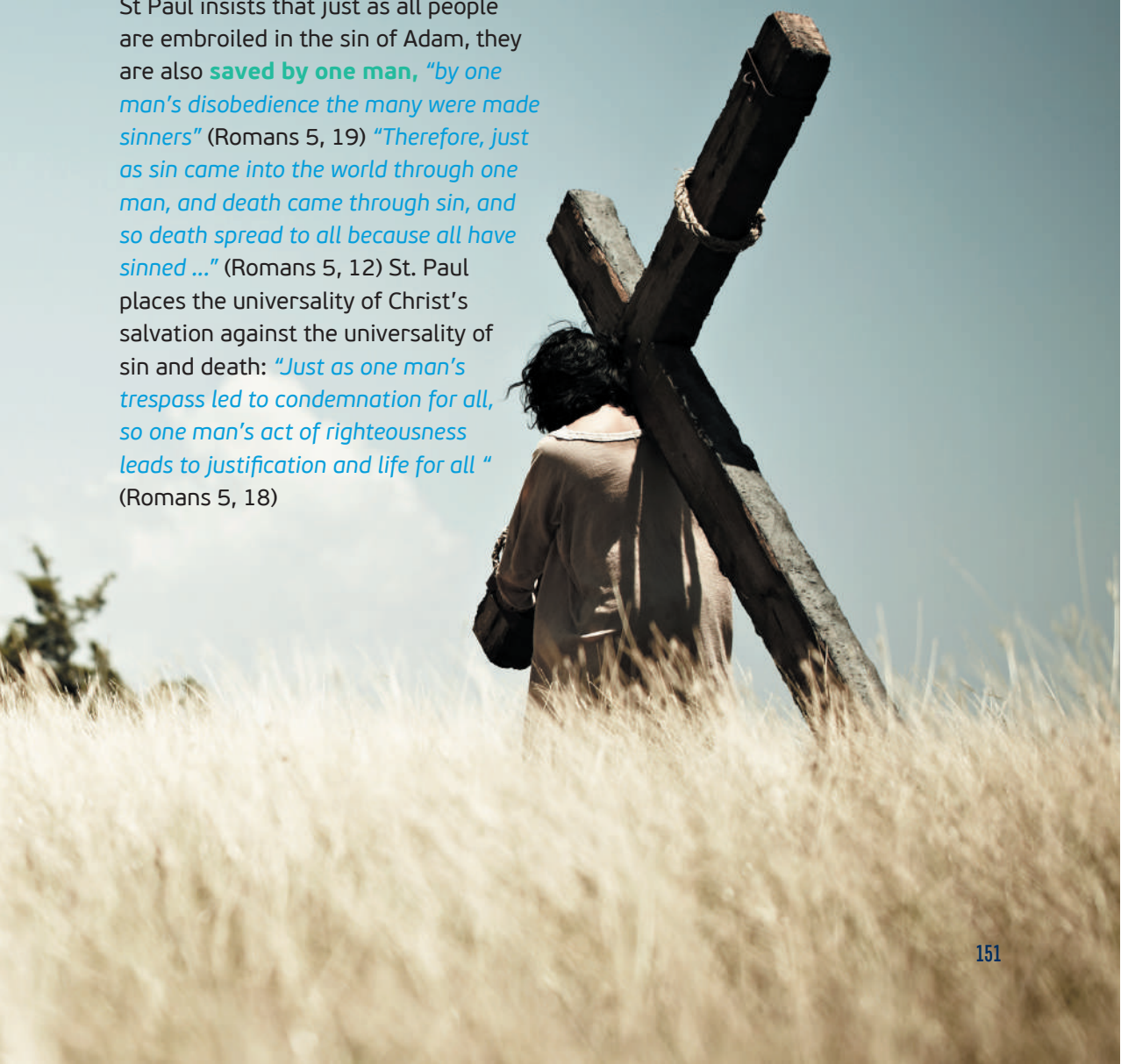
It is this sin of the world, or better still **original sin**, that in a mysterious but real way infects and deeply wounds whoever is begotten. Each person, from the very first moment of conception, is prone to the state in which humanity found itself after the first sin. As a result of original sin, man's nature became weakened in its natural powers; it became victim to ignorance and suffering and also to the domination of death. Man's nature also has a tendency towards sin, which is called **concupiscence**. (CCC 418)

SALVATION

St Paul insists that just as all people are embroiled in the sin of Adam, they are also **saved by one man**, *"by one man's disobedience the many were made sinners"* (Romans 5, 19) *"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned ..."* (Romans 5, 12) St. Paul places the universality of Christ's salvation against the universality of sin and death: *"Just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all "* (Romans 5, 18)

THE HELP OF THE SACRAMENTS

Man by himself, wounded by sin, is not able to overcome evil attacks, but by the grace of God, he can rise up again and continue fighting this ongoing struggle. Baptism gives us the life of grace in Christ, removes original sin and turns us back to God. Yet, the consequences of original sin remain with us, revealing themselves in our weakened nature and our tendency to sin. Through the Sacraments, God keeps inviting and sustaining us in our spiritual struggle, with his grace.



A PLAN OF SALVATION

God, of endless perfection and wisdom and happy in himself, **prepared a plan** of endless goodness. Out of his own volition, he created man to give him a share of his happy life. That is why, at all times and everywhere, God keeps approaching man, calling and helping man to find God, to understand and love God fully. God is constantly beckoning man, who is plagued by sin and is separated from other human beings, to find again the harmony that existed previously. God's plan reached its peak in the fullness of time, that is, when he sent his own son as Redeemer and Saviour. With Christ and through Christ, God exhorts people to become his adopted children, and therefore heirs of his happy life, through the Holy Spirit.

In the 'Exultet', the song of glory to God which is sung on the vigil of Easter, we refer to Adam's sin as **'happy fault'** in the sense that this disgrace brought on by man, led to the coming of Christ among us and the salvation of all creation. In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul says, *"He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things on earth."* (Ephesians 1, 9-10) St. Paul also wrote to the Romans: *"Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."* (Romans 5, 20-21)

St., Paul stresses that just as all persons are included in Adam's sin, they will all be saved by one man. *"Just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all."* (Romans 5, 18)

GOD OFFERS A REMEDY

After man's fall through sin, God did not abandon him, but instead **offered him protection**. *"And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for the wife and clothed them."* (Genesis 3, 21). God called man in a mysterious way, *"And the Lord God called to the man..."* (Genesis 3, 9) and prophesied victory over evil and Adam's rising again from his fall: *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers, he will strike your head and you will strike his heel."* (Genesis 3, 15). In this excerpt there is the first announcement of the Redeemer Messiah, of the fight between the serpent and the Woman and the final victory of her descendants.

In this passage, Christian tradition sees the prophecy of a **'new Adam'** (1 Corinthians 15, 21-22, 45), who *"became obedient to the point of death -- even death on the cross."* (Philippines 2, 8) He paid a high price for the disobedience of Adam (Romans 5, 19-20). The Woman, mentioned in this passage, was seen by many Fathers and Doctors of the Church as the mother of Christ, Mary, the **'new Eve'**.



She was the first, in a singular way, to reap benefits from the victory over sin obtained by Christ: she was absolved from all contamination of original sin and through God's special grace, she committed no type of sin during all of her life. (CCC, 411)

God showed himself to the first persons, talked to them and **promised them a saviour**, after they committed sin; he also offered to make a Pact with them. Later, God made a pact to last forever with Noah, between him and all living creatures (Genesis 9, 16). God even made a pact with Abraham and his descendants. God chose his people

and made a pact with them; he would be their God and they were to be his people forever. He gave them his law through Moses. He established Kings to lead his people according to his will. He used prophets to prepare his people to accept salvation, which was for all human beings. Finally, God revealed himself completely when he sent his own son , thereby signing a pact that would last for ever. Christ is the last word of the Father; there is not going to be any revelation after Christ. God's plan for salvation was accomplished **"once for all"** (Jews 9,26) by the death of Jesus Christ, who redeemed us.

IN THE BEGINNING



THE PATRIARCHS



THE EXODUS FROM EGYPT



ISRAEL IN EGYPT



THE JUDGES



THE MONARCHY



THE EXILE



THE PROPHETS



BACK TO JERUSALEM



THE NEW TESTAMENT

FROM SLAVERY TO THE EXODUS

Around the year 1800 BC **Abraham** had a son called **Isaac**, who had a son called **Jacob**. Jacob, who is also known as **Israel**, had twelve sons from whom emerged the twelve tribes of the people of Israel. In the year 1600 BC, because of a great famine and because of Joseph, one of Jacob's sons, the whole family had to emigrate to Egypt and settled there. In time, this big family grew in numbers and became a nation in a foreign land.

MOSES

About three hundred years later, the Egyptian Pharaoh, who did not know

Joseph, began persecuting the Jews by imposing on them very hard work. The Pharaoh noticed that the Jewish people had become too numerous and were posing a threat to the Egyptians. He ordered that all males born were to be killed and thrown into the river. It was exactly at this time that a Jewish woman gave birth to Moses. Thereby, God sent a servant to save the Jewish people from the hands of the Egyptians. (Exodus 1, 8-22)

To save her son from death, Moses' mother placed him in a papyrus boat and floated him on the waters of the



Nile. The boy was found by Pharaoh's daughter, who looked upon him as hers. She called him Moses because she said, "I saved him from the waters." Thus, Moses was raised and grew up in the palace of Pharaoh. As an adult, Moses approached his brothers, the Jews, and witnessed their hardship. He saw an Egyptian beating a Jew and Moses killed him and then buried him in the sand. To avoid the anger of Pharaoh, Moses escaped to Midian, where he later married Zipporah and started tending the flocks of her father, Reuel. (Later, Reuel is also referred to as Jethro). (Exodus, 2, 11-22).

At that time, the Israelites were undergoing great hardships and their prayers reached God. Moses had taken the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro, a priest of Midian, to graze out in the desert and reached Horeb, 'the mountain of God'. Here, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a burning bush of thistles. Moses looked and saw the bush on fire but the flame did not burn the bush. It was exactly here that God called Moses and sent him to bring his people out of Egypt. Greatly frightened, Moses resisted God's plan. However, being ordered and offered all the help he needed, Moses, filled with God's grace, went to face Pharaoh and save the Israelites (Exodus 3-4).

THE EXODUS

Just when the people of Israel had lost all hope of ever being saved from the might of the Egyptians, God prepared **a plan of salvation**. Filling Moses and Aaron with his power and might, the Lord God sent them to speak to Pharaoh in his name. The ruler of Egypt hardened his heart more than ever and opposed the God of the Hebrews. Seeing how hard-hearted

Pharaoh was, God worked, through Moses, great wonders in the form of ten punishments. God hears the cries of the downtrodden and shows he is all in their favour and against those who oppress persons. Just like when he punished the serpent (the devil) in the garden of Eden for enslaving man through sin, God did the same to Pharaoh, who had enslaved God's people. The intention of the author while recounting this episode was not only that of relating what happened, but also of evoking in the readers an emotion of faith in God's power. The greatness and power of God shown in these not unusual natural disasters that occur in Egypt, lie in the way that they happened at the opportune moment to soften the heart of Pharaoh and let the Jewish people escape their slavery in Egypt, (Exodus 5-12)

THE PASCHAL MEAL

The Lord God ordained that the freedom from slavery in Egypt and the migration to the promised land were to be celebrated by **the eating of the Easter lamb**. It is a story of liberation beginning with the homes of the Israelites being spared the killing of their firstborn son because the blood of a lamb was smeared on the doorposts and lintels of their homes. God wanted this very important event for the Jews to be commemorated over the years. Thus, God ordered, *"That same night a vigil is to be kept for the Lord by all the Israelites throughout the generations."* (Exodus 12, 42). The Israelites have to celebrate again the Paschal meal in the same way that they celebrated it for the first time: the eating of a lamb which has no bones broken, unleavened bread and bitter herbs.



FROM THE COVENANT TO THE PROMISED LAND

The ten punishments and mostly the killing of the firstborn son in each family, including his own, forced the Pharaoh to concede defeat. The sons of Israel, about six thousand men (without counting the children), **left** Ramses on foot for Sukkoth. To show them the way, during the day the Lord led them in a column of clouds and during the night in a column of fire.

After a while, however, Pharaoh regretted his decision to let the Israelites go. He chased them hurriedly to attack them in the desert. When the Egyptians approached them, the Israelites saw them and a great fear engulfed them. They called upon the

Lord, and Moses said to them, *“Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today.”* Moses stretched out his hands over the sea and the waters dried up and were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on the right and on the left. The Egyptians pursued them and went into the sea after them with all their horses, chariots and drivers. On God’s orders, Moses stretched his hands over the sea, which returned to its normal depth and covered the entire army of Pharaoh, drowning them all. (Exodus 14, 5-28)





THE SINAI COVENANT (PACT)

At the beginning of the third month since their flight from Egypt, the Israelites reached the desert of Sinai and pitched their tents near the Mountain. The Lord God asked Moses to go up the mountain where he proposed a **Covenant** by which the Jewish people, chosen from all the other people of the world, would become his people and he would be their God. Moses gathered the elders of the people and repeated God's words and all the people, with

one voice said, "*Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.*" (Exodus 19, 8) Moses presented God with the people's wish and, as a sign of a pact, God gave Moses the commandments written by the finger of God on tablets of stone. (Exodus 20)

Through his law, God gave his people a guarantee of freedom, if it was kept and developed. Once again, man had a guide, not only to avoid falling into the slavery of sin, but also to walk along the good

and sure road to complete salvation. Moses came down from the mountain and reported what the Lord had ordered. The people with one voice said, *"Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do."* Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. In the morning, he built an altar at the foot of the mountain and erected twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. Then, he sent some youths to offer sacrifices and kill oxen as sacrifices of thanksgiving to the Lord. Moses took half the blood and put it in bowls and spread the other half on the altar. He then took the book of the covenant and read from it in a way that all could hear him. And they said, *"All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient."* Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, saying, *"See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."* (Exodus 24, 3-8).

This Covenant was a **proposal of intimate friendship** between God and his people; God wanted to narrow the distance between God and man, who was wounded by sin. Just as the heart is a

symbol of love, blood was a symbol of life to the Jews. That is why Moses sprinkled half the blood on the altar and the other half on the people; he wanted to show that God was sharing his life with his people.

THE PEOPLE BREAK THE COVENANT

However, man is **weak** and forgets all that God does for him. This is, in fact, what happened to the Jewish people in the desert. From time to time they forgot the pact that they had made with God and frequently doubted him. Often, they went to Moses and asked him to take them back to Egypt; they even grumbled against God. *"Would that we had died in the land of Egypt or at least in the wilderness! Why does Yahweh bring us to this land only to have us fall by the sword and our wives and children seized as booty? Should we not do better to go back to Egypt?"* And they said to each other, *"Let us appoint a leader to go back to Egypt."* (Numbers 14, 2-4) Notwithstanding all this, God remained faithful to the pact he had made with his people and like a good father kept offering the hand of friendship to his children.

THE COMMANDMENTS

1. I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before me.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's day.
4. Honour your father and mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.
9. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbour's goods.

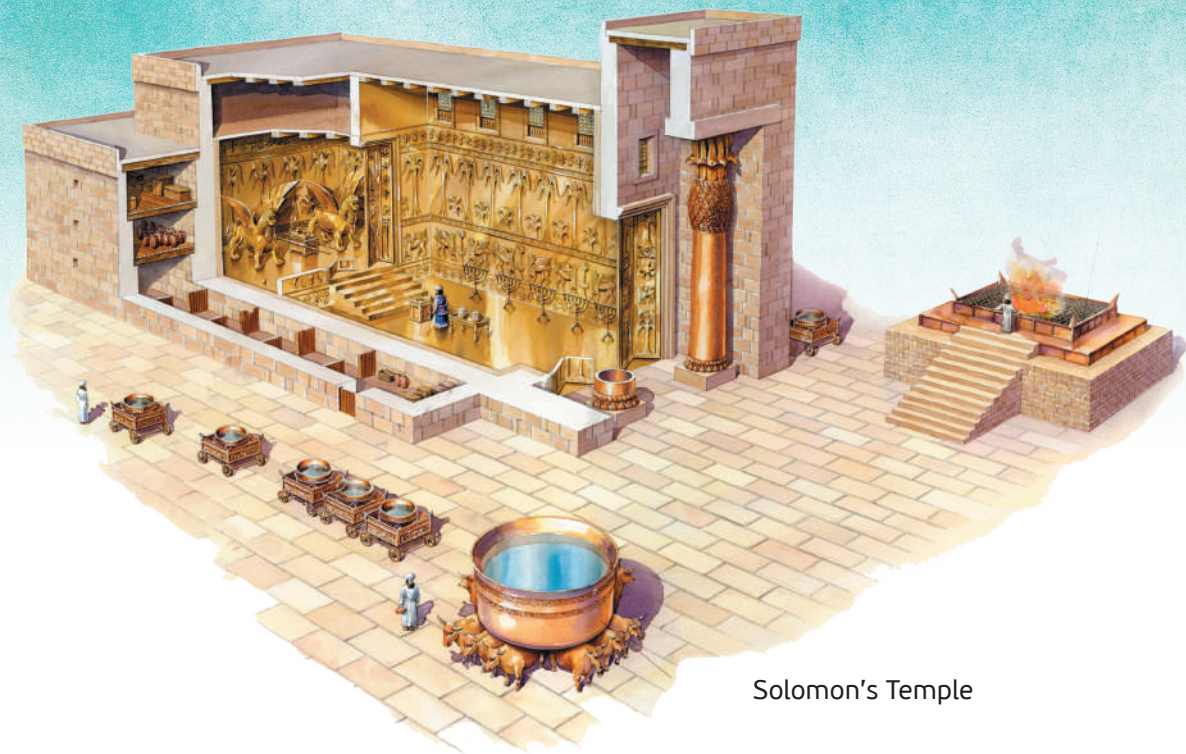
FROM THE PROMISED LAND TO EXILE

After their experience in the desert, the Jewish people began to **establish** themselves in the land of Canaan. It was a time of conflicts with the neighbouring tribes, as they tried to acquire the land that God had promised to Abraham and later also to Moses. God selected 'judges' from among the people to lead them in time of war or to rule over them in times of peace. Joshua, Gideon, Samson and others were charismatic persons, filled with the Spirit of the Lord, who fulfilled the role of judges.

THE KINGS OF ISRAEL

After being ruled by judges for two hundred years, the people wanted a king in order to be like the neighbouring people. It was not enough for them to

be guided by God; they wished one of them to be a ruler. Unwillingly, God chose **Saul** to be the first king. But, after a while, Saul did not remain faithful to God and so, God chose **David**, who was a king 'after God's heart'. Therefore, God promised that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David. In David's time, all the Israelites were united in one kingdom and they even managed to win great battles against the Philistines. Though David was a king loyal to God, he sinned and broke the good relationship with God. His son **Solomon** succeeded him and built a Temple to God. But, he also was not faithful to God. After his death, the people did not remain united and formed two sections. This signalled the beginning of the downfall of the Jewish people.



Solomon's Temple

THE PROPHETS

It was the prophets, who in the name of God, urged the kings and the people to repent and to stay faithful to the Pact with God. The prophets were not only those who, as many think, foretold the future. In God's name they interpreted what God wanted to tell his people in varying circumstances. In the Old Testament, the prophet was also called a shepherd, because he led the people, who sometimes were lost and were without any direction, just like sheep without a shepherd.

The monarchy came to an end

because of the division among the people. In the year 721 BC, the Upper Kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians, while in the year 586 BC, the Lower Kingdom fell to the Babylonians. During this period, great **prophets** delivered messages which

were collected in books. Among these prophets we find **Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah**. Along with others, these prophets warned the people about their evil doings and tried to convert them and become again faithful to the Pact. Even at this time of trial, God did not abandon his people. He sent the prophet Ezekiel and others to fill their hearts with hope of salvation and with faith in the Lord.

After the Jewish people touched rock bottom because of the two exiles, they once again felt a certain new eagerness to keep the Pact and obey God's law; they especially started looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. Over the years, God had kept his promise and from time to time, he reminded his people of the promise of the only saviour, who alone could free them from the slavery of sin.



GETTING CLOSER TO EACH OTHER

Archeology and history have shown us that even from very early times, man always felt the need to communicate with someone far above him. Being a rational and spiritual being, man is continually seeking for and asking about the big questions in life; this is because

man is thirsty for truth. Religion does not ask "How?" but "Why?" Therefore, Religion helps us find answers to these big questions which determine whether we build our life on firm ground or not, whether our life is embedded in hope or it is desperate in front of blind destiny.





The story of humanity shows that it was influenced by the great religions, because over the years it took over the values transmitted by the religions which ruled it. The five most important influential religions in the world are: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism.

Despite the differences among the great religions, they all try to give an answer to man's main questions. Although some important answers are conflicting, we still have to consider them with respect. In its declaration about non Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican Council II, urges us to accept what is true and good in them, as a ray of that truth which enlightens each person and which reached its fullness in Jesus Christ.

For many years, this vision of respect has not been present among these

religions and over the centuries conflicts have led to bloodshed. Vatican Council II tried to bring together again the Christians who were separated and to bring down the walls of separation once and for all, while seeking to build bridges through dialogue. The word "Ecumenism" is derived from the Greek word "Oikoumene", which means 'all the inhabited earth' (see Acts 17, 6; Mt. 24, 14; Hebrews 2,5) and is the promotion of dialogue and unity among Christians. Each Christian Church is called to work for the unity that existed at the beginning among the first Christians. The Catholic Church considers itself as that tree from which, over the years, the other Christian Churches became separated. Therefore, the Catholic Church's commitment to ecumenism is based on the conviction that a fragmented Christianity contradicts the will of Jesus, that is, that there should be one shepherd and one flock.

Inspired by this sense of religious dialogue, which goes further and deeper than the differences in beliefs, new spaces and initiatives have been created. Among these initiatives, one finds the Community at Taizé in France and the Bose Community in Italy.

In 1940 Roger Schutz founded his monastic community in Taizé, a small village in France. From the very first, this was an ecumenical community, consisting of 'brothers' from different Churches.





Despite some differences in beliefs, the 'brothers' show that they can live fully the message of Jesus. Those who choose to join this community live a celibate life, in poverty and simplicity and seek to help those who need help most. Today, this community has become like an oasis in the middle of a desert, a space which attracts thousands of youths and others of all ages. These go there on pilgrimage and discover how the Word of God and prayer are the basic elements on which to build every true spiritual experience. In this oasis, one first meets with oneself, so that one can then share one's life with others and with God.

In 1965, Enzo Bianchi started an experience on the same lines in Bose, Italy. Today, there is a community of monastics, which is ecumenical, offering space to persons of all ages and creeds, wherein they can live the experience of prayer. This community has really grown in number and includes women and men, Catholics and Protestants, as well as some priests. Many of the monks are scholars of old Scripture texts, both of the East and of the West. Every

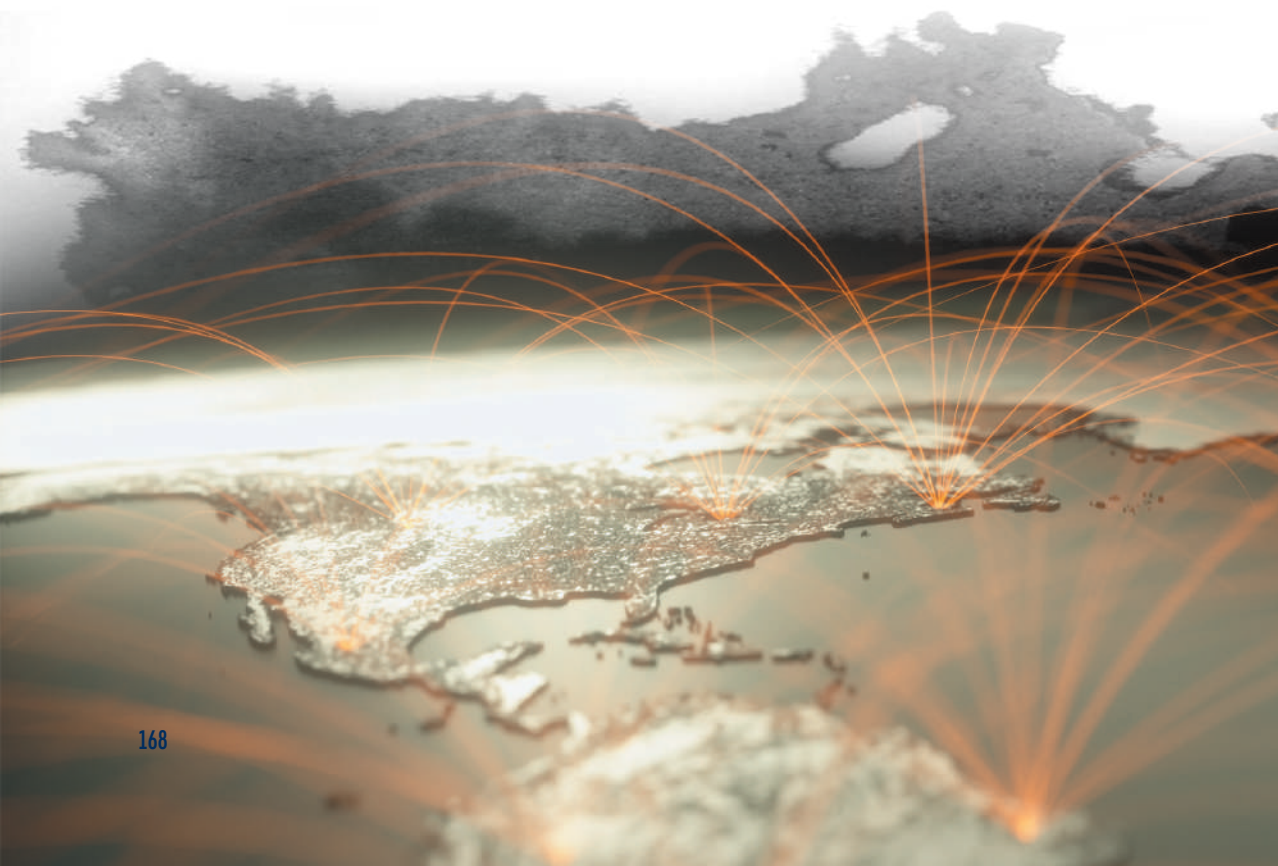
year, thousands of people visit Bose to experience the word of God in prayer and discover what God wants from them.

In 1986, Pope John Paul II called the leaders of all the world religions for a meeting in Assisi. This meeting surprised many but it opened new doors for dialogue among the great religions. This was an inter-religious meeting, not an ecumenical meeting. In the same year, the same Pope became the first Pope to enter a synagogue and called the Jews 'our elder brothers'. Even Pope Benedict XVI called a similar meeting of prayer in 2011, to which he invited four atheists. This meeting focused on world peace. In 2015, Pope Francis visited the Philippines and Sri Lanka and took part in an inter-religious and ecumenical meeting, where he called the congregation "friends" and invited everyone to promote peace and love among peoples and religions. When Pope Francis visited the United Arab Emirates in 2019 he also had an inter-religious meeting, and in 2020 he wrote the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* - All Brothers.

A HELPING HAND

Today, there is no need for us to go to India to meet the Indians or to China to meet the Chinese. The social media and telecommunication facilities have made all this very easy to attain. Yet, even in Malta there are small and bigger communities of persons coming from different countries, who, for one reason or another, have made Malta their home. These persons have brought with them a rainbow of different colours through their own **cultures, religions, food and music** which, when exploited, bring out the richness of pluralism and diversity among peoples. However, this diversity may perhaps instil an element of fear in those who have not experienced the riches of different cultures.

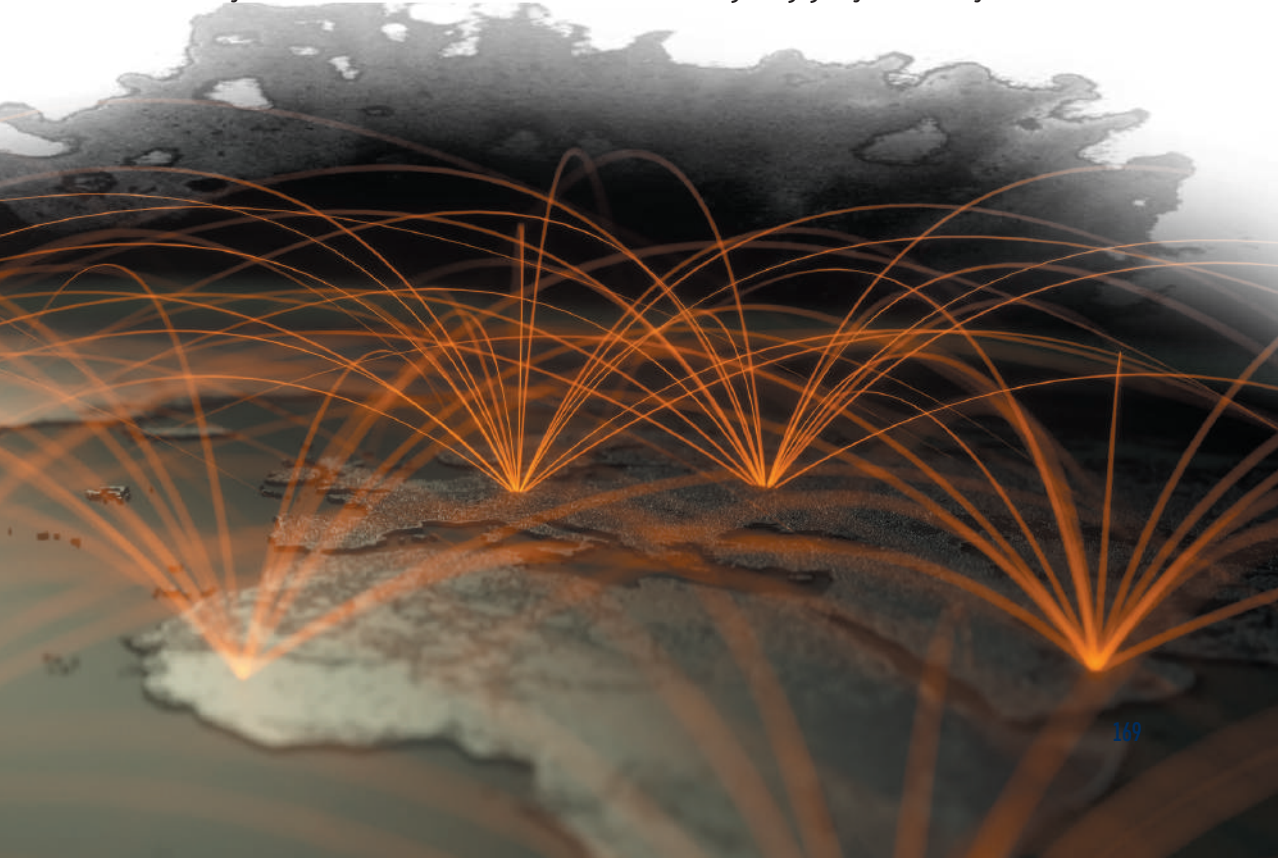
It is practically impossible for us in our daily life not to practise the value of acceptance, in a globalized world and in a society, which is increasingly becoming multi-cultural and diverse. The geographical position of Malta in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea makes us a centre of dialogue among the people of the three continents which surround us. Our country should be a centre of peace and respect, so that this multi-cultural society can live and grow in harmony; not only that, but it should be a place where people can appreciate diversity in every aspect of life. The words of Jesus Christ himself urge us to work for this aim – to love each other without barriers.



When faced daily with an environment replete with diversity, one has, first of all, to learn to accept the differences existing among peoples. If, as an example, we consider the school environment, we realise that up to a few years ago, the population in our schools consisted mostly of Maltese students. However, these days there are also many students who were born in various foreign countries who are studying together with the Maltese. As Christians, we are invited by Jesus to welcome these strangers and, at least, accept them and see that they lack nothing. This is one of the calls that Jesus lists in the corporal deeds of mercy found in the gospel of St. Matthew. This invitation has been repeated by Pope Francis, in the face of so many unfortunate people who have to escape from their countries because of injustices or wars. The Pope asks us to be missionaries in our own country by helping these people who have come from far away lands and who may never have had the fortune

of meeting Jesus. By our attitude and behaviour towards them, we can be the means whereby these strangers meet Jesus.

In the Gospels, Jesus gives clear, instructions to the apostles to make disciples from all nations (Mt 28, 19-20; Mk 16, 15-18). This quotation clearly shows that the Church, in its very nature, is a missionary Church. Therefore, through Baptism, every Christian becomes part of the missionary life of the Church. The principal work of this mission is evangelization; therefore, the missionary places God in the first place, then others and lastly himself. It is evident to the Christian missionary that there is much more sense to life than the here and now. The missionary sees life in the perspective of eternal life. It follows that Christian missionaries are called to do simple work, which bears lasting fruit in the life of the needy, while giving glory to God by these acts.



In his Apostolic Exhortation 'The joy of the Gospel', Pope Francis argues that, first and foremost, the missionary must experience within himself the joy of the gospel, as, without this joy, the gospel will not attract persons. This joy in the word of God should be at the centre of mission work, because it is in this way that Christ attracts persons.

The work of the missionary Church takes diverse forms and it does not matter whether the missionary is working in his own country or in a far away

land. The core of a Christian mission is evangelization, but it also includes education, social justice, mission with the poor, medical mission and finally, the kingdom of God. The Church understands the mission to comprise all these issues, as it looks on a person as the image of God and, therefore, it does not make a difference if the person is a Christian or not. Christians, helped by the power of the Holy Spirit, should strive to make the name of Jesus 'known and loved' wherever they are, through their words and the sacraments.



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE BIBLE: THE WORD OF GOD



THE BEGINNING OF EVERYTHING ...

"This week there is going to be the launching of a new car model." "There is going to be a new mobile phone on the market. Who knows what features it is going to have!" "That group has released a new video and it has already reached the top hits." When something new is advertised, there is always a lot of excitement about its form and about the way it will make our life easier and better. We become interested and ask about its country of origin, the company that has produced this new model and even who manages this company.

Many millions of years ago, it was not a new car model or a new mobile phone or any other thing that we use in our daily life, that was created. The world was created! Naturally, it was not created in one place or country, as nothing existed. There was only nothingness and a great void. And out of that void, the world and all that is in it was created. It was not the owner of a company that took on this great project, as humans did not yet exist. **It was God who created it, as God always existed. Nobody created God, for God has no beginning and no end.**

God does not need a place where to stay, for **God is a spirit**. In his greatness, God wanted to create man out of love for man. Before creating

him, God wanted to prepare a beautiful place for him to live in, just like parents-to-be do. Before the baby's birth, they provide all the things that the baby will need when it is born. They prepare a room, a bed, clothes and all other necessities, so that from the very first moment of life, the baby will live in comfort as much as possible. God did the same thing. Before creating man, God created the world so that man would live a beautiful life.

CREATION

The narration of the creation of the world is found in the **Book of Genesis**. We find that God created the world in six days and on the seventh day he rested. Naturally, the creation of the world did not necessarily happen as we read in the Bible. What is written is not meant to be taken word for word. God's love is not determined by how the world was created. Therefore, the aim of the Bible is not to give us a scientific study about how the world was created. In Genesis 1, 1-29 we read that the world was created like this:

- On the **first day** God created light and separated it from darkness. God called the light 'day' and the darkness 'night'.
- On the **second day** God created the heavens.
- On the **third day** God created the

earth and the sea. He also created the trees, plants, flowers and all other vegetation.

- On the **fourth day** God created the sun, the moon and the stars to give light to the earth and to separate the night from the day. In this way, seasons, days and years were also created.
- On the **fifth day** God created all the creatures that fly in the air and those which swim in the seas and rivers.
- On the **sixth day** God created the animals and he also created man.
- On the **seventh day** God rested.

THE GREATNESS OF GOD

In everyday life, we calculate the worth of persons by looking at their capabilities and the results they obtain. We recognise the greatness of athletes according to the records they attain. Companies are considered good brands if their products are of good quality and satisfy the needs of consumers.

We cannot see God but we say that he is good and great because all around us, we can see what he has done. We can only say how great God is when we look at the marvel of what he has created: from the biggest animal to the smallest insect, from the tallest tree to the tiniest plant. When we see the vast expanses of the seas, the beauty of birds and so many other things, we stop to think and say, *"If creation is so big and beautiful, how much greater is he who has created it!"*

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul says, *"Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse."* (Romans 1, 20) A question that comes naturally is this: "How can I know who God is if I have never seen him?" St. George Preca teaches that creatures talk to us about God and we **know God through his works.**



In Genesis we read that after each day that passed, **God saw that everything was good**. It seems that God guaranteed that all he made was good. After many millions of years, we cannot say that man has left what God created in that same state. By constructing haphazard and unplanned buildings, creating pollution, killing protected animals and birds and resorting to many other destructive practices, man is suffering the consequences of his own actions.

Just imagine how you would feel if you give a gift to a person, who destroys this gift in your face. This is what man is doing – destroying the wonderful gift that God has given him. It is therefore, our duty to take care of what God has given us. We may be limited in certain aspects because certain types of destruction occur as a result of decisions taken by persons in authority. Still, we can make a great difference in our life and that of others by opting to do the right thing every day.

God gave us this beautiful gift of creation to **enjoy** it. It is our responsibility to **pass on this gift to our descendants**. It is possible to repair or replace a damaged mobile phone or car but it may be impossible to repair or to replace any damage or destruction caused to creation.



THE MOST BEAUTIFUL GIFT

"Then the Lord formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." This makes man the image of God and in his eyes we are all the same and equally special.

God is directly involved in the creation of man. God did not create a living being, left it alone and it evolved and became human. **God created man and gave him the gift of life.** God could not give us a better gift than life because without it, we would not be able to realise our dreams and enjoy life. Without existing, we would not have been able to do those things we have enjoyed doing till now. It could be that we have experienced things that were not so good but these could have served as opportunities for us to mature.

We may go through difficulties in life that may obscure the beauty of life for a time. It will be more difficult for us to

appreciate the beauty of this gift of life if we have no control over these bad experiences. However, God continues sending gifts to all of us to make our life more beautiful for us. These gifts may be in the form of guidance teachers and other persons, whose aim is to help persons lead a happier life

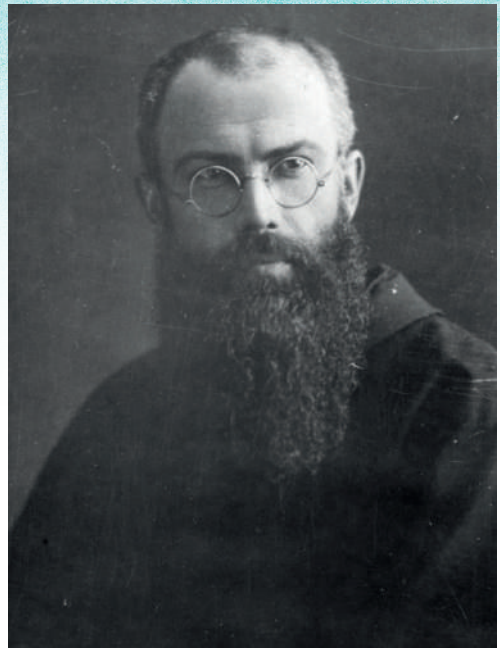
We ought to be grateful to God for all the beautiful things in our life, as they all come from God. This is how the psalmist praised God, **"I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works."** Have you ever asked, "How am I going to turn my life into a beautiful project?" God, not only created us but he enriched us with gifts and talents, which, if we use well, will make our life and that of others much better. Nothing comes from nothing. It is through persons who knew how to use their talents that we have achieved much progress. Hence, each person should ask, "What makes me a special person? How can I make a positive difference in my life and in that of others?". **In the same way that God gave me this gift of life, I want to be a gift for others.**





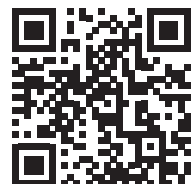
OSCAR ROMERO

Many were the saints who appreciated this gift of life and were prepared to pay with their own lives to make the lives of others better. One of these was Oscar Romero, a quiet and reserved person, who was the Archbishop of San Salvador. He lived at the time when the government was ill-treating the citizens of the locality. Archbishop Romero took action by speaking for his people, when his friend Father Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit, was killed. Although Romero received continuous threats against his life, he used all possible means to protect his flock. He directly addressed the government in newspapers and during his homilies, as he believed that the persons with whom God had trusted him deserved much better. The Archbishop kept doing this until he was gunned down while he was saying mass in March 1980.



FATHER MAXIMILIAN KOLBE

Father Maximilian Kolbe is another saint who died so that someone else could have a better life. He was one of a big group of prisoners in the concentration camp in Auschwitz. When one prisoner managed to escape, ten of these prisoners were condemned to death. One of these ten became very distressed when he learnt that he was destined to die because he kept worrying about how his wife and children were going to be looked after and cared for. It was at that moment that Father Kolbe, a priest, went forward and asked to be allowed to die instead of that family man, whose family would be fatherless if he died. In fact, the priest took the place of that father and, together with the other nine prisoners, walked towards the death bunker.



PIER GIORGIO FRASSATI

Pier Giorgio Frassati is another saint who died at the age of 24, after having taken on the cause of the many poor persons in Torino. He was very sociable and was always surrounded by friends. He was a very good rock-climber, a swimmer and a strong athlete. His success in these pursuits made him so popular that his support for the poor carried more weight.

AND I?

I have the gift of life like the saints we have just mentioned. As in the **Parable of the Talents**, I have the full freedom of doing what I want with this gift of life. However, I know that if I release the goodness and potential that are present within me, I can make a lot of difference in the lives of those around me. I only have one life and every day is an opportunity for me to make a beautiful gift of it to others.



THEY HEARD HIS CALL!

You are in a waiting room expecting to be called to talk to the person with whom you have an appointment; you then hear your name being called so that you proceed to your appointment. You are in the emergency area of a hospital waiting to be seen to and you hear your name called in order to go to the section you need. You are at the airport waiting to board an airplane and, suddenly, you hear your name called as it is time to embark.

At such moments, you may be startled, as you may not have expected to be called by name, especially if you are distracted doing something else. Still, when you hear someone calling your

name, you quickly try to do what you are expected to do. Even though you have never seen or known the caller, you believe that what the caller is asking you to do is the right thing and, without any doubts, you obey.

Important persons in the Bible also heard someone **calling their name** to tell them what to do. Some of them were very common persons, among whom we find **Samuel, Jeremiah, Mary and Paul**. While they were going about their daily life, they heard God calling them. It was a call they could not refuse; they stopped, thought about it and decided.





THE CALL OF SAMUEL

Samuel was a youth, who, while resting with Eli, a Jewish priest serving in the Temple, heard a voice calling, "Samuel!", while he was sleeping. He immediately got up, for he thought that it was Eli who had called him. Samuel approached Eli, who was sleeping and asked him why he had called him. Eli answered that he had not called him and Samuel went back to sleep. But some time later, Samuel again heard this same voice. He got up and went near Eli, who told him that he had not called him. Samuel grew confused as he could not understand who could have called him if it was not Eli. There was nobody nearby who could have been the caller. Not much time passed by, when he heard his name called for the third time.

Samuel was certain he was not dreaming; he went near Eli, who assured him for the third time that he had not called him. Finally, Eli realised that God was calling Samuel, who did not recognise this call. So, Eli told Samuel, "Go to sleep. If you hear the call again, say, '**Speak, as your servant is listening**'." From that day on, God kept on speaking to Samuel for a long period of time. In fact, Samuel became one of the greatest prophets of the Jewish people, and through him God performed great things.

Can we imagine what these persons felt when God called and spoke to them? Certainly, Samuel felt confused as he was not expecting anything of the sort. When something similar happens, one has many questions to ask. When **Jeremiah** was called by God, he answered, "**Ah! Lord God; I do not**

know how to speak for I am only a child."

We know that when the angel Gabriel told **Mary** that she had been chosen to be the Mother of God, she answered, *"How can this be, for I know no man?"* We can imagine how **Paul** felt when, with a fervent will and great energy, he was on his way to put Christians to death. He was dazzled by a strong light and thrown off his horse while asking who was calling him! These reactions are quite normal if one is asked to do something out of the ordinary, more so if this thing is being asked by God. So, it is quite acceptable not to accept God's request automatically. Great persons, like St. Paul, besides being great, were also human and **felt it difficult** to say 'yes' straight away. However, they went through a process, which led them to accept what God wanted from them. Whenever there is a call from God, one usually finds these things:

- God speaks to us at any time of any day . This means that when God speaks to us **he is not going to make a special appointment** to tell us what he wants us to do.

- **We do not always understand immediately** that God is speaking to us. Samuel thought that it was Eli.
- We need the **help of someone** to understand what God wants from us. Eli helped Samuel to understand that it was God who was speaking to him.
- It is normal that one has many **doubts and questions**.
- On the other hand, one should have the disposition to hear. Samuel said to God, *"Speak, as your servant is listening."*

God called Samuel to give him a mission and Samuel answered in the affirmative. But God calls everyone; and he is calling me by name in a particular way. On the other hand, I do not expect God to wake me up in the middle of the night to tell me what he wants from me. Neither am I going to hear him calling me like I hear my name being called at the airport or at the emergency service of the hospital. God has different ways of speaking to me. How do I realise that God is speaking to me? How do I understand what he wants from me?



DO YOU KNOW HE IS CALLING YOU?

My mobile phone rings. First of all, I find out who the caller is and it is then that I listen to what the caller wants to tell me. However, things are different when God wants to speak to us.

The fact that we are baptised persons is a sign that **God is calling us to become saints**. To be saints, we have to live according to the way God wants and after this life we will enjoy him for ever. We live his way by following the plan he has prepared for us. St. Augustine used to say, "Love God and do what you want." This means that the only scope in life is to love God and, hence, we do whatever we do because God desires and wants it. In this way, in our life we will be accomplishing what God wants from us. How are we going to know what God wants from us and how are we going to accomplish it?

Primarily, we have to keep in mind three important points:

1. God does not love us only in a general way because we are his children, but he also loves us with an **infinite love and in a personal way**. So, whatever he chooses for us, is first and foremost of benefit to us.
2. **God does not impose any choice on us**. One of the things that makes us different from animals is freedom. Because God respects

freedom, he still loves us with the same love, even if we do not follow his way.

3. God is a spirit. He **uses us** to show his love for the others. That is why Mother Theresa used to say, "We are all like pencils in the hands of God."



HOW DO I KNOW WHAT GOD WANTS FROM ME?

There are various ways whereby I can realise what God desires from me:

1. First, I have **to know God**. Workers cannot take orders from their boss if they do not know who the person is. I can know God by seeking him in quiet places. Consequently, nature can bring us nearer to God. I can also find God in the Eucharist. I can visit him in any of the chapels scattered all over Malta and Gozo. I can meet God in a small extract from his Word, that is, the Bible. He can show me who he is and what he wants from me.
2. When I get to know him, it will be easier for me to **hear what he wants from me**. God has no voice but he can talk to me through my experiences, as well as through other persons and my own personality. He also uses that which attracts me, that which I like to do. It is important that I take note of what I feel in my life because God speaks to me also through my feelings.
3. But how do I know that all this is coming from God? When one starts asking these questions, one needs to **talk to a person who** understands what God wants. This may be a priest or other persons, known as spiritual directors or spiritual companions'. One can discuss things with these persons and understand better if it is God who is speaking.

4. This process takes time and it is not something to be decided in a hurry. This process, called **discernment**, consists of speaking about one's feelings, as well as praying God to be always present. When a person decides to say 'yes', this is not a one-off decision but it is renewed daily; the person prays God for help to be able to persist till the end.





Olalla Oliveros



Philip Mulryne

PERSONS WHO ABANDONED EVERYTHING

There are particular and drastic calls which require one to leave one's career and change one's lifestyle to do God's bidding. Among others, there was **St. Francis of Assisi** who let go of his business interests and led a poor and holy life. A contemporary person, who gave up his football career and became a Dominican monk and priest is **Fr. Philip Mulryne**. Before becoming a priest, he had won 27 cup tournaments with the national Northern Ireland team. He played with various clubs, including that of Manchester United. There is also **Olalla Oliveros**, who left the career of a beautiful and successful actress and became a nun, after visiting Fatima and experiencing what she described as an 'earthquake'. She stated, "The Lord is never wrong. He asked me if I would follow him and I could not refuse."

However, there are thousands of persons who daily answer God's call. Priests have answered his call and

served him through their priesthood. Many Maltese have left their jobs and even their native land to go and serve God among peoples all over the world. There are also consecrated persons, such as monks and nuns, who have left their families and joined different communities to serve Jesus, whom they see in the persons of those they meet. Married couples have also answered God's call by being united in holy matrimony; these, together, are raising a family and living God's love as a couple. Other persons have remained single through choice, to be able to answer God's call in different realities. Among these, we find the members of the Society of Catholic Doctrine. (MUSEUM).

God has a plan for each and every one of us. The invitation he is offering us was also offered to the Apostles, when he told them, "**Follow me.**" Meanwhile, he is also promising us the same thing he promised his Apostles: "**I will be with you till the end of time.**"

I AM NOT ALONE!

John Donne used to say, **"No man is an island."** Man has been created to live with others. He has not been created to live alone in solitude but to live in conjunction with himself, with others and with nature. Man becomes complete when living with others. If we live all alone, we can feel isolated, emarginated and depressed. On the other hand, relationships can make us **treat each other with respect and dignity**, without having any desire to control each other. Relationships lead us to **appreciate the individuality of each other and that which makes others special**. We should collaborate with each other by building strong relationships with those around us, especially at home, at school and in

places which we frequent. We should open up to our friends, to our relatives and to those who wish us well, and not remain reticent.

AN INVITATION BY GOD

God is asking to enter into a relationship with us. We can answer this invitation by praying and showing him appreciation for all that he does for us.

Reflect on these questions:

- Which are the important relationships in your life?
- Which relationships give you life?
- What should you do to keep these relationships strong to fill your life in a positive way?
- How conscious are you about the relationship God wants to build with you?
- How is this relationship being realised?





THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

I cannot open up to others if I find **no value in them**, more so if I repudiate them, if I consider them different from me. The Jews presented Jesus with a **woman who had sinned**, whom they wanted to kill by stoning her. However, Jesus spoke up for her. Jesus showed **compassion and respect** towards that woman, who was looked upon by others as of no value. He recognised the good qualities in the woman, who washed his feet and dried them with her hair. Here I should ask myself if there are persons with whom I feel I should not build a strong relationship, as I consider them without any value.

The **Parable of the Good Samaritan** passes on the message that Jesus wanted to build bridges with those who were different from him. The person who asked Jesus to tell him how he could lead a good life, was an expert of the law. Jesus invited this expert not to obey only what the Law said but to

act also according to the law of love towards others. The Samaritans and the Jews were not on good terms, so much so, that when Jesus mentioned the word 'Samaritan', the Jews who heard him, began muttering among themselves. Jesus presented this parable of a man, who was on his way to Jericho from Jerusalem, when he was assaulted by robbers, who left him wounded and in pain, by the side of the road. There passed a priest, who was held in high respect by the Jews of the time. He saw the man but kept on walking. A Levite, whose occupation was to serve in the Temple, saw the injured man and instead of taking the opportunity to serve another person, he crossed the road and went on his way. Finally, a Samaritan came by; he was the one who helped and saved that Jew.

I ask myself if there are any particular groups of persons at whom I look in a different or disparaging way because they are of a different skin colour, they



have different religious beliefs, they back a different political party, they are members of a particular club or they are fans of a different football team.

I feel that they are inferior to me, so I do not bother to build a relationship with them. In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul says, *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."* (Galatians 3, 28).

WE ARE ALL BROTHERS

The prayer, "Our Father" encompasses all this in one word – **brothers**. We are all children of the same Father, who makes no difference among his children because he loves them all in the same way. The prayer makes us feel that there is intimacy, relationship and trust in the Father, who is in heaven. It shows that there is **a relationship of love with God and those around us**. In fact, we ask our Father to provide us with what we need.

The prayer requires that we **forgive** others just like God forgives us. There is no stronger link to better relationships than forgiveness, which rebuilds broken bridges and rejoins torn ropes. **Through forgiveness, relationships becomes stronger than ever before.**

It is true that man is not an island, but individuals must strive not to become islands, which are isolated and alone. It is easy for persons to cut themselves off from others, resulting in the divisive phrase 'we and they' becoming very common. It is also quite easy for islands to be created, with persons having different creeds living on them. The sea separating these islands may be too rough to allow persons to cross and meet each other, for different opinions may not be welcomed. As Christians, however, we should understand the differences among us and, instead of allowing them to separate us and break us apart, let us consider them as a way to live together, in spite of the fact that we are not all the same.

LIVING TOGETHER

“Make me a friend”, “ I am following”. The social media has an important role in letting us get to know each other and **communicate with each other**. The social media have described many good events which have proved beneficial to humanity. Virtual reality can bring persons together; however, according to the Eurobarometer, the Maltese use this reality to indulge in hate speech. This means that we are not able to respect other persons and their opinions. It seems that sometimes we forget how to live together with others.

THE LIFE OF THE FIRST CHRISTIANS

On the other hand, the experience of the first Christians was very different. Notwithstanding the lack of means of communication, their transmission of information was

built on **strong relationships**. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read how the first Christians lived a simple life, which made much sense. They shared everything among themselves according to their needs. They used to praise God in the temple, prayers being at the centre of their lives. They were persons filled with joy, the happiness and peace that only Jesus can give. This sense of pleasure drew much respect from unbelievers, who were enchanted by these Christians and they started believing in Jesus.

The first Christians learnt to live together, in spite of their differences because it was Jesus who united them. With Jesus in our life, we will not seek to be superior in everything but to ensure that everyone is happy.



- **They shared among themselves** all material things, so that nobody would fall behind and everyone would live decently. Do we share with others what we have?
- They shared **social and emotional** feelings, as their lives were filled with what only Jesus can give. They did not keep this joy to themselves but shared it among themselves by holding joyous celebrations in each other's homes. We are to share with others the joy that Jesus gives us, since we are committed to make our environment better.
- They even shared their **spiritual life**, as they used to go together to pray in the temple and praise God. We feel a great difference when we share our spiritual life with others. For example, hearing Sunday mass with colleagues makes a difference. Another good idea would be for friends to visit a

chapel and pray together, even if only for a few minutes. Members of a group can help each other to do good; sometimes this only requires a small effort, but the benefits will be great.

The way of life of the first Christians began to have a positive impact on those around them. In fact, people showed them respect and as time went by, more people joined them. This is because what is good, draws people like a magnet, without any need of shouts or sermons. When we live together a normal life, in as good a way as possible, we will be giving witness to a Christian life.

HELPING OTHERS IN THE COMMUNITY

What does living in a **community** mean? We have heard of youths spending some weeks doing **voluntary**



work in Malta or in other countries. When one listens to an account of what they succeeded to do, one concludes that they have not done anything special. Some mention that they have worked with children, the elderly, the sick, the disabled, the emarginated and those who live alone. Others organise a project, which will benefit the vulnerable who, very often, do not have access to things we take for granted. When their experience is over, many of these volunteers say that they received more than they gave. **This means that when the work is done as a community, the community itself gives to its members the satisfaction, which is difficult to explain in words.**

It could be that not all of us will have this same beautiful opportunity to do voluntary work together in a community. Yet, this does not mean that we cannot do something together to make our surroundings better. **Every Christian**, together with others, **is called** to leave the world a better place. Jesus himself said that *"where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."* (Mt 18, 20). And also, *"Just as you do it to one of the least of those who are members of my family, you did it to me."* (Mt 25, 40)



THE SEARCH FOR GOD

It is a marvellous thing to see how a new born baby looks for the mother from the very first moment of life; it is the mother that the baby feels closest to. Although the baby does not reason like an adult, yet, the natural feeling present is that of being close to the mother. The baby seeks the mother and wants her near. The mother has given the baby life and the baby wants to be with her.

From the very first moment of his existence, man has always been **attracted to someone far greater than himself**, someone who is above everything and everybody. It is in man's nature to realise that there is an **energy** much greater than himself, in which he can find shelter and strength.

The temples of Haġar Qim, Imnajdra, Ġgantija and the Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni, all bear witness to the fact that early man already realised that there were gods who controlled what happened. So, early man built places where he could enter into a closer relationship with these gods. Man has always tried to answer essential questions about his existence, the most relevant being, "Where does man come from?" and "Who is greater than man?" We are still asking these same questions today.

GOD IS OUR SHELTER

We Christians know that our God is the **Creator** who created us because he **loves** us and wants to enter into a **relationship** with us. Like the baby





who seeks its mother for rest, man finds shelter in God. The psalmist prays, *"I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother"* (Psalm 131, 2). Like in all religions, Christians look upon God as being much greater than they are; he is the Lord of everything and everyone. The Psalmist professes, *"The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens. Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?"* (Psalm 113, 4-6).

Other religions also tried to answer similar questions and they all came to the same conclusion, that there exists someone who is greater than man. The **monotheist** religions which believe that there is only one God are Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Buddhism and Hinduism are **polytheist** religions.

The **Muslims** refer to God as *Allah*, the One Only God, like whom there is no other or greater. The Muslim religion does not teach that Allah is everywhere,

for by doing so, it would be limiting God to a form and also to a space. On the other hand, Allah is above any form. This religion reasons that if we say that Allah is in heaven, then we are assuming that he is not on earth or in the sea. We cannot limit him to time and space.

Judaism, which is also a monotheistic religion, teaches that God entered into a lasting covenant with the Jewish people on Mount Sinai. So, God is called as *elohay yisrael*, the God of Israel. This name represents the intimate relationship between the divine and a particular people during its history. Despite this, after the Holocaust, there were many who asked where this God of Israel was, when millions of Jews were tortured and killed at Aushwitz. This discussion is still going on in Jewish theology.

The **Christian** religion believes and teaches that God is a Trinity, which means that there are three persons in one God – the Father, the Son and

the Holy Spirit. This is a mystery which no one can understand. The Church teaches that there are three persons distinct from each other but there is a unity among them. God is eternal, that is, he has always existed and will always exist.

God is everywhere. We see God through his works, as he is also present in creation. The Psalmist says, *"The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."* (Psalm 19, 1).

GOD IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH MAN

God's love for man led him to become man himself and enter into a relationship with man. In his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul says, *"Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross."* (Philippians 2, 6-8).

Yet, this did not all end two thousand years ago. God is still alive with us in the **Eucharist**. Pope Francis said, "The Eucharist is essential to us: it is Christ's wish to enter into our lives and fill us with his grace." Once, St. Theresa of Avila heard someone say, "If only I lived at the time of Jesus ... if only I could see Jesus ... if only I could talk to Jesus..." St. Theresa answered, "Don't we have the living Jesus, true and real in front of us in the Eucharist? Why are you asking for more than this? The Eucharist is the most beautiful gift: he who you believe in, is still alive, is with you and you can receive him inside you. No other religion, the world over, offers such a gift.

Just like a baby passes through different stages of development to get to know the mother better, a man passes through various phases in his knowledge of God. Still, even if we do not understand who God is, he remains with us. His love is unconditional and very great.



I SEEK GOD LIKE OTHERS

Imagine a young child gets lost in a large crowd of people; wherever he looks, there are people he does not know. He starts worrying, becomes thoughtful, afraid and finally starts weeping. What is he going to do? At last, in the distance, he sees the person who looks after him. He looks only at this person and he runs towards this individual, whom he hugs. He can now rest assured that even though he is surrounded by strangers, he can feel safe, as he is accompanied by a person whom he trusts blindly.

When in their daily life, persons feel at a loss about what to do, they can make choices which they think will help them feel more at ease. However, they may feel more lost and go on looking for something else which makes more sense. We hear of diverse stories of persons who tried many things during their lifetime but still they did not find the **real scope** of their lives.

MAN SEEKS GOD

It could be that another choice which Christians make is to **turn to God**. They may take a long time to make this choice. However, in the meantime, God gives us the freedom to do what we think is good for us. Notwithstanding, God goes on waiting for us.

Man tries to find different ways to answer those fundamental questions that worry him, questions that are not necessarily answered. Still, God can give us **rest and shelter**. The Psalmist prayed, *"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."* (Psalm 42, 5)

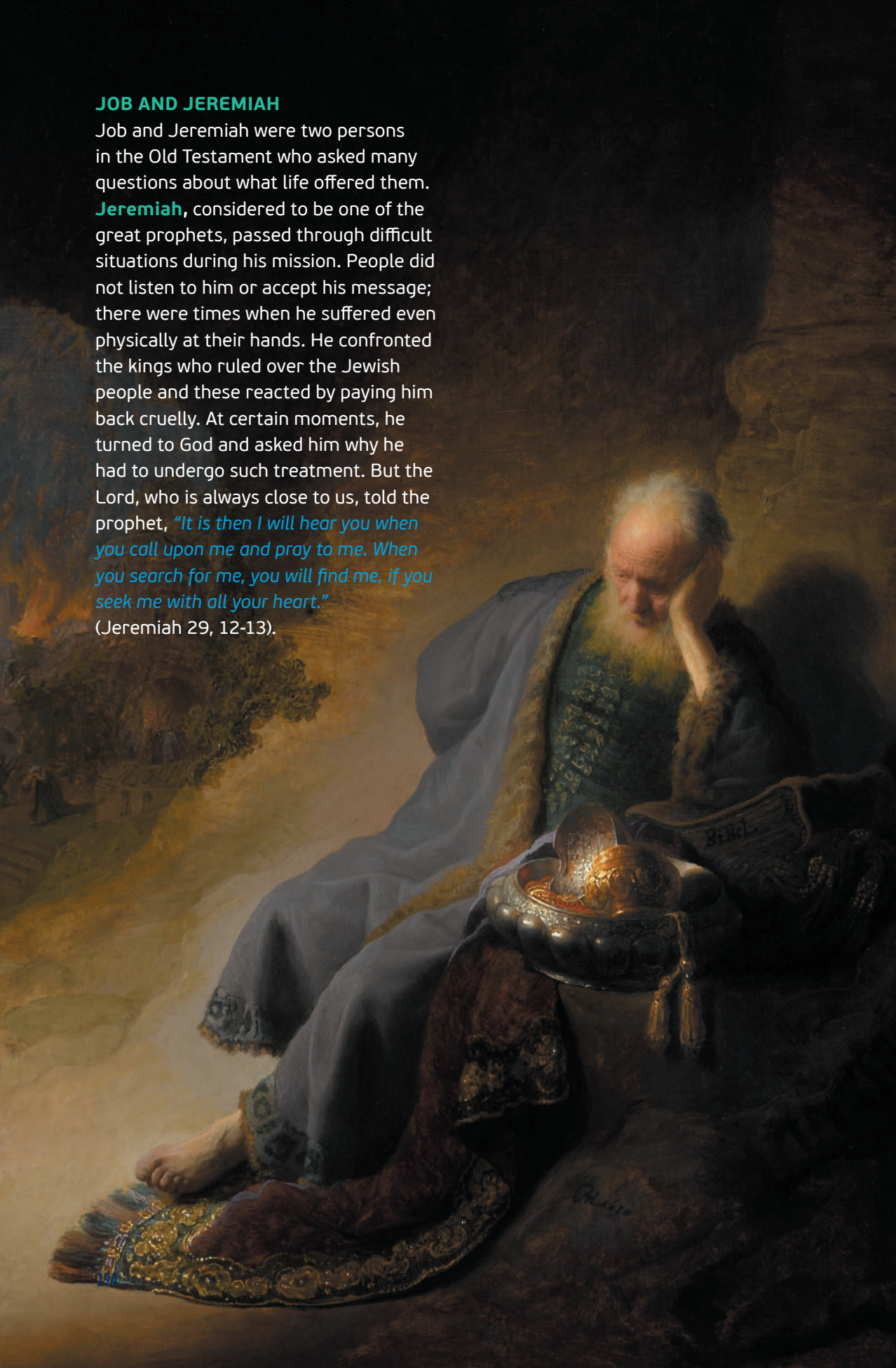


JOB AND JEREMIAH

Job and Jeremiah were two persons in the Old Testament who asked many questions about what life offered them.

Jeremiah, considered to be one of the great prophets, passed through difficult situations during his mission. People did not listen to him or accept his message; there were times when he suffered even physically at their hands. He confronted the kings who ruled over the Jewish people and these reacted by paying him back cruelly. At certain moments, he turned to God and asked him why he had to undergo such treatment. But the Lord, who is always close to us, told the prophet, *"It is then I will hear you when you call upon me and pray to me. When you search for me, you will find me, if you seek me with all your heart."*

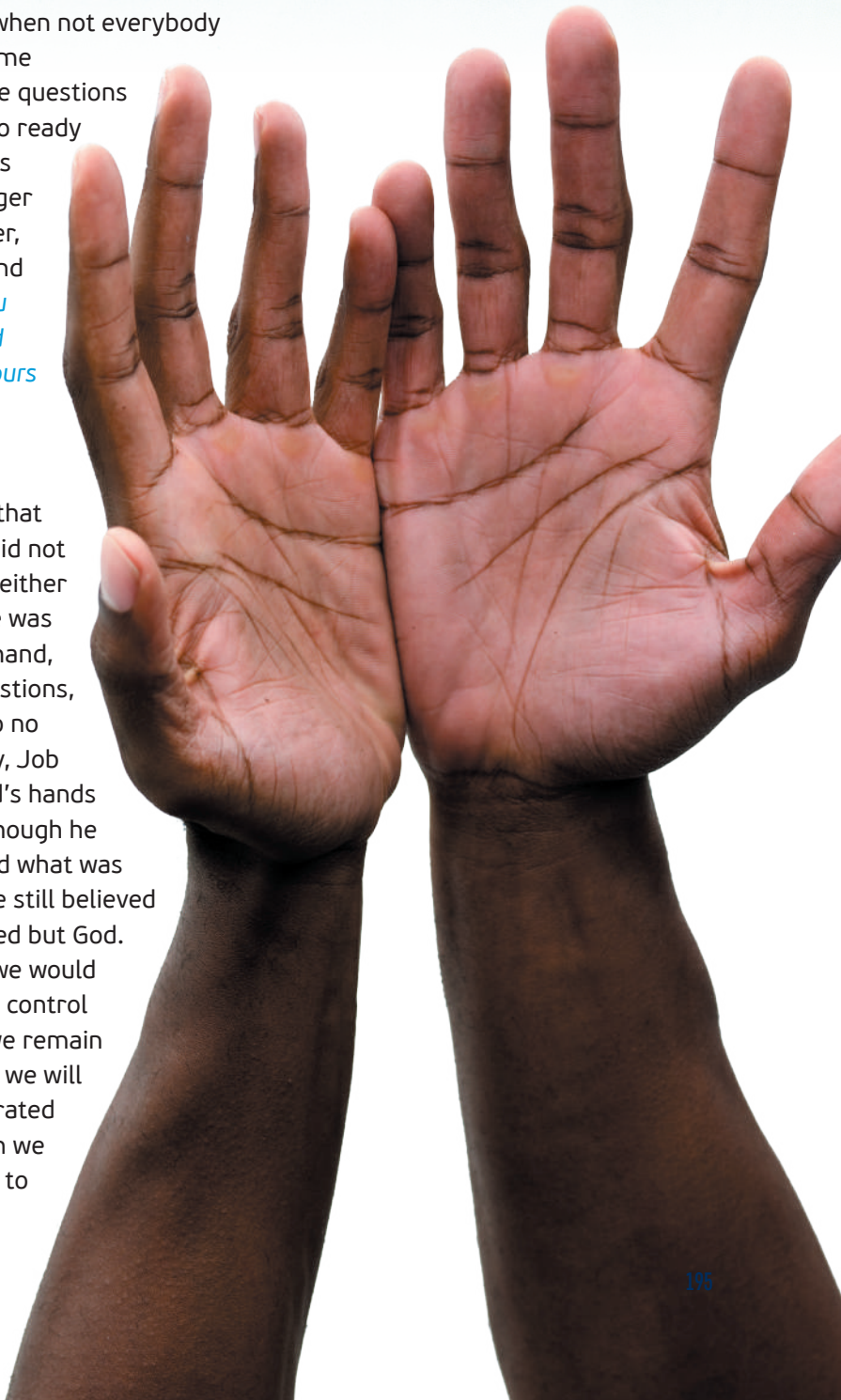
(Jeremiah 29, 12-13).



Job also asked God many questions, especially in moments of suffering, similar to those which we may go through as well during our life. At such moments we turn to God and ask human questions. We doubt God's real mercy, how just and merciful he is. We may ask, "Why me?" or "Why do I have to go through all this?" or "How can we say that God is just when not everybody goes through the same suffering?" These are questions to which there are no ready answers. Job felt this same emotion of anger against God. However, Job turned to God and said, *"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted"* (Job 42, 2)

This does not mean that Job lacked faith or did not have a strong will. Neither does it mean that he was weak. On the other hand, Job asked many questions, which at times led to no solutions. But, finally, Job threw himself in God's hands and declared that, though he could not understand what was happening to him, he still believed that nothing mattered but God. When we trust God we would be entrusting him to control our life. As long as we remain in control of our life, we will feel angry and frustrated and blame God when we lose this control due to

such experiences as sickness and death. However, when we put our trust in God, he gives us a sense of freedom and internal peace because we know that he wishes us all that is best for us.



LET US PUT OUR TRUST IN GOD

Jesus asks us to trust God for he knows what is good for us. In fact, Jesus told us, *"Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened"* (Matthew 7, 7-8). Sometimes we feel disappointed that God has not given us something we sincerely thought was good for us or for those dear to us. At such times, we do not understand God. Despite this, we believe that God **wishes us only that which** is good for us and will give it to us if we benefit from it.

In the book of Deuteronomy we find, *"From there you will seek the Lord your God and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul"* (Deuteronomy 4, 29). So, before we pray to God, let us make sure that first we find him. It is possible that we become disappointed that we do not receive what

we have prayed for because we have not discovered who the God we have prayed to, is. The boy who was lost in the crowd sought hard to find the one who took care of him. He did not seek anyone else for attention, for he wanted attention and love from the one who really cared for him. In our search for God, we may try other things or persons but nothing and no one will give us what God can give us.



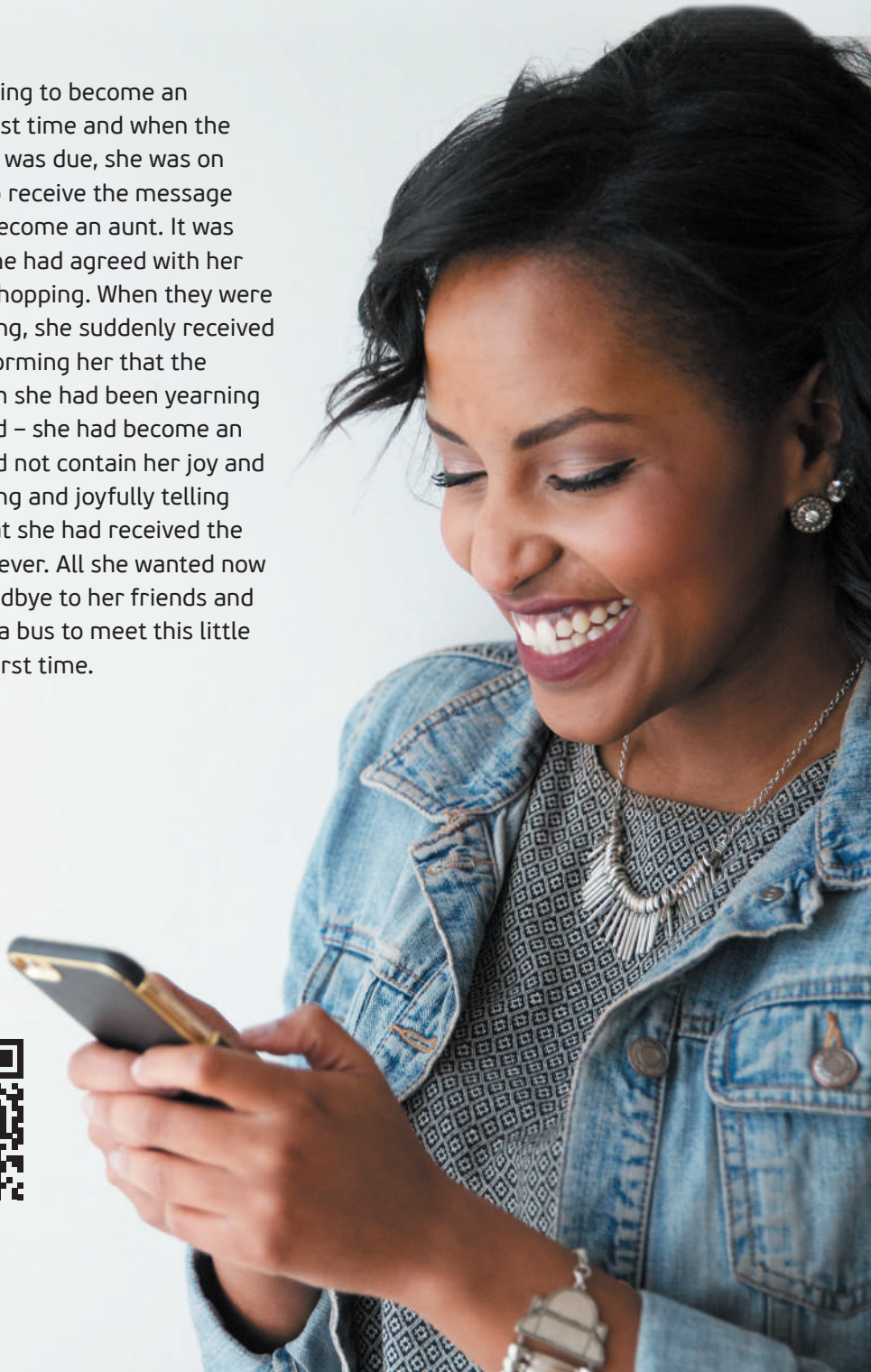
CHAPTER NINE

HELPING HANDS



GOOD NEWS!

Natalie was going to become an aunt for the first time and when the expected baby was due, she was on tenterhooks to receive the message that she had become an aunt. It was Monday and she had agreed with her friends to go shopping. When they were windowshopping, she suddenly received a message informing her that the moment, which she had been yearning for, had arrived – she had become an aunt. She could not contain her joy and started shouting and joyfully telling her friends that she had received the best message ever. All she wanted now was to say goodbye to her friends and quickly get on a bus to meet this little angel for the first time.



THE GOOD NEWS

What happened to Natalie, also happened to the Apostles and disciples when they heard that Jesus had overcome death: they could not keep the news to themselves. They passed on the beautiful memories they had of Jesus to their children and relatives by word of mouth. This is called **oral tradition**. They wanted more persons to know about these beautiful memories. It is at this moment that the Gospels started being written – **the good news!**

We find four Gospels, written by **St. Mark, St. Matthew, St. Luke and St. John**. These Gospels were written in Greek towards the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century after Christ. They relate the story of the life of Jesus of Nazareth and his teaching. The word 'gospel' in Greek means 'good news'.

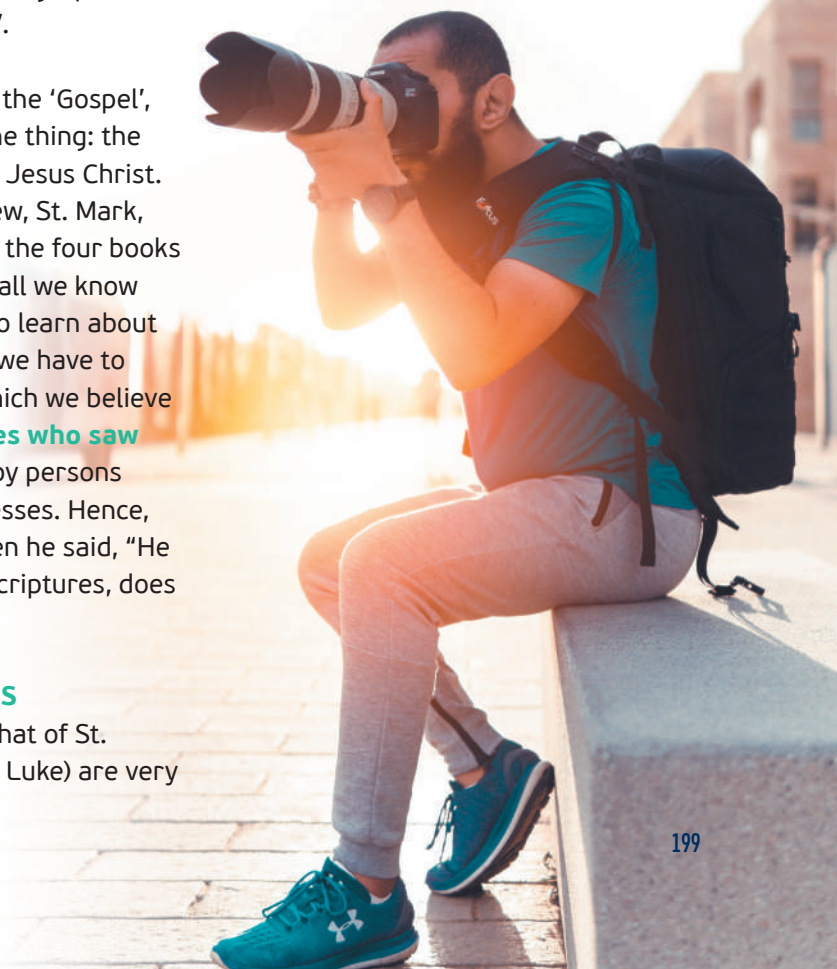
When persons talk about the 'Gospel', they have in mind only one thing: the life, work and teaching of Jesus Christ. The gospels of St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke and St. John are the four books of the Bible which tell us all we know about Jesus. If we want to learn about what Jesus said and did, we have to resort to these books, which we believe were written by **witnesses who saw with their own eyes** or by persons who spoke to these witnesses. Hence, St. Jerome was right when he said, "He who does not know the Scriptures, does not know Christ."

THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

Three of these Gospels (that of St. Matthew, St. Mark and St. Luke) are very

similar and so they are called **Synoptic Gospels**. These synoptic Gospels present Jesus as a preacher, who with his teaching and miracles, announces the kingdom of God on earth.

Once, four photographers wanted to take photos of a famous actor. Each photographer had to choose only one photo of the many taken. The chosen four photos were then placed on a table near each other. Although the photos showed the same person, no one of them resembled the other, as each photographer took the photo from a different angle or from a different perspective. The same thing happened with the Gospels. Each of these four evangelists gives a unique picture of Jesus. They show us the same person of Jesus from a different perspective. Though they are similar, there are also some differences.



According to scholars, the **Gospel of St. Mark**, which was written about the year 70, is the oldest Gospel. It gives an account of Jesus announcing the kingdom of God in Galilee, then going to Jerusalem, where he came into conflict with the Pharisees and the Scribes. His own disciples did not understand the real message of what he was teaching them before his death and resurrection.

The **Gospel of St. Matthew** was written about the year 80 and in it there is the whole story of Jesus presented as the realisation of the prophecies of the Old Testament. The teaching of Jesus can be seen as the realisation and perfection of the law of Moses.

The **Gospel of St. Luke** was written after the year 70 in Greek, which is much better than the Greek used in the other Gospels. The central theme of this Gospel is the mercy of God towards sinners. There are some parables of Jesus in this Gospel which are not present in the other Gospels,

for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The **Gospel of St. John** is the most philosophical Gospel. Its author gives great importance to the divine nature of Jesus, that is, Jesus as God.

From what we have already observed, one can note that the authors of the Gospels did not write the books at the same time that Jesus was living. Like in the case of other books of the Bible, some years passed before the authors decided to write the story of the life of Jesus and the experiences they had when he was still with them. After these events were written and formed part of the Holy Books, the first Christians could listen to the Word of God being read and explained to them in church. We should pass on to others freely and in a convincing way the good news that is relayed to us in church, as well as all that we have received from our ancestors.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD ON EARTH

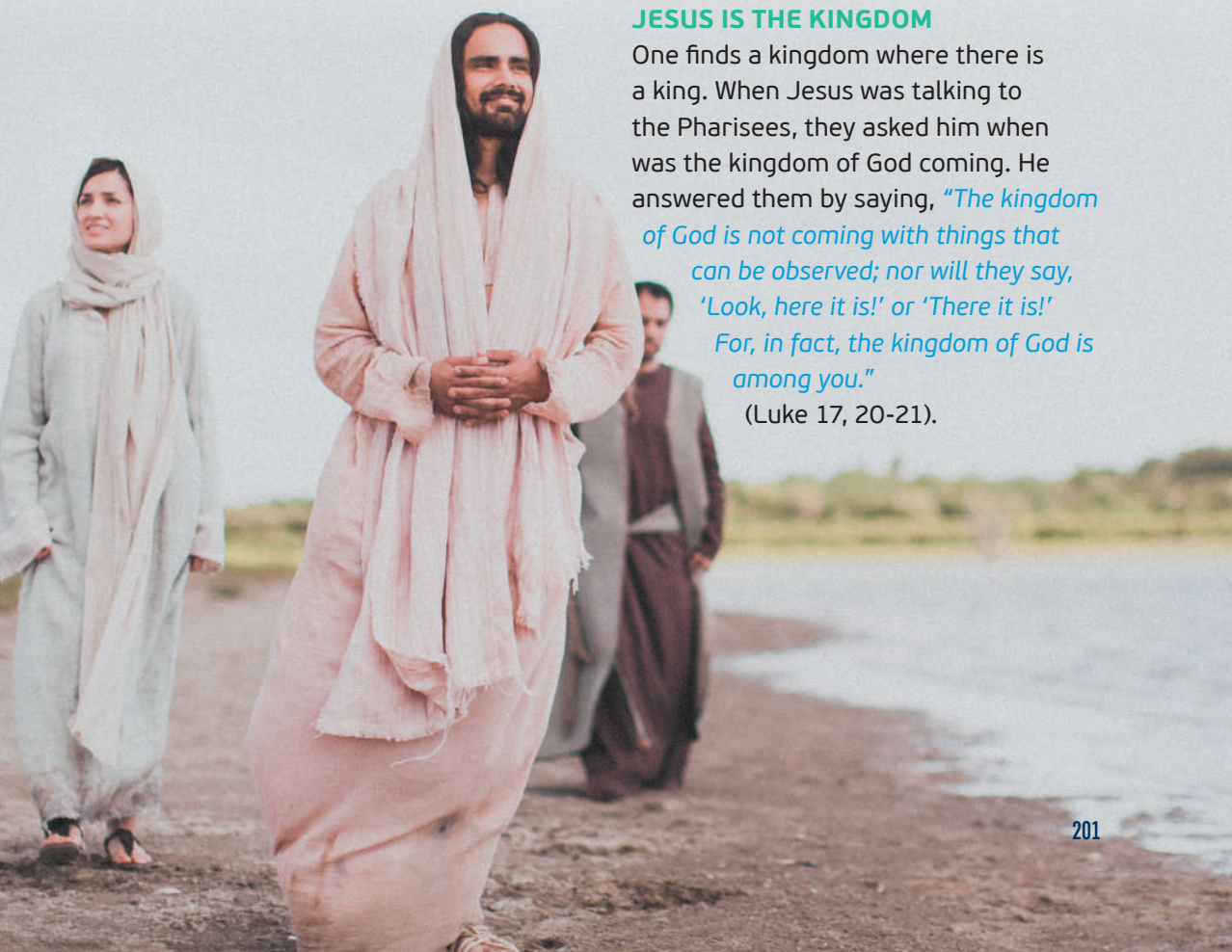
When we talked about the synoptic Gospels, we noted that they present Jesus as a preacher, who with his teaching and miracles proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God on earth. What is this **"kingdom of God on earth"** that Jesus talked about so much? We are going to take a quick look at the New Testament to find the moments which refer to this kingdom, mentioned so many times by Jesus.

JESUS INAUGURATES THE KINGDOM

This kingdom started with the coming of Jesus but not with the pomp and ceremony of the installation of a mighty king; it started with the birth of a crying baby. When Jesus began his work, St. Mark writes, "After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. *'The time has come, and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Good News.'*" (Mark 1,14-15)

JESUS IS THE KINGDOM

One finds a kingdom where there is a king. When Jesus was talking to the Pharisees, they asked him when was the kingdom of God coming. He answered them by saying, *"The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."* (Luke 17, 20-21).



JESUS IS THE SCOPE OF THE KINGDOM

Jesus shows that his scope is to proclaim the kingdom and he describes this mission by saying, *"I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose."* (Luke 4, 43). Thus, Jesus wants the kingdom to be known by everybody and not only by any particular race.

JESUS PROCLAIMS THE KINGDOM

In his preaching, Jesus explains what this kingdom is and invites those listening to him to be part of it. *"Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God."*

(Luke 8, 1) Often, Jesus uses parables to proclaim the kingdom and explain what it is and how it works. These are some of the parables:

- The parable of the hidden treasure (Matthew 13, 44)
- The parable of the pearl (Matthew 13, 45-46)
- The parable of the net (Matthew 13, 47-50)
- The parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13, 31)

- The parable of the yeast (Matthew 13, 32)
- The parable of the farmer who went out to sow (Matthew 13, 8)

JESUS SHEDS LIGHT ON THE KINGDOM

Through his deeds Jesus shows the power of the kingdom and his authority over the prince of darkness. *"But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."* (Luke, 11, 20). Jesus does not proclaim the kingdom only through his words, but he throws light upon it also by his deeds.

JESUS SENDS WORKERS TO THE KINGDOM

Jesus sends his disciples as ambassadors to proclaim the coming of this kingdom. In the Gospel of St. Luke, we find Jesus sending 72 disciples and telling them what to say. *"Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its*

streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. You know this: the kingdom of God has come near.'" (Luke 10, 8-11).

JESUS CHANGES THE MENTALITY ABOUT THE KINGDOM'

The people of Israel were waiting for a messiah to save them from their enemy. That is why they tried to make Jesus their king. *"When Jesus realised that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself."* (John 6, 15). Jesus tried to change the way the Jewish people looked at his kingdom by saying, *"My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were of the world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."* (John 18, 36)

Jesus establishes the kingdom

After inaugurating the kingdom with his teaching and his miracles, Jesus establishes the Kingdom in a definitive way, through his victory over death *by rising from the dead*.

If we were to explain the kingdom of God on the earth in a few words, we could say that every Christian who meets Jesus through his Word in the Scriptures, cannot remain indifferent but will strive, with the help of the Church, to make the name of Jesus hallowed and his will to be done. In the Parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13, 31-32), the Kingdom of God on earth, that is the Church of Jesus, appeared to be small in the eyes of people but, by the power of God, it was going to grow and welcome all those who would accept God's invitation.

How am I going to help so that the kingdom of God on this earth will go on growing?

The Word of God urges us not to content ourselves with things done half-heartedly but, with the grace of God, to live life according to the law of Christ. Through the Church, the Word of God encourages us to commit ourselves everywhere to be witnesses of the values that Jesus brought on this earth, such as the spirit of understanding, of being peaceful, of serving others, of commiseration, of forgiveness, of honesty, of justice, of work well done, of loyalty, of purity and of respect for life.

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

God created man to live in a relationship with others. This means that all of us, whoever we are, **need a community**.

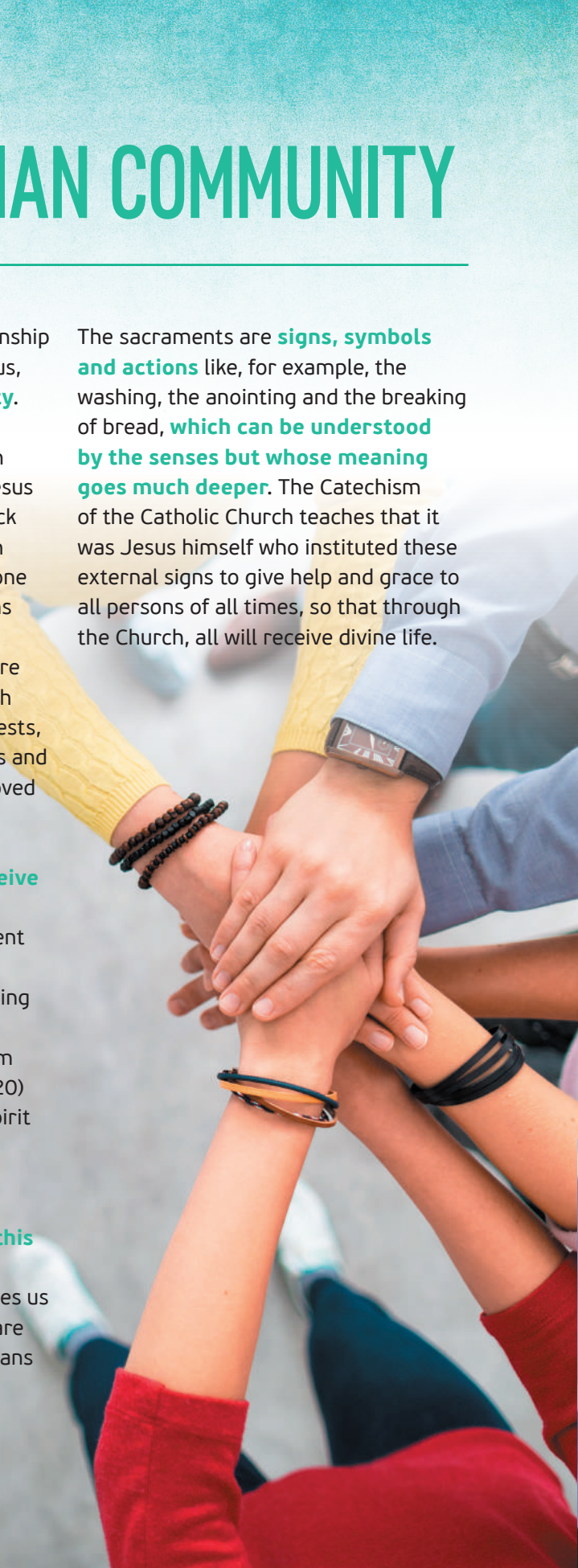
When we come to define a Christian community we can consider that Jesus referred to this community as a flock driven by a shepherd. This Christian community is the **Church**, not the one built of stone, but all of us Christians together, who make up this Church. In this Christian community there are persons who are different from each other but who share common interests, like following the examples of Jesus and loving with the same love that he loved us.

In this Christian community we **receive the Christian values** which Jesus taught. There are persons at different stages of faith in this community, meaning that everyone has something to teach or to learn. "When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18, 20) The Bible shows us that the Holy Spirit is present when those who believe congregate together.

How do we become members of this community?

The sacrament of Baptism introduces us to this Christian community. What are the sacraments which we as Christians receive? How did they originate?

The sacraments are **signs, symbols and actions** like, for example, the washing, the anointing and the breaking of bread, **which can be understood by the senses but whose meaning goes much deeper**. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that it was Jesus himself who instituted these external signs to give help and grace to all persons of all times, so that through the Church, all will receive divine life.



St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that the sacraments have three dimensions: they are signs which **remind us of the passion of Jesus** (that is, we can be victorious over the power of sin and of death), **show us grace** (or true life, even on this earth) and **give us a taste of the glory that is to come** (eternal life). The Council of Trent also teaches that the sacrament is a symbol of something holy, a form we can see of the grace, which cannot be seen; the sacrament has the power to sanctify those who receive it.

Baptism, the Eucharist and Confirmation are the three sacraments which introduce us into, and make us members of this community of believers. These sacraments are known as the **sacraments of initiation**. Pope Paul VI in *Divinae Consortium Naturae* says, "The faithful are born anew by Baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of Confirmation and finally are sustained by the food of eternal life in the Eucharist."

Baptism

Baptism is the first sacrament that we Christians receive. We are born with original sin but through the sacrament of Baptism we are cleansed of it and thereby, receive the great gift of salvation from God. Before going up into heaven, Jesus ordered his apostles, "*Go therefore*

and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28, 19-20). Baptism **introduces us into the Christian community and makes us God's children, brethren of Jesus, temples of the Holy Spirit and heirs of God**. We can receive Baptism only once, as it leaves a character that cannot be removed. The minister of Baptism is normally the bishop, the priest or deacon, but in an emergency everyone can baptise.

The signs used during Baptism are the following:

- Water, symbol both of freedom from original sin and of a new life
- Oil, a symbol of the gift of the Holy Spirit
- Paschal Candle, symbol of the Risen Christ and a sign that the light of faith is being passed on to the baby
- White robe, symbol that the one baptised has put on Christ.

Whoever is baptising, pours water on the baby's head and says, "I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."



The Eucharist

Jesus instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist during the last supper with his apostles, when Jesus commanded them, "Do this in memory of me." In Jewish tradition, the word 'memory' meant that one relives and feels the effects of what one is to remember.

This command of Jesus means that he **wanted to remain present for us** in the Eucharist with his body and blood. The minister of this sacrament is the bishop or the priest. The Eucharist forgives venial sins and guards against the temptations of mortal sins.



Confirmation

On Pentecost day, the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles who were together in the cenacle and they were filled with courage and strength. The Holy Spirit transformed their fears into courage and, from persons who used to listen to the Word of God, they started to proclaim and live it. This sacrament is known as '**Confirmation**' because we would be confirming the faith we received at Baptism, as well as, promising to mature in our Christian life and pass on the faith to others. To help us in all this, the Holy Spirit gives us his **seven gifts**: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord.

Each person, who is going to be confirmed, chooses a godfather or



godmother, who has already received the sacraments of initiation and can help in the spiritual life of the newly confirmed, through prayer and good advice. The minister of the sacrament of Confirmation is the Bishop who lays his hands on the participant and says, "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit."

IT GOES ON BEING BUILT EVEN TODAY!

The Christian community, which we are discussing, is still being built today. The sacraments of initiation are contributing greatly in the building of this community. We can also add another sacrament, which is very important in the life of the Christian, in order to be in a close relationship with God and with the other members of the community. It is the **Sacrament of Confession** or, as it is better known today, **the Sacrament of Reconciliation and of Penance**. Other names given to this sacrament are: sacrament of forgiveness, sacrament of penance, sacrament of mercy and sacrament of repentance.

Jesus showed a special interest in the well-being and salvation of sinners. Many times he stated, "The Son of Man has come to seek and save the 'lost'." God sent his Son to save us from the slavery of sin, before we loved him or gave him anything. Through his passion, death and resurrection, Jesus made us friends again with God. Jesus went through all this as an expression of total obedience to the will of the Father and out of everlasting love for mankind.

Through the Church, Jesus continues to pass on this salvation and our renewed friendship with God. Therefore, Jesus clearly showed the power he bestowed on the apostles on Easter Day, when they were gathered in the cenacle and he told them, *"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*



Therefore, one cannot go and confess in a corner by oneself, because only the Church has the power to forgive. Through the Church, in this sacrament, Christians receive from **God's mercy**, forgiveness of the offences committed against him and, at the same time, they reconcile themselves with the Church.

The Church offers us the first forgiveness in the sacrament of Baptism. In the Creed, we declare, "I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins." The second sacrament is that of Reconciliation which also forgives sins. Even the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick confers forgiveness of sins and it instils in those who receive it great faith in God's mercy.

WHAT IS SIN?

Sin is a lack of love. Sin separates us from God, breaks us up and separates us from other persons and from creation. When we sin, we send God away from our souls and separate from him. To commit sin, one has to do three things:

- a) one is conscious that one is sinning (doing something wrong)**
- b) one wants to do this wrong thing**
- c) one does it**

HOW DO I CONFESS PROPERLY?

For my sins to be forgiven I have to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. As is the case in every sacrament, I have to prepare myself before going to confession. To make a good confession, I must:

- 1) Reflect well on my sins**
- 2) Repent committing them (feel sorry that I have committed them)**
- 3) Make a decision to try not to repeat them**
- 4) Confess all my sins**
- 5) Do the penance given to me by the confessor who is the bishop or a priest.**

Repentance does not end with the confession but must be lived in a way that through life, we are ready to forgive as we have been forgiven. What does Jesus expect from us before our confession? We have to understand with whom we are going to meet and what we are going to tell him; we have to be humble, repentant of our past and promise to be better in the future, seek to re-unite with others, be ready to forgive those who have done us wrong and look for a priest with whom we can open our hearts.

There are various terms related to this sacrament, among which is the word **reconciliation**, which means 'become friends again'.



The priest gives us **absolution**, which means 'to make free and loose from sin'. **The Satisfaction or penance** is a sacrifice or a short prayer which the priest gives us after confession, to make us show by deed that we are sorry. The **confessor** is the minister of the sacrament, the priest who is hearing the confession. The word **repentance** means that we are sorry about what we have done and this will bring a change in our heart.

VENIAL SIN AND MORTAL SIN

We hear talk of 'venial and 'mortal sin'. What do these terms mean? What is the difference between them? A mortal sin is **a grave action against the love of God**. To commit a mortal sin :

- The matter must be grave (for example: theft)
- One knows what one is doing (one knows and is aware that one is doing wrong)
- One commits sin because one freely wants to (without being forced by anyone).

On the other hand, venial sin is an **action against the love of God but is less grave**. Christians are to confess all mortal sins and pray for help to overcome even venial sins. Only Jesus Christ can save us from sin. He has saved us by taking on himself the burden of our sins and dying for us by shedding his blood to expiate for our misdeeds. *"Everone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name"* (Acts 10, 43) Try to find some time in which you and Jesus talk to each other in silence. Tell him that you are sorry for offending him with your sins and in the future you will not do so again. Thank him for suffering for you

so that you can live a good life.

THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK

Jesus paid great attention to the sick and he healed them. As with every other sacrament, this sacrament was instituted by Jesus himself. We find a reference to this sacrament in the letter of St James: *"Are any among the sick? They should call for the elders of the Church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven."* (James 5, 14-15).

Persons who are sick are sad and frightened but, if they learn to associate themselves with the suffering of Jesus, they will find that this will be of benefit to them and to the Church. The Anointing of the Sick is administered as a strong measure of help, for both the soul and the body. Those who receive this sacrament should make an act of faith in Jesus and, if possible, also an act of contrition for their sins. The minister of the Anointing of the Sick is the bishop or the priest.

When received, these sacraments help us to build the Christian community. We need to keep in mind that we have an important mission to accomplish, that of serving; we need also to keep in mind that every measure, we take, is always activated by love for Jesus. By doing this, we will be helping to change our community and the world in which we live. We will be: listening to friends who have problems at home, helping friends who are bullied, being positive and spreading a message of forgiveness instead of hate. Above all, we will not feel uncomfortable to say that we hear Sunday mass or that we form part of a Christian community. At such moments, we will be carrying on with the mission of Jesus, that of continuing to build the Christian community on this earth. **209**

THE EUCHARIST

The central focus of the Eucharist is found in the 'last supper' Jesus had with his apostles before being arrested and crucified. The last supper was held at the holiest time for the Jews, a time when they commemorated God's delivery of their ancestors from the killing of the first born children of the Egyptians. Jesus made known to his apostles the place where he wanted them to prepare for this meal. It was during this supper that Jesus took off his cloak, put on an apron and washed the apostles' feet to show them that the greatest among them was the one who had to serve others. It was also during this meal that Jesus told Peter that he would betray him three times before the cock crowed and it was at this time that Jesus told his apostles that one of them was going to betray him.

If we reflect well on the words of Jesus during the last supper, we will realise how **important** this supper was to him. "I have greatly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." And, *"While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, he broke it and said, 'Take, this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'"* (Mark 14, 22-25). Then he said to them, *"Do this in memory of me."*





THE LAST SUPPER

Many of the prophecies were being realised in the person of Jesus. In this meal, Jesus was looking at the future, that which was yet to come. He linked that **supper with his death on the cross**, a death in which he gave us his body and blood. He also looked back at what had happened in Egypt and at the pact that had been sealed on Mount Sinai. He connected his passage from death to life with all the central events of the story of the people of God.

In Egypt, the Jews killed the lamb and sprinkled their doors with its blood, which saved them from the punishment of the death of their firstborn. In the last supper, Jesus showed that he was the lamb who, through his death and the shedding of his blood, **was giving himself to us to save us** from the slavery of sin. St. John also says that Jesus wanted to take the place of the lamb of the Easter meal, when he says that Jesus died at the same time that the Easter lamb was being killed in the temple: *"The soldiers therefore came*

and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: 'Not one of his bones will be broken.'" (John 19, 32-36) John the Baptist had also shown him as *'the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world.'* (John 1, 29)

Through his words when sharing the wine, Jesus wanted to declare that he was sealing the new covenant with his own blood. In the wine he was giving to the apostles, after it was changed into his blood, Jesus was taking the place of the blood which had sealed the great covenant at Mount Sinai (Ezekiel 24). What Jesus accomplished in the last supper was the **culmination and fulfilment of the story of Salvation.**

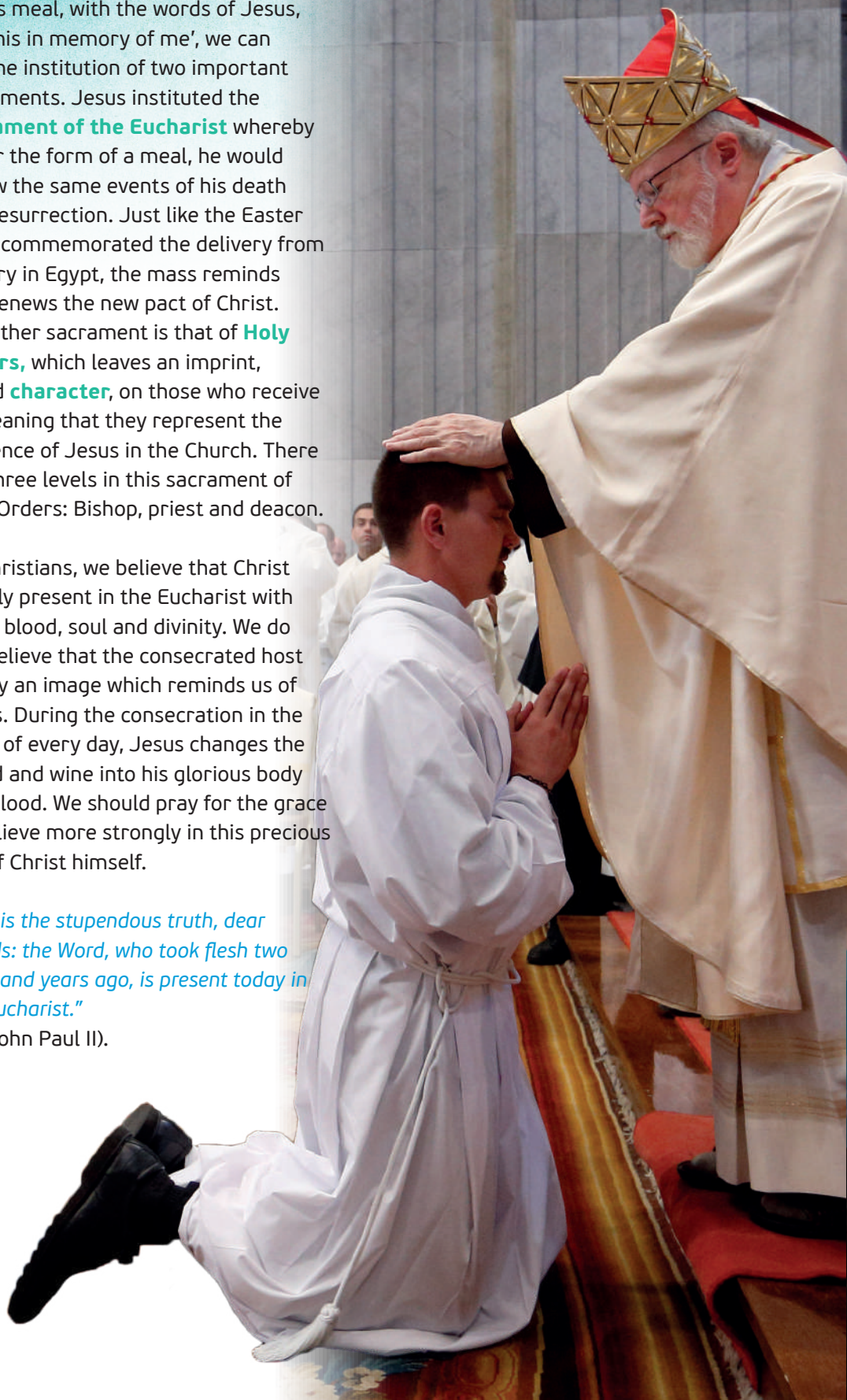
THE MEAL AND THE SACRAMENTS

In this meal, with the words of Jesus, 'Do this in memory of me', we can see the institution of two important sacraments. Jesus instituted the **sacrament of the Eucharist** whereby under the form of a meal, he would renew the same events of his death and resurrection. Just like the Easter meal commemorated the delivery from slavery in Egypt, the mass reminds and renews the new pact of Christ. The other sacrament is that of **Holy Orders**, which leaves an imprint, called **character**, on those who receive it, meaning that they represent the presence of Jesus in the Church. There are three levels in this sacrament of Holy Orders: Bishop, priest and deacon.

As Christians, we believe that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist with body, blood, soul and divinity. We do not believe that the consecrated host is only an image which reminds us of Jesus. During the consecration in the mass of every day, Jesus changes the bread and wine into his glorious body and blood. We should pray for the grace to believe more strongly in this precious gift of Christ himself.

"This is the stupendous truth, dear friends: the Word, who took flesh two thousand years ago, is present today in the Eucharist."

(St. John Paul II).



THE DAY OF THE LORD

St. Justin, who was martyred in the year 165 AD, bears witness to how the early Christians celebrated the Eucharist on the day of the sun, in English known as Sun—Day. The early Christians considered Jesus as the sun that would light their lives and, hence, chose this day. They used to meet on the **first day of the week**. In the Apostolic letter *Dies Domini*, Pope John Paul II says that “*Sunday is the day when Jesus rose from the dead.*” That is why the apostles chose Sunday, instead of Saturday, which was the holy day of the Jews, to celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Christians are obliged to keep this day as a day of rest from daily work; They should look on it as a day of joy, a day of togetherness with their family and others and a day dedicated to God.

If we take a look at the first years of the Church, we notice that the sections of the mass which are present today, were also present at that time. Let us examine the Apology of St. Justin, where he talks about what took place when the early Christians met. Then, we review the sections of the present mass.



"On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities and in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits; then when the reader has ceased, the presider verbally instructs and exhorts to the imitation of these good things

Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the presider in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability and the people assent, saying Amen, and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those that are absent a portion is sent by the deacon.

And they who are well to do, and willing, give

what each thinks fit, and what is collected is deposited with the presider, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. For he was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to his apostles and disciples, he taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration."

The Eucharistic celebration, or as we know it today, mass, has two great sections:

a) The Liturgy of the Word

b) The Liturgy of the Eucharist

The beginning

- Opening hymn
- Prayer for forgiveness, which is also called Penitential Act (we ask for God's forgiveness)
- The Glory
- The Collect

The Liturgy of the Word

- The First Reading (generally taken from the Old Testament)
- Responsorial Psalm
- The Second Reading (generally taken from the Letters of the Apostles or from the New Testament, excluding the Gospel)
- The Gospel
- The Homily (an explanation of the reading, also called the sermon)

- The Creed or the renewal of the Baptismal promises
- Prayers of intercession (known also as prayers of the faithful)

The Liturgy of the Eucharist

- The Offertory
- The Eucharistic prayer, which includes what takes place between the Preface and the Doxology
- The Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy)
- The Consecration (the moment when the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ)
- The Acclamation
- Doxology (Through Him, with Him, in Him...)
- The Our Father
- The Sign of Peace
- The Lamb of God
- Communion
- Thanksgiving

tells us, "Go in the peace of Christ!"

This directive implies that in our life we should be witnesses of Jesus by loving each other and giving a good example to others through the power of the Eucharist.

How can we, as Christians, accomplish in practice the directive given to us by the priest?

First and foremost, we should know that the word 'Eucharist' is derived from the Greek language and means to thank and also to glorify. Therefore, our comportment as Christians, should be one of thanksgiving and praise to God for all that he does for us during our daily lives. As much as possible, we should do what God wants from us and offer ourselves in the service of others.

How beautiful is this Eucharistic Song, which we may have heard sung in church but did not take note of the words. We are to pray to our Lord so that, just as he offered himself for all of us on the cross and remained with us in the sacrament of the Eucharist, we will also give ourselves to him, to be used as instruments for the good of others. By doing this, we will ourselves become the Eucharist for all those that we meet in our lives.

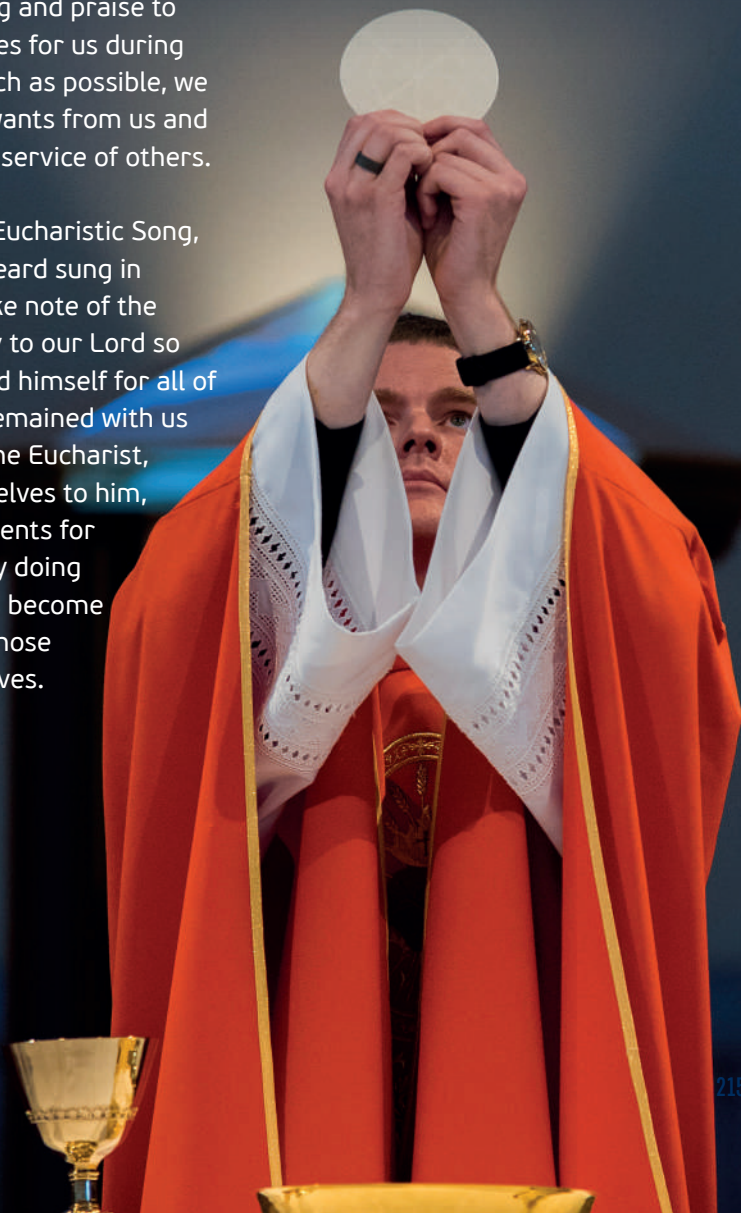
TO BECOME THE EUCHARIST

How much you loved me, Lord, how much you loved me!
for me you chose to become the Eucharist.

How much you loved me, Lord, how much you loved me!
for me you graciously chose to become the Eucharist.

Take me in your hands, Lord, take me in your hands.
O Jesus, bless me and share me with those around me.
Take me in your hands, Lord, take me in your hands.
O Jesus, bless me and share me with those around me.

O dear Jesus, I pray you'll always be with me
To become the Eucharist for my brothers!
O dear Jesus, I pray you'll always be with me
To become the Eucharist for my brothers!



FOR BETTER AND FOR WORSE

"We believe in the power of love."

Love is able to change everything. If we Christians believe that man was created by God, then our principal and natural call is to love. God created man in God's own image.

Marriage is that sacrament by which a baptised man and woman are united together for life through the vows they make to each other to celebrate **their love for each other**. Through this sacrament God gives his grace to the couple to accomplish their duties towards each other and bring up their children.

In the Greek culture there existed three words associated with love: *Eros*, *Philia* and *Agape*. These three terms are going to be explained in more detail in the theme "Sexuality and relationships of love in life".

THE CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

The Christian marriage should be based on **agape** and married persons should fashion their love like that of **Christ**. It is the presence of Christ in the life of Christian married persons that makes their marriage different from a non-sacramental marriage. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that the union of marriage "has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament." (CCC, 1601)



The relationship of Christ with his Church is present in the sacramental marriage and this gives marriage its **Christian character**. St. Paul confirms this when he refers to marriage as 'mysterion', a word which can be translated as 'sacrament'.

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery and I am applying it to Christ and the Church"
(Ephesians 5, 31-32)

THE RITE OF MARRIAGE AND ITS MEANING

Mario and Maria had been engaged for some time and there came a moment when they decided to receive the Christian sacrament of marriage. They understood that they had to prepare themselves well for this important step, just as they would do to receive any other sacrament. During the preparation meetings they realised that they **would be administering the sacrament of marriage to each other**. This means that during the ceremony, the priest is only there as a representative and witness of the Church and blesses their marriage in its name. So, the ministers of the sacrament of marriage are the spouses themselves.

When the moment of the marriage rite arrived, the priest began by saying these words to the couple:

"You have come together into the house of the Church so that in the presence of the Church's minister and the community, your intention to enter into marriage

may be strengthened by the Lord with a special seal. Christ abundantly blesses the love that binds you. Through a special sacrament, he enriches and strengthens those he has already consecrated by Holy Baptism so that they may have strength to be faithful to each other forever and assume all the responsibilities of married life."

He then asked them three questions: whether they had come without any coercion and out of their own free will, whether they were ready to love and honour each other all their life and also whether they would accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church. Now was the time for the couple to give their **consent**.

While the spouses held together their right hands, they said to each other, "I, Mario/Maria take you Maria/Mario to be my wife/husband. By the grace of Jesus Christ, I promise to be faithful to you, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love you and honour you all the days of my life."

The priest then held the couple's hands and said, "May the Lord in his kindness strengthen the consent you have declared before the Church and graciously bring to fulfilment his blessings within you. What God has joined, let no man put asunder."

The priest then blessed the rings "so that those who wear them may remain entirely faithful to each other, abide in peace and in God's will and live always in mutual charity."

Each spouse took a ring and, while putting it on the other's finger, said, "Maria/Mario, receive this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

The words which the spouses say to each other explain the aims and the qualities of every marriage. The presence of Christ in a Christian marriage does not change these aims but it strengthens them.

THE AIMS OF MARRIAGE

The aims of marriage are two: **the unity of life and the education of children**. These two aims should not be separated but should be considered as one aim: the welfare and unity of the married couple and the conception of children. These two aims together make us partners with God, who is the only Lord of life.

THE QUALITIES OF MARRIAGE ARE THREE

Indissolubility

"Till death do us part." Marriage should not be dissolved by divorce. The couple are married for life. (See Mark 10, 2-9)

Fidelity

"I give you my pledge that I will be faithful to you." The couple should not be unfaithful to each other or give themselves to others. Infidelity towards each other is adultery. (See Matthew 5, 27-28)

Unity

Marriage is between one man and one woman.

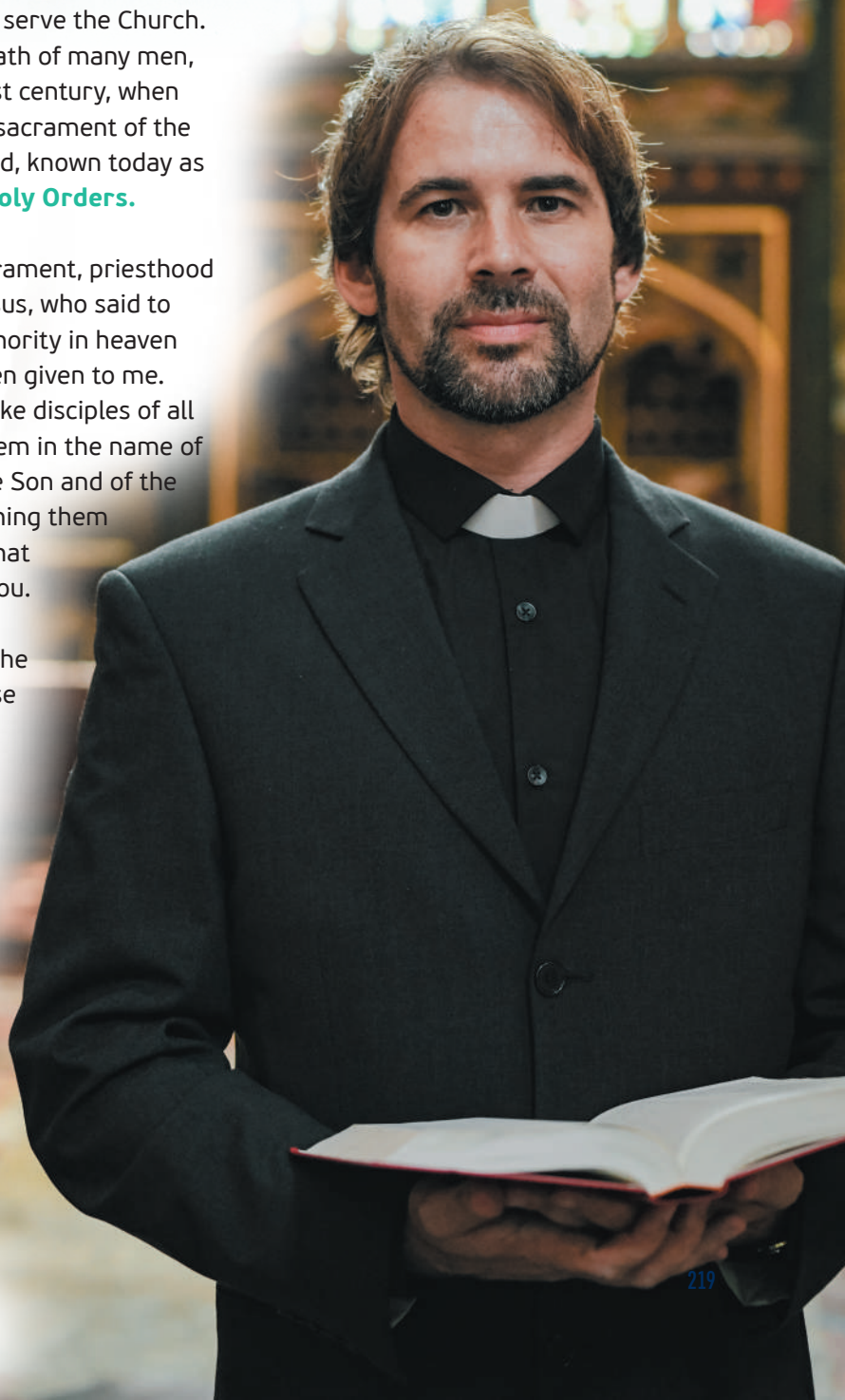
This sacrament is of benefit not only to the individuals who receive it but to the whole community. In one of his homilies, Pope Francis states that, "Marriage is a sacrament not only for the bride and groom, but for the entire Catholic Church, because it proclaims that 'love is possible'." (25 May 2018, Domus Sanctae Marthae).



BEING CALLED

The man we see on the altar when we go to church is a **priest** or, as we call him, a **Father**. This individual has been called by the Lord to serve the Church. He is following the path of many men, going back to the first century, when Jesus instituted the sacrament of the ministerial priesthood, known today as the **Sacrament of Holy Orders**.

Like every other sacrament, priesthood was instituted by Jesus, who said to his apostles, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, till the end of the age." These apostles were to be the first Bishops of the Church.



HOLY ORDERS

Besides being a sacrament, Holy Orders is also a **vocation**, which is an intrinsic call from God to follow him and serve him in a total way. Just as Jesus washed the feet of the apostles in the last supper, so do priests follow Jesus's example to serve the Church and imitate him to the point of acting in the **person of Christ** (*in persona Christi*).

The idea of a mediator between man and God can also be seen in the Old Testament, where we read about priests in the temple. They were responsible for the sacrifices that were offered to God and also performed other liturgical services.

TO BECOME A PRIEST

To become a priest, one must be baptised, have received the Sacrament

of Confirmation, and after feeling and accepting God's call, one spends years of preparation at the seminary. Later, one is ordained by the Bishop, thereby receiving this sacrament. Just as Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on the apostles, likewise, the Holy Spirit changes the soul of that young man who is being ordained a priest. It is the same change that occurs at Baptism and Confirmation and leaves a **mark in the soul**. When one is ordained a priest, one remains a priest for ever.

During the ordination mass, the Bishop lays his hands on the candidate, who is being ordained a priest. At the moment the Bishop says the words of ordination, the Holy Spirit seals the soul of that man. There are **three grades** of ordination that one can receive: diaconal, priestly or episcopal. Holy oil is always used during an ordination.





THE DEACON

The work of deacons has always been to **help** the Church, by providing help to priests in their pastoral work. They cannot celebrate mass or give the sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick. On the other hand they can baptise, assist during the rite of marriage and offer their service during mass.

PRIESTS AND BISHOPS

The sacrament of Holy Orders has to be lived in everyday life. The life of a priest is one **of service**; that is why a priest in the Latin Rite does not marry. Only priests can celebrate mass and only priests can forgive sins. These faculties can be attained in the name of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of God the Father. The role of priests is unique and optimal in God's plan of salvation. **The Bishops are the**

successors of the apostles while the Pope is the successor of the Head of the Apostles, St. Peter.

CELIBACY

One who does not marry because of the Kingdom of God, as in the case of a priest, is called a celibate. **Celibacy** is embraced not only by priests but also by monks, nuns, the members of the Society of Catholic Doctrine (MUSEUM) and others. Celibacy and virginity are a choice of love, too, although different from that of marriage. Celibacy is a call from God to some persons. It is a gift of grace, something that persons do not normally experience. It is also a way of keeping the soul free and eager for a purer and more generous love. Celibacy is an effort of love towards the building of the kingdom of Christ among people and is a sign of the Kingdom of Heaven.



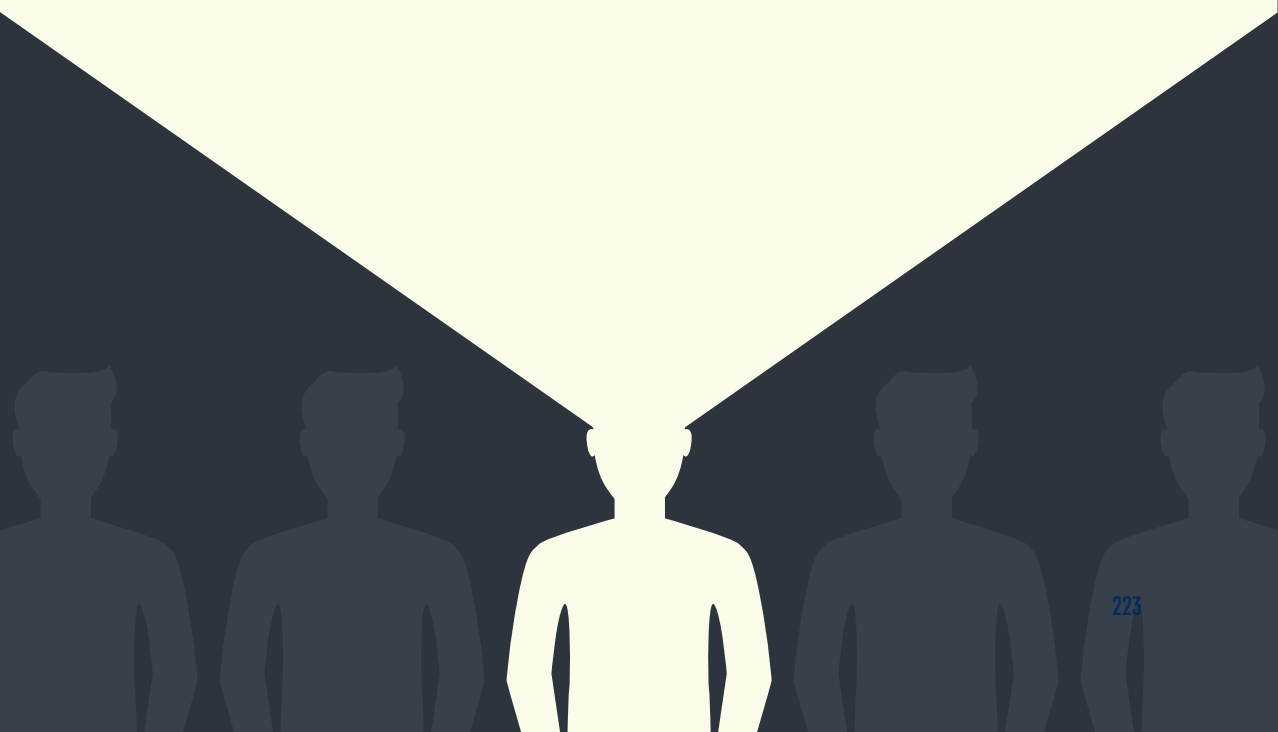
Even the love of those who do not marry is the mirror of the love with which Christ loves the Church. Priests, monks, nuns, members of the Society of Catholic Doctrine and others offer God the capacity of marrying and forming a family. They deny themselves this ability and offer it to God, because they believe that God will repay their generosity by helping them to serve him with joy through serving others, in whom they see God. "Just as you did to one of the

least of those who are members of my family, you did it to me."

With these already mentioned, we include a number of lay persons, who do not marry because they have the same opinion and they give a great contribution as catechists, nurses, teachers, animators in Church societies and pastoral operators. Sometimes, these spend part of their lives as missionaries in mission lands.

CHAPTER TEN

ROLE MODELS



I ADMIRE THEM

As human beings and as Christians, we understand and believe that every person has some sort of talent. The word **talent** meant a type of measure which was exchanged for money at the time of the Greeks. However, in time, the word came to mean a particular ability, physical or mental, which a person likes to do.

Generally, the more one likes doing something, the more one spends time practising it, with the result that one automatically becomes more capable at it. The process becomes a cycle, because on realising that one has become so adept, then one derives more satisfaction, which drives one to practise more.

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

Jesus also spoke about this in the parable of the talents: *"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time, the master of these slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent came forward saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping what you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap*

where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'" (Matthew 25, 14-29)

Jesus made it clear that each person has been gifted with a skill or a talent, be it in a small way or in a more generous way. In this parable of the talents, Jesus emphasises that a person must first and foremost:

- **believe** that he or she has a talent,
- **discover** what the talent is,
- take steps to **develop** this talent for the good of the person and that of others.

IDOLS

It is true that some have extraordinary talents, which appear extraordinary to certain persons but are not much appreciated by others. Persons coming from the world of the cinema, sports or music are normally admired for their talent. There are others who attract attention by their beauty rather than by their talent. We have the tendency to hold these persons as idols, especially if they shine in an area of life we are interested in.

It could be that these 'idols', besides being admired, cause certain persons to desire to imitate them; this desire may be just a wish but it may be more insistent. Individuals may yearn to be talented like them, to be successful and

famous or rich like them; maybe even idols like them.

... TEACHING BY EXAMPLE

A Maltese proverb says that people may be motivated by hearing a speech but they are pushed into action by seeing an exemplary deed. In the case of idols, it is what they say and also what they do that have an impact on children or youths who admire them. It is man's nature to be tempted by, as well as to imitate others; so, these idols are in duty bound to behave decently, simply because they are **role models**; that is, they influence the behaviour of others.

BALANCE

There is nothing wrong for one to admire the talents of other persons, more so if these talented persons encourage their admirers to enhance their talents. But, normally, in life one must find a balance and keep control over one's emotions. There have been instances, for example, when individuals have even resorted to plastic surgery to appear like the persons they admire.

When self control is not exercised, it may result in the lack of respect for the private life of the one being admired. An exaggerated interest in the **private life** of an individual is neither necessary nor healthy, both for the admirer and for the one being admired. Being famous does not mean that the person is not entitled to being treated as a person. The argument, that this is the price these persons have to pay because they are famous, is not valid. This argument transforms these famous persons to objects, existing only for the satisfaction of the public, who is consistently probing their private lives and gossiping about them

Respect for the individual does not extend only to the emarginated but also to those who, in the eyes of people, are loved and well known.



A COMMUNITY IS BORN

NAZARETH

A little more than two thousand years ago, in an obscure village in Palestine, going by the name of Nazareth, was born and lived a person, who has been ever since a great inspiration to great millions of persons. He is a special person - God and human - who carries the name of that village, which practically is not mentioned anywhere else – **Jesus of Nazareth** or, as he was known, the Nazarene.

In those days, there were only about one hundred families in Nazareth. They were all farmers, poor and illiterate, earning their living from what they could produce with the help of the animals,

which each family possessed. The home consisted usually of two rooms, one for the persons living there and the other for their animals. The village had no roads, no particular buildings. It is no wonder that at the beginning of St. John's gospel we find the following about the village,

'The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me". Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"'

(John 1, 43-46).





IS THIS THE MESSIAH?

From then onwards, Jesus began to acquire many followers, as the idea of him being the **Messiah** - which means the "Anointed" - caught on. This was nothing new, for before him and even after him, there many others who gave themselves this title, with the scope of leading the Jewish people in a rebellion to free themselves from the harsh rule of the Roman Empire, which had been existing for many years.

Jesus knew where this title of being the Messiah or a king would lead him. It was no secret that, though the Jewish leaders were not pleased with the disparaging words Jesus used when referring to them, the Romans were really vexed with the rebellions started by persons like him. Finally, the governor Pontius Pilate took no chances and decided to get rid of him

by condemning him to the most cruel death invented by man, crucifixion, after subjecting him to beatings, which left him nearly half dead. His dearh was meant to give a lesson and a warning at the same time – think twice before opposing Rome.

RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD

Death on the cross was no surprise for those who made themselves kings or led rebellions against Rome. Yet, what happened afterwards was surely not expected. When other 'messiahs' died, everything died with them. But, history has shown that in the case of the Nazarene, **everything was going to begin.**

As is to be expected, the resurrection from the dead of a person, coming from a simple village, out of which nothing good can come, has been and still is a



hotly discussed subject. There are many theories and arguments about whether this actually happened. Although the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a **question of faith**, it does not follow that we should not try to find out the facts surrounding this event which changed the history of the world.

When faced with the account of the resurrection from the dead of a person, something which goes against all sense and logic, it is the easy way out to say that it is an invented story and, consequently, even a great lie. However, in this story there is a crucial point that must not be forgotten. Gradually and one after another, all those who attested with certainty the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, were arrested, beaten, tortured and even killed.

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

The book of the Acts of the Apostles is a detailed account of what the apostles and other disciples went through **after the resurrection of Jesus**. It was written between the years 80 and 90 AD by the same author of the Gospel of St. Luke. It is considered as the second part of this gospel.

THE FIRST CHAPTER

The book is addressed to a certain Theophilus, who probably was a Roman citizen; it is an annex to what the author calls 'my first account', that is, the gospel of St. Luke himself. It begins at once with the appearances of Jesus that occurred after the discovery of the empty tomb. *'After the suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.'* (Acts 1,3)

Then the book continues with the accounts of the **ascension of Jesus to heaven** and the selection of Matthias to take the place of Judas, who had hanged himself after betraying Jesus.

However, what is most important in this chapter is what the author states about the promise which Jesus made to his apostles, that they would **receive the Holy Spirit**. Indeed, St. Luke attributes the strength, which the apostles showed in spreading the name of Jesus worldwide, to the coming of the Holy Spirit.

IN THE FIRST CENTURY

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

THE SECOND CHAPTER

In the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, there is the account of the coming of the Holy Spirit and of how the apostles **overcame the fear** that had taken possession of them after the death of Jesus.

PENTECOST – A JEWISH FEAST

The account starts by saying that *“the day of Pentecost had come.”* (Acts 2,1) This shows that the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles on the day that the Jews celebrated one of the three most important feasts in their calendar. This feast, called the **Shavuot**, commemorated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai and even signified a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. The word ‘Shavuot’ means ‘weeks’, as it occurred seven weeks after Easter, in which the Jews celebrated their exodus or departure from Egypt. The Greek word for ‘Shavuot’ is ‘Pentecost’, which means fifty days.

THE SITUATION OF THE TWELVE

Most probably, while commemorating this Jewish feast, the Apostles were thinking about what had recently happened to Jesus, their companion and teacher. Their conversation still concentrated on what had happened and about their own future. On the one hand they were convinced that Jesus, whom they had seen more than once and who had talked and eaten with





them, had risen from the dead. On the other hand, they realised that if they spoke about the resurrection of Jesus they would have to face two options: either they would either be taken for fools and made fun of or if they were believed, the Jewish and Roman authorities would consider them a threat, like they had considered Jesus, and they would be killed just like he was.

THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

With the coming of the Holy Spirit the Apostles' doubts vanished. While they were gathered together three things happened:

1. "They heard what **sounded like a powerful wind** from heaven, the noise of which filled the entire house in which they were sitting",
2. "Something appeared to them that seemed like **tongues of fire** which separated and proceeded to rest on the head of each of them",
3. "... they began **to speak in foreign languages** as the Spirit gave them the gift of speech." (Acts 2, 2-4).

These three events are very important as they help us understand a little bit better who the Holy Spirit is.

1. The strong wind means power, a **power** which is very strong, despite the fact that it is invisible, a power attributed to the Holy Spirit. The Jewish word '**ruah**' is used to mean 'wind' as well as 'spirit'. Incidentally, it is a word which is very similar to the Maltese words '**riħ**' and '**ruħ**', meaning 'wind' and 'soul'.
2. Fire is also a symbol of **power** and the tongues of fire may mean that this power can spread strongly like fire, by word of mouth.
3. The passage says that people coming from various places, speaking different languages, who at the time were present when the Apostles came out to preach, **could understand what the Apostles were saying**.

The author wanted to pass on the powerful message that the news of the death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as his teaching appeal not only to the Jews but also to the peoples of all nations in the world.

THE FIRST CHRISTIANS

The first moving speech of Peter again shows that the resurrection of Jesus was the reason of all that the Apostles were planning to do and go through. It was a speech which appealed earnestly to those who heard it. (Acts 2.37)

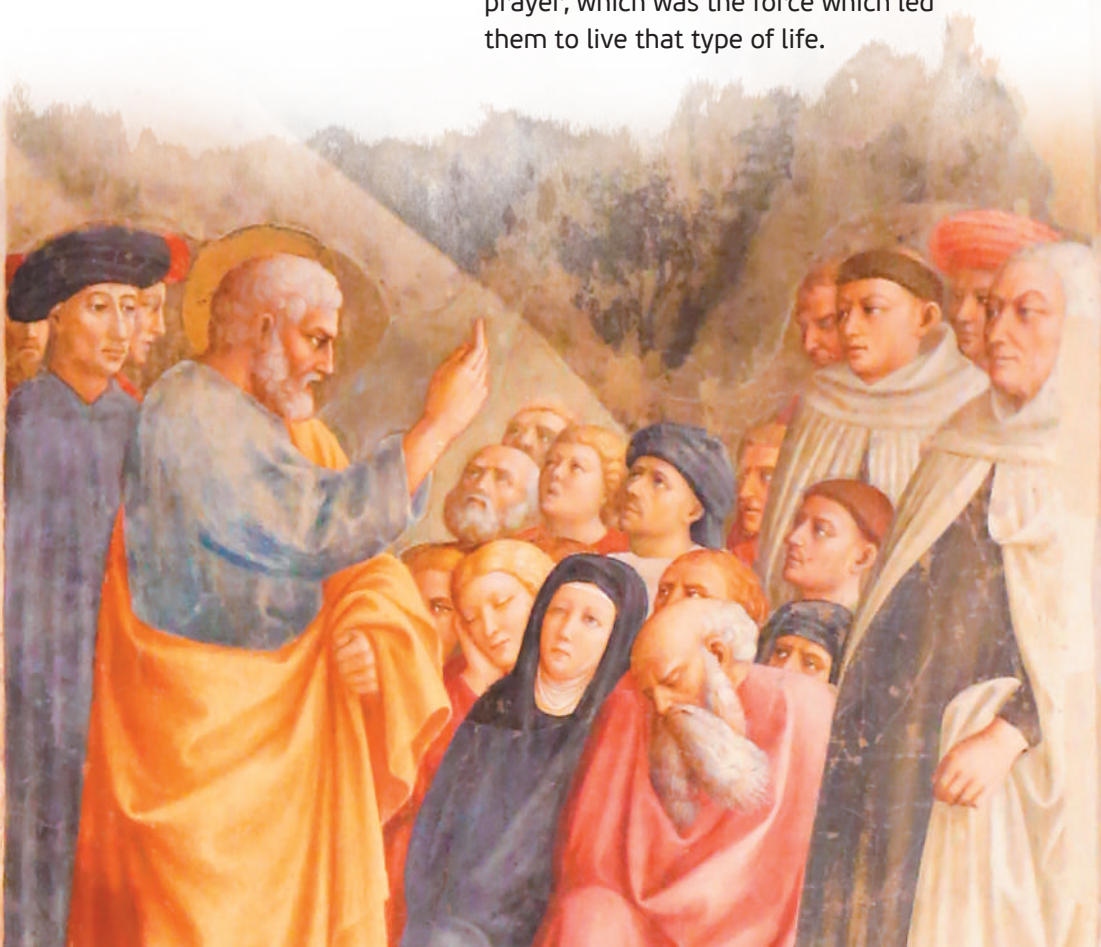
This account in the "Acts of the Apostles" states that on that day, about three thousand persons were baptised. Peter associated these three things with baptism:

- **feeling remorse or repentance for past actions or sins**
- **the remission of sins**
- **the gift of the Holy Spirit**

The change of attitude of those baptised was radical as it involved not only the heart and soul of these early Christians but even the way they lived together.

"All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people" (Acts 2, 44-47).

Thus, the **commitment** of the Christian towards those in need is evident from the very beginning. Moreover, this passage shows the joy and positivity of the first Christians, a true joy that comes not from the acquisition of things but from what one is able to give, as is affirmed by those who go to live and work among the poor. It is clearly evident from this short passage that there was a sense of celebration in what the early Christians did, including prayer, which was the force which led them to live that type of life.



CHRIST IN OTHERS

Over the years, those who believed in the resurrection of Jesus, who were baptised and who wanted to embrace the evangelical values, grew in number. However, the 'honeymoon' period of the early Christians soon passed as, with the increase in number of believers, there was also an increase in imperfections and disagreements. Moreover, all those who called themselves disciples of Christ started being persecuted.

The Church continued to consider as top priority those qualities which the first Christians valued, namely, unity in prayer and in the Eucharist, as well as solidarity with the poor. It still did this, despite the fact that, at times, the leaders themselves of the Church were not poor or showed love towards the poor.

THE PARABLE OF THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

The aim and the teachings of Jesus were clear, as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus shows:

"There was a rich man dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.'"

(Luke 16, 19-25)



The most important message in this parable is that Jesus did not say that the rich man went to hell just because he was rich. Undoubtedly, there are rich persons who not only are good persons but also give away much to others. However, the rich man in the parable saw the poor man near him and **chose to leave Lazarus in poverty and sickness**, even though he had more than enough means.

PERSONS WHO EMBRACED POVERTY

From time to time, within the Church, there appeared persons, who with their words and deeds, reminded people of this important principle in the teaching of the gospels. They went back to what is called the 'root' of the gospels. We know some of them because they became great and popular saints, like: **St. Anthony of Padova, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Nicholas of Bari and St. Theresa of Calcutta**. Certainly, there are **thousands of others who**

are not so well known or who have not been much mentioned. James Barnet is one such person, who made an interesting choice in his life; he gave away all his possessions and went to live in poverty with the homeless.

Despite adverse criticism, one can say that the Church is at the forefront, where charity and solidarity with those in need are concerned. This, it tries to do everywhere in the world. An article in the newspaper Catholic Herald gives an idea of the commitment of the Church on a world basis, a commitment that is not always recorded precisely. These figures speak for themselves: the Church runs 140,000 schools, 10,000 orphanages and 5,000 hospitals. And this is just a starter. It is difficult to calculate the various incentives organised by individual parishes around the world to help the poor and the sick.





Pope Francis endorsed this important mission of the Church by establishing the **World Day of the Poor** for the first time, on November 19 2017 with the theme 'Let us love not with words

but with deeds'. A week before, the poor living in the vicinity of the Vatican were given free meals and free medical services. The following is an excerpt from the Pope's speech on November 19, 2017:

"Being near to the poor in our midst will touch our lives. It will remind us of what really counts: loving God and our neighbour. Only this lasts for ever; everything else passes away. What we invest in love remains; the rest vanishes. Today we might ask ourselves, 'What counts for me in life? Where am I making my investments? In fleeting riches with which the world is never satisfied, or in the wealth bestowed by God, which leads to eternal life? This is the choice before us: to live in order to gain things on earth or to give things away in order to gain heaven.'"



IN THE FACE OF DEATH

As we have seen in this chapter, one of the greatest proofs of the existence of Jesus and of his resurrection was the change in the Apostles. The men Jesus chose to be Apostles were simple persons who, according to the gospels, often did not understand Jesus, doubted their faith, were presumptuous and, at the same time, cowards.

The resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit fifty days later made these eleven men and some others like them, ready to die rather than deny the fact that they had seen with their own eyes the risen Christ. These persons are called **martyrs**, a word which means **witnesses**. The first of these martyrs was Stephen, one of the seven deacons chosen by the Apostles to distribute the common goods, an activity which was a priority with the first Christians. The Acts of

the Apostles recounts the ordeal of St. Stephen.

"Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their coats at the foot of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen he prayed, 'Lord Jesus receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died." (Acts 7, 58-60)

It is believed that all the Apostles, with the exception of John, died as martyrs. **The young man named Saul**, was one of the Pharisees who wanted to exterminate the Jews. Later, he became the man who travelled widely to spread the word of Jesus. He was none other than **St. Paul**, who, himself eventually died as a martyr.





THE CHURCH PERSECUTED UP TO THIS DAY

It was not only the Jews who looked upon the followers of Jesus as a religious threat, but also the Romans who felt threatened by the increasing number of Christians. One emperor after another tried to get rid of these Christians. However, the **persecution** of Christians has not ended. It has continued over the years, in different places in the world, even up to today.

In 2017, the news agency Foxnews reported that Christians are the most persecuted group around the world, with a total of 90,000 being killed in 2016 and 600 million denied the liberty of practising their religion. Robert Nicholson, the person, who prepared this report and spoke to Foxnews, stated:

"There are places in the world where it is very dangerous to choose to be a Christian. Those, who think that Christianity is the religion of the mighty, need to realise that in many places it is the religion of those who are weak. Actually, whoever is not strong should be protected."

The article particularly mentions extreme groups like ISIS and Boko Haram in Nigeria.

This article mentions an interesting point: the persecutions against Christians have had an effect on the number of Christians in certain countries, as, for example, in Iraq where the million and half of Christians in 2003 decreased to 275,000. However, often persecutions strengthen the faith of many, so that the number of Christians actually secretly increases.



In this regard, it is worthwhile mentioning the organization **Aid to the Church in Need** which originally was founded after the Second World War, with the aim of helping refugees, who mostly were Christians exiled from Eastern Europe. Today, this organization helps Christians who are persecuted in more than 140 countries all over the world.

JOSÉ SANCHEZ DEL RIO

Between the years 1926 and 1929 there was a rebellion in Mexico against the government of the time, because it wanted to enforce laws to abolish the power of the Catholic Church in Mexico. Among other things, the government wanted to close the Church schools, to regulate the outdoor religious festivities and drastically reduce the number of priests. It did so by exiling or killing several of them. Refusing to

suffer more atrocities, the Christians in Mexico organised themselves in rebel groups called '**Cristeros**'. Very many of these were killed; some of them were hanged in public places and their bodies left there for a long time to rot. José Sanchez Del Rio was thirteen years old when this rebellion started and, because he was young, he was not permitted to accompany his brothers in the fighting. After much insistence on his part, he was allowed to carry the flag. At the beginning of 1928, he was captured and forced to renounce his faith. When he repeatedly refused, he was compelled to witness the hanging of a 'Cristero' and later, had parts of the soles of his feet cut off and made to walk on his mutilated feet around the town. Finally, he was killed on the 10th of February 1928 at the age of 14. He was declared a saint in 2016, when a sick baby, with no hope of living, was cured through his intercession.

CATHOLIC ROLE MODELS

At the beginning of this chapter we discussed persons who become idols to others because they possess some great **talent**. These persons become **role models** when many imitate their behaviour and sometimes even their outward appearance.

Later on we considered Jesus as a role model because of his diverse characteristics. The Nazarene ended up being a role model to millions of persons, some of whom are presented to us by the Church as being saints, so that they serve as role models to us. The difference is only that instead of admiring them for their artistic or sportive qualities, we esteem and imitate their **virtues**.

THE MEANING OF VIRTUE

The word 'virtue' is derived from the Latin word 'virtus', which means the **qualities** which every individual – or vir in Latin – should have. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that virtue *"allows the person not only to perform good acts, but also to give the best*

of himself. The virtuous person tends towards the good he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions." (1903)

St. Thomas Aquinas calls the four virtues mentioned by the philosopher Plato, the four **cardinal virtues**. These are:

- Prudence
- Justice
- Fortitude
- Temperance

St. Thomas Aquinas mentioned three other virtues, which were also acknowledged by St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. St. Thomas called them **theological virtues**. They are:

- Faith
- Hope
- Charity

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

St. Thomas Aquinas is one of the greatest saints who contributed much to the Church with regard to teaching. St. Thomas was born in Italy in 1225,





four years after the death of St. Dominic de Guzman, the founder of the Dominican Order. Thomas joined this Order notwithstanding the opposition of his family. There, he grew in wisdom and is still known today for the way he correlated the ideas of Greek philosophers to the Christian thoughts and teachings. He is considered as one of the greatest thinkers of all times, not only in Theology but also in Philosophy. His works, the 'Summa Contra Gentiles' and the 'Summa Theologica', consisting of volumes of Christian teaching, are considered as masterpieces of writing and are still studied by each scholar of the Christian religion. When St. Thomas died, at the age of 49, he was still writing his 'Summa Theologica', which by then already consisted of 920,000 words.

The contribution of great saints did not lie only in their writings, nor in the way they expounded deeply the simple message of Christ. The saints are neither only the martyrs who gave their life for the faith, nor only those who lived a life of prayer. The Church presents also as saints those who dedicated their lives to **fight poverty and injustice**; Rutilio Grande and Oscar Romero of El Salvador are examples of persons who spent their lives doing this.

THE SERVANT OF GOD RUTILIO GRANDE AND SAINT OSCAR ROMERO

Rutilio Grande was born in 1928 in a poor family of seven children, whose parents later got divorced. He became a Jesuit priest at the age of 31 and he was one of the first persons to speak out against those leading his country,

San Salvador, because they were responsible for the non-observance of the workers' rights and for poverty resulting from injustices. In March 1977 twelve shots were fired at him while he was in his car with another person. Both were killed.

Three weeks before Rutilio was killed, Oscar Romero, had been appointed Archbishop of San Salvador, a country in Central America. Rutilio and Romero had been friends since when they were studying together for the priesthood. Though Romero was a reserved person, he was inspired by his friend's death and came all out against the government, which did not investigate the death of Rutilio. Romero strongly criticised the violence of the army, resulting in assassinations, torture, injustices and poverty. In March 1980, Archbishop Romero was killed by a shot in his chest while he was saying mass.

THE PROCESS NEEDED FOR A PERSON TO BE DECLARED A SAINT

Nowadays, the process used by the Church so that a person can be declared a saint is as follows:

1. First and foremost, the person must have been dead for **five years**. However, the Pope may decide to start proceedings before. For example, this happened in the case of Mother Theresa and Pope John Paul II.
2. The Bishop of the locality where the person died writes to the Pope to start the process. If this is accepted, then this person starts to be called '**servant of God**'.
3. There is then a period of time during which witnesses and the writings of the person are gathered. If the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, which is made up of Cardinals and Bishops, agrees, then the Pope gives the person the possibility of being called '**venerable**'.
4. The person starts being called '**blessed**' if theologians and scientists agree that the person has worked a miracle by curing somebody who has been seriously ill and has prayed for the intercession of the person. This step is omitted in case of martyrdom.
5. If another miracle is confirmed, using the same rigorous process, then the person is canonised, or in other words, declared a '**saint**'.



DOES TRUTH SET YOU FREE OR NOT?

James A. Garfield was born in 1831 and his presidency is the second shortest in the history of the USA, as he was killed just a few months after his installation. Two shots were fired at him and he spent more than two months fighting for his life. He is still remembered for a remark he once wrote:

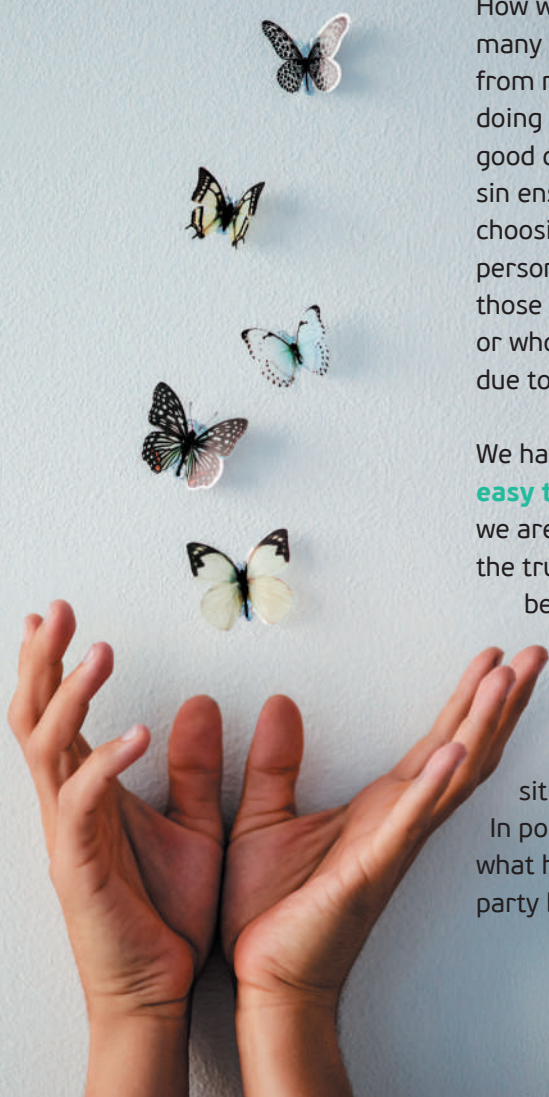
*"The truth will set you free...
but first it will make you miserable."*

These were the words said by Jesus to those who were listening to him: *"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free"* (John 8, 31-32).

How wonderful freedom is! And how many people think that freedom results from not being interfered with and from doing what one wants, whether it is good or bad! Jesus makes it clear that sin enslaves a person. The freedom of choosing to do wrong soon renders a person a slave. This is very evident in those who want to be free to take drugs or who have ended up in great trouble due to the lies of others.

We have to admit that **it is not always easy to tell the truth**. Sometimes, we are in doubt whether to speak out the truth or to keep our mouth shut, because we find ourselves in a position that someone is going to get hurt, whatever we say or do. It is certain that President Garfield was referring to political situations he had found himself in.

In politics, the politician has to see that what he believes in, what his political party believes in and what those who



elected him believe in, are congruous. It is therefore, advisable that before making a decision, the politician weighs its implications, including the fact that he may lose popularity because of such a decision.

HONESTY AND INTEGRITY

It would be a beautiful compliment if one describes a person with these two important virtues. And it would be very gratifying if someone describes you in the same way. One is honest when one **chooses the truth**. When one tells the truth, one is trusted and is called a person of integrity. The eighth commandment 'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour' urges us to tell the truth during all our life.

As President Garfield said, it is sometimes difficult to keep to the truth. It becomes more difficult if we give preference to other values, like for example, success and popularity. Unfortunately, there are persons who think that to make money or to be successful, even in politics, one has to forget words like 'honesty' and 'integrity'. Thank God, this is not the case of most politicians, who do their utmost to serve correctly, sometimes with tragic consequences. What happened to St. Thomas More is an example of this.



ST. THOMAS MORE (1478 – 1535)

St. Thomas More was born in England in 1478. He was very intelligent and after studying law, he started teaching it. He also possessed literary talents since he was a writer and a poet. He admired monks of different religious orders, but never joined any of them. Instead, he became a member of Parliament, later a 'Speaker' and finally became Chancellor of England, a position that led him to become a great friend of King Henry VIII.

Everything was proceeding smoothly, until the King divorced his wife and wanted to marry another one. The King ordered Thomas More and some other prominent persons to sign a document saying that his marriage to his first wife was invalid and, therefore, should be annulled. At the same time the King made himself head of what is still known as the Church of England.

Thomas refused to sign, even though this caused him to be thrown into prison for fifteen months. During the time of his imprisonment, he was urged many times to change his mind but he remained firm in his decision and was finally beheaded. Thomas More was declared a saint in 1935.

IN THE DEPTH OF ONE'S CONSCIENCE

Thomas More knew what his choice should be. This does not mean that it was an easy choice. At the back of it all, there was his career, his family and also his life. More prayed for **courage**, courage to keep firm in what he knew was right, according to his conscience and the teaching of Christ. This is shown in a letter he wrote to his daughter:

"I shall think of St. Peter and remember that he started to drown during a gust of wind because of his faltering faith. I shall do as he did: call upon Christ and pray to him for help and then I trust he shall place his holy hand on me and in the stormy seas hold me up from drowning..."

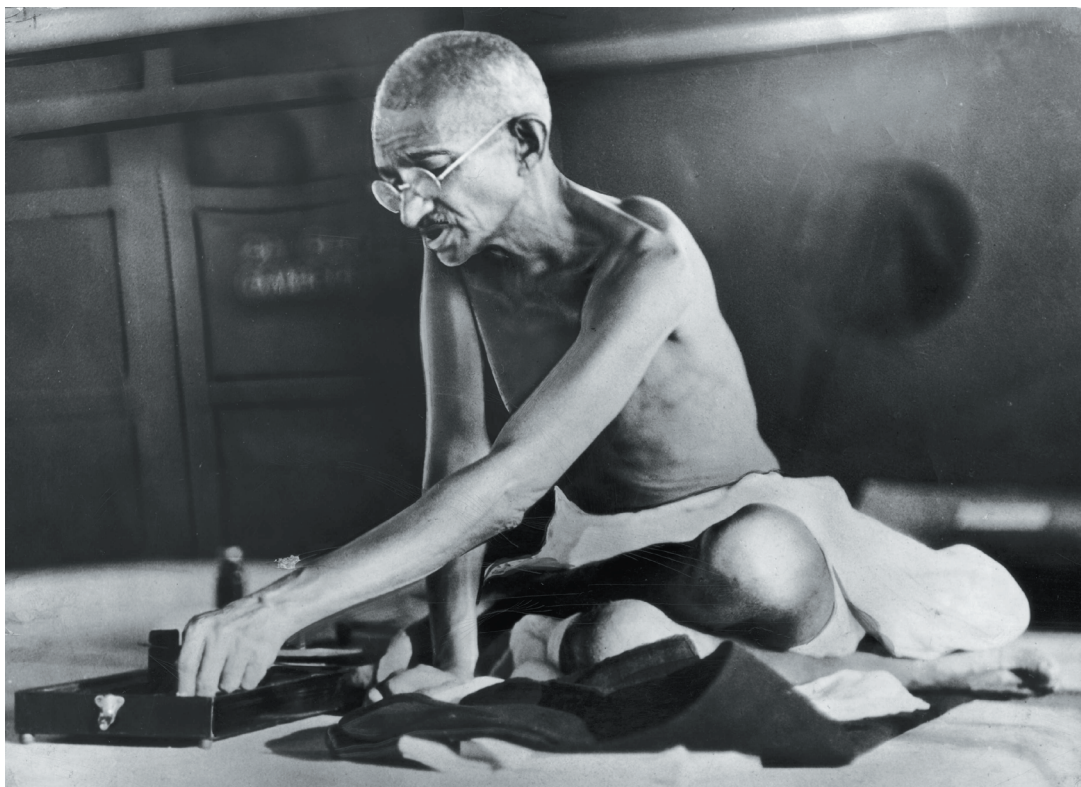


THE WORST FORM OF VIOLENCE

Mahatma Gandhi used to say that the worst form of violence is **poverty**. He meant that poverty is not a situation on which we have no control. It is something brought on by persons. In other words, poverty exists not because there is no wealth but because **wealth is not justly distributed**.

ABSOLUTE POVERTY

In 1995, the United Nations coined the term 'extreme poverty' or 'absolute poverty' to refer to those persons who are **denied their basic needs**, such as food, drink, medical care, education and a place to live in. The World Bank specifies that absolute poverty includes those who have only €1.50 or less daily to live on. It also says that though this type of poverty is decreasing, there are still more than 700 million persons, or 10% of the world population, living in absolute poverty.



IMBALANCE

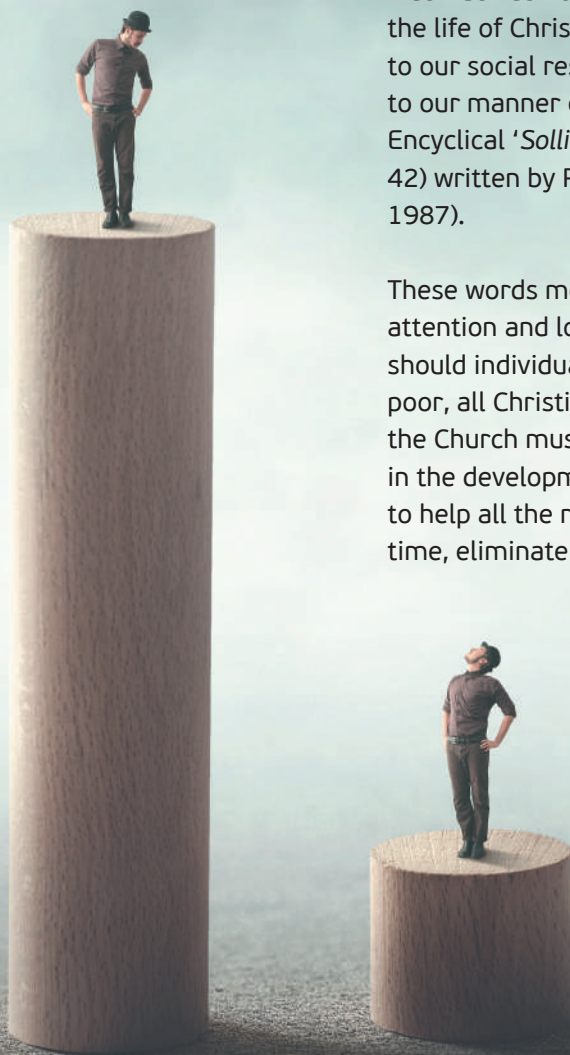
As has already been stated, the problem of poverty appears graver when one considers how the global wealth is distributed. Many statistics prove this. But what is most shocking is the fact that the most rich 300 persons in the world together own the same amount possessed by 3,000,000,000 (three billion) poor persons altogether.

THE PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

Considering all this and recalling the words, life and love of Jesus, the Church gives **special attention** not only to the poor and emarginated, who live in absolute poverty but also to those who are not very far from this extreme state. By the term '**preferential choice for the poor**' we understand:

' ... the option or love of preference for the poor . This is an option, or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness. It affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ, but it applies equally to our social responsibilities and hence to our manner of living ...' (from the Encyclical '*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*' (par. 42) written by Pope John Paul II in 1987).

These words mean that, apart from the attention and love that each Christian should individually bestow to help the poor, all Christians and, consequently, the Church must **participate actively** in the development of a world policy to help all the needy and, at the same time, eliminate all types of poverty.



ST. THERESA OF CALCUTTA

(1910 – 1997)

The symbol of Christian love towards the poor is, undoubtedly, Saint Agnes Gonxhe Bojaxhlu, better known as Mother Theresa. She was born in Skopje, Macedonia in 1910. At 18, she joined the Sisters of Loreto in Ireland and a year later went to India to teach in a school. When she was 36 years old, she felt a different call: that of working with those who lived in absolute poverty in India, the sick and the abandoned. Four years later, she founded the **Missionary Sisters of Charity**, a congregation of nuns who were ready to work with those she called **'the poorest of the poor'**. In a few years, this congregation spread to more than 130 countries in the world, including Malta. The missionary work

carried out by Mother Theresa and her Sisters, as well as more than a million volunteers included the taking care of those infected with AIDS, lepers, the old and children. She succeeded in providing shelter to thousands of persons, even though sometimes they were near death's door. She saved a number of children who were in a hospital during a war. As recognition of all her work, she received more than 120 awards, including the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1979. Mother Theresa died on the 5th September 1997. Pope John Paul II began the process of her sainthood after only two years instead of five years, as is the norm. Pope Francis declared her a saint in September of the year 2016.



THE VIRTUE OF FIDELITY TO GOD

It was this virtue which spurred Mother Theresa to do what she did. She showed her loyalty to God by her deeds and even declared it in one of the sentences for which she has remained famed:

'God did not call me to be successful but to be loyal to him.'

The thoughts and actions of the Christian should be enlightened by the wish to be faithful to God, as is explained in the Gospel. And, with regard to the commitment of the Christian towards the poor, Jesus is very clear about what happens on the day each individual person is judged:

'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me...' (Matthew 25, 34-36)



CHAPTER ELEVEN

LIFE CHOICES



FREEDOM

"I arrive home from school and soon after I lie on my bed, put on my headphones and start going through the messages on my mobile phone. You can't imagine how really downcast I feel when I read that my friends go out to recreate themselves while I remain at home. I am waiting eagerly for my eighteenth birthday so that I shall be free and be able to do whatever I want, without anyone interfering. What I cannot understand is that at sixteen I can vote, but I have to wait till I am eighteen to go out and enjoy myself. We are living in a society that does not

make sense." This is what Francesca told Luke while they were waiting for their private lesson to start.

We frequently celebrate the rights of persons, including independence and freedom of expression. In many countries, like the United States of America, freedom is considered as the highest and most important value existing. There are also those who celebrate the acquisition of human rights as the greatest acquisition of all, as these rights concede dignity to persons.





THE FREE PERSON

This capacity for freedom has been given to us by God. We have to remember that we have been created in the image of God and God himself is free. Through freedom, we fashion our life by taking decisions freely, after weighing the consequences of what we choose. We also form our life when, in complete freedom, we plan and work on projects which are beneficial to us and to others. Freedom is a power which makes persons grow into better beings. This freedom reaches perfection when we exercise it according to how its author, God, guides us. Persons who use freedom in this way, choose what is good and mature in the best way possible. If they make a bad choice, they may experience some sort of consequence or suffering. The more we choose what is good, the more we become whole and free persons.

WE LIVE FREEDOM WITH OTHERS

We really live freely when we are able to work for the good of others and ourselves. Freedom helps us to succeed in inter-relationships with others, by safeguarding the rights of others, thereby guaranteeing our own freedom

from being abused. Each person should allow others to live in the freedom given to them by God. This means that freedom carries within itself the strong element of responsibility towards others, those we know and those we do not know. We should always consider how our behaviour is going to affect others. We should ask ourselves: How am I using my freedom at present? What are my responsibilities at this point in my life? How am I affecting others with these responsibilities?

WHAT CAN HELP US TO STRENGTHEN OUR FREEDOM?

Freedom makes persons responsible for their own behaviour, when they are acting in a voluntary way, that is, when, with a free will, they know what they are doing. The education we get from the family and from the school helps us to exercise freedom in a responsible way, as in these environments we learn how to live with others. In order to use our freedom well and make good decisions, we need the advice of persons who wish us well and who can help us understand what God wants from us.

We are sure to find help towards making good decisions in the teaching we find in the Bible, as well as in the teaching of the Church. These are useful tools which lead us to that which is good. Jesus said to the Jews who believed in him, *"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* (John 8: 31-32). The ten commandments give us basic teaching which helps us to make good decisions. God gave us the ten commandments many years ago, as he knew what we need to enjoy the gift of freedom he himself gave us.

When used in a wise way, technology can also help us to strengthen our freedom, as it provides us with much information. The internet is of a great advantage to us, especially when we want to inform ourselves about the consequences of the decisions we want to make. We need to evaluate, vis-a-vis our Christian values, those values expressed by the social media in the light of freedom of expression.

Freedom can be ill-used, as is the case when we use it unwisely, thereby

becoming slaves to a dissolute life.

When we do not use our brains, we end up suffering consequences. Sometimes, we are in danger of losing the freedom we enjoy or the freedom which future generations have the right to enjoy. People are ignoring God in order to be the ones controlling the world around them, while expecting to possess everything by right. In truth, Christians should not try to take the place of God but should recognise the fact that God is the principal author of life. In gratitude to God, Christians should not look on life as belonging to them or that they can do whatever they like with life; indeed, they should try to understand how God wants them to use the gift of a free life for the good of both themselves and others. Unfortunately, we can witness situations, where the uncontrolled acquisition of rights is leading to disaster. An example of this is when in the name of freedom, persons choose to kill the human life that God begets in a womb. Also, nature and the environment are often abused for personal, egoistic gain. It is therefore important that the roots of free actions should be based on and directed towards that which God wants from us.



FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY ARE NOT SEPARABLE

One can frequently hear stories in the news of persons acting irresponsibly, thereby causing ugly consequences which can be fatal. For example, one hears of traffic accidents due to irresponsible driving or of persons who, through carelessness, cause other persons to experience serious consequences.

Many persons want to be free but find it hard to accept the responsibilities which freedom brings with it. Liberty is inseparable from responsibility!. If I have the freedom to think, it is my responsibility to think well to be able to take action and live the consequences of my decisions. If I have the liberty to speak, it is my responsibility to speak

well so that I help and do not hurt or destroy others. If I have the freedom to act, it is my responsibility to act correctly for my own good and for that of others. Nobody can decide for me. If every person lives this freedom responsibly, then the world will be better and more beautiful.

THE NEED FOR BALANCE BETWEEN DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

We are created in the image of God and have the capacity to understand that we all have various rights, among which, the right to life. Each right brings with it a responsibility. From an early age, in the place where we live, we start learning what is expected of us for every right we have. For example, if we have a right for a roof over our heads, it is expected of us to play our part to keep our environment clean. Our responsibilities begin with those towards each other, those towards our family, as well as those at school; in all these we relate together every day. The more we mature in these responsibilities, the more we learn to live in society, which consists of a bigger circle of acquaintances.



If we fight for our rights without being responsible for our actions, we will be causing the loss of rights of everyone else, through pride and egoism. The sin which makes us care only for ourselves, breaks up all relationships. We build our relationships by communicating with and giving space to each other. If we want to build strong groups and communities, with good relationships, we should grow in personal discipline to be able to keep a balance between the rights and responsibilities in our relationships. Because we are created in the image of God, we are capable of knowing what is good and what is bad and instead of acting instinctively, we use our reason to understand what God wants from us and, in a responsible manner, do our duty wherever we are.

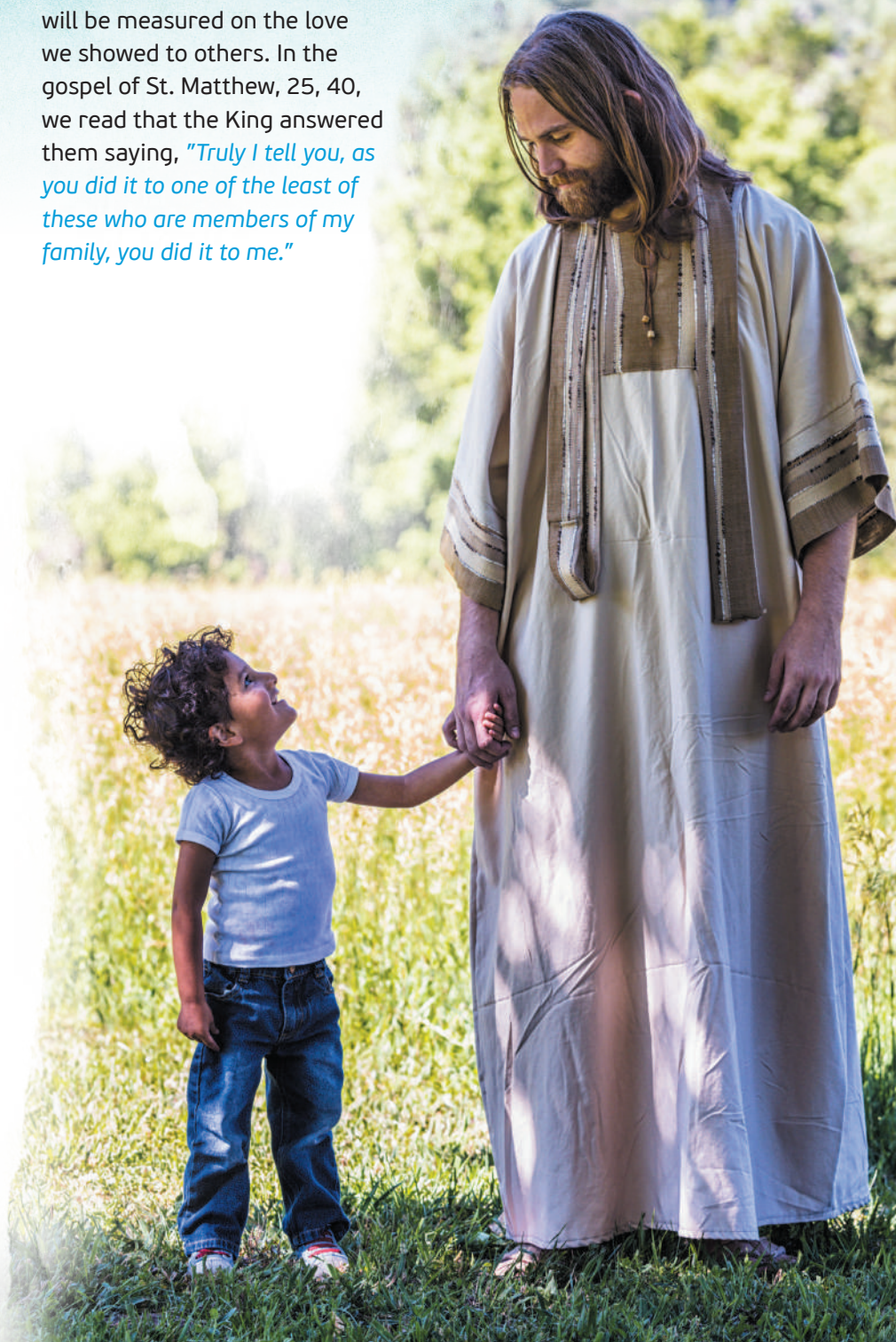
Society, of which we form part, imposes rules to be followed, so that persons can live in peace together and no one will destroy others through egoism or abuse of power. Every country has rules to regulate the behaviour of the persons who live in it. We have to remember that not everyone grows in an environment which helps persons to know how to behave well; therefore, rules are there to help persons to do just that. Besides rules and laws, there are persons whose responsibility is to see that these laws and rules are adhered to so that no one is deceived. For example, when we, as consumers, buy something, we are in duty bound to pay for it. On the other hand, the seller has the duty to sell us a good product or service as we expect to be given.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY

We, young persons who profess Christian values, need to ensure that in every action we take, we are guided by a Christian conscience. We can do this by following the example and the teaching of Jesus in every activity we take part in. God is interested in every section of our life. We are Christians not only when we attend a church activity or when we go to Sunday mass. We have to act like Christians always and everywhere: at home, at school and, in the future, at our work or profession. Unfortunately, there are those who reason that, apart from behaving properly during church activities, they can do what they like elsewhere. But this is not Christian responsibility; we must behave like Christians in every sphere of our life.

As Christians, we have the primary responsibility to love each other with the 'agape' type of love, that is, a love that manifests itself in our service to others. At Baptism and Confirmation, we have been given the strength and the call to do this as witnesses of Christ, all our life and in all our relationships. Our Lord Jesus Christ instituted the Eucharist exactly in the context of his total surrender on the cross; he gave his life for us in its totality. Therefore, when we receive the Eucharist, we get closer to God and this gives us the strength and courage to carry on living this reality in the execution of our duties, even when, in a responsible way, we enjoy ourselves with each other in our leisure time. The effect of the Eucharist is clearly evident, when in our actions we are ready to make sacrifices for the good of each other.

Finally, we have to remember that at a certain time, we have to give an account of how we have used our freedom, which will be measured on the love we showed to others. In the gospel of St. Matthew, 25, 40, we read that the King answered them saying, *"Truly I tell you, as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."*



WE HAVE TO BE ACCOUNTABLE FOR OUR BEHAVIOUR

We Christians form part of the society we live in. Therefore, like each citizen, we also have to be conscious of all that we do, so that everyone feels comfortable and accepted in this society. We can achieve this by not separating the values taught to us by Jesus from the values we live by daily, as we have already seen in the previous lesson. As students, we should do our work well and use the talents that God gave us. The more we mature, the more we have to use our talents for our own good and that of others.

As we see in the chapter “Role Models”, Jesus related the parable about a rich man, his workers and the talents that the rich man gave them. (Matthew 25, 14-30). The rich man is God, the servants are we, human beings and the talents are the abilities to answer God’s calls. The parable teaches us that we are responsible to use our talents for the common good. God did not give us talents only for our benefit and joy but also, so that through them, we show God’s love to others. Just like that rich man showed faith in his workers and let them act freely, so does God have full faith in our good will. He guides our actions through our conscience.



GOD'S WORD GUIDES US ABOUT GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF OUR BEHAVIOUR

The Word of God is replete with necessary teaching about how we have to examine the way we are living our life. It also helps us to remember that at the end of our life, we have to give an account of this beautiful gift of life. Some say that this is the easiest test of our life, as we already know what the examination paper holds. In fact, in the well-known St. Matthew's chapter 25, we find an extract which explains how we are going to account for our lives:

"Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by the Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and we visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

(Matthew 25, 34-40).

The Word of God clearly shows us and guides us on the fact that we are responsible for our actions because God wants to get to others through us.

THE WORD OF GOD CONTINUES TO GUIDE OUR BEHAVIOUR

Another important aspect of Christian responsibility is that we encourage each other to grow in our Christian and human maturity. In his letter to the Hebrews (10,24), St. Paul writes, *"Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and deeds."* It is a good thing to instil in ourselves the attitude of encouraging each other to mature in the good aspects of our life. We should be careful not to allow our sense of jealousy or competitiveness to overcome us, so that our attitude will be that of helping others and not of being better than them. To attain this, we we should grow in our trust of each other. It will be helpful to us if we find a person or persons, who listen to us and encourage us to lead a good life.

When we meet other persons and share our life with them, at school or in a Christian community of which we form part, we start making new relationships and this makes us grow in our trust in others. In the letter of St. James (1,19) we read, *"You must understand this, my beloved, let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger."* This attitude helps us to respect the other persons more and consequently, to build good friendships.

The Word of God also teaches us that, if we truly love each other, we should be ready to correct each other in a spirit of love, so that we become better persons. We should also accept the fact that those who love us, correct us for our own good. In a letter to the Galatians, St. Paul writes, *"My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who*

have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted." If your friends' actions go against Christian values, you should show them their errors with gentleness, forgive them and guide them well. We should not do this in a judgemental way, but because we really want to help the other persons to grow in goodness. The Word of God warns us not to judge others, as we all can do wrong. We have to remember that not everybody has the same opportunities in life and it could be, that persons do not know that what they are doing is not the right thing to do. It could also be the case that persons behave in a certain manner because they are going through a difficult time, which nobody knows about.

It is also very important that we take great care about what we say about others, especially when they are not present. We should do all we can not to talk disparagingly about other persons. In the gospel of St. Matthew (7, 1-2), we read, *"With the judgement you make you will be judged and the measure you give will be the measure you get."*

We will be giving an account to God of all that we say, especially when we talk about others. The same St. Matthew reminds us, that, *"On the day of judgement you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter."* (Matthew 12, 36)

At the end of this lesson we are all called to make an examination of conscience with a difference:

What are my talents?

How am I using my talents?

Am I seeing God in others?

Am I being a help to my colleagues and those I live with?



WHAT IS CONSCIENCE?

A ship's captain sails his ship on the sea; an explorer trudges in a solitary desert and a pilot guides his airplane on layers of clouds in the sky. What is common among these persons? There is an important instrument, without which each of them can encounter many problems, especially if the technology of GPS is inaccessible: **the compass**.

The compass or GPS is important if one wants to reach one's destination. The compass and the GPS can be compared to the precious gift God gave us: **conscience**. Without conscience we will be lost, without direction. A well formed conscience **can help us find our way** and **make the best choices in life**.

WHAT IS CONSCIENCE?

When we stop to think, we realise that inside us there is a voice, **which we have not created ourselves but which we feel that we have to follow and live according to its advice**. Inside us we hear a voice which is always advocating love and consequently, guides us to do what is good and avoid what is bad. This is due to the fact that we all have in our hearts a law given to us by God. We call this our conscience; in other words, conscience is the **voice of God in our hearts**. Vatican Council II, in the *Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes* says,



"In the depth of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart; do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. In his conscience a person is alone with God, whose voice echoes in the depths of the person's heart. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals the law which is fulfilled in the love of God and neighbour." (Paragraph 16)

This conscience within us has the role of **guiding** us at the right moment so that we choose what is right and avoid what is wrong. Therefore, our conscience helps us to take decisions and also make good choices. Our conscience leads us to understand the truth because when we listen to it, we can say that we are listening to God who always leads us to that which is good and true.

Conscience is that tool with which **we consider what we are doing and what we intend to do**. It also helps us to **reflect on what we have done**. **In this way, we will be evaluating what we are doing in our life**. We have to know what God wants from us in all that we think, say, do and what we decide not to do, for our good and that of others. To do this, it is important that we assign a part of the day to reflect on what is happening inside us and take note of it. This means that we have to **stop for a while and dedicate that time** to listen to and follow the voice of our conscience. We have to acquire the ability to stop and reflect on the voice of God in our heart, because our hectic way of life does not allow space for self examination and hinders us from taking stock of what is happening to us.



ACTING ACCORDING TO OUR CONSCIENCE

We have to remember that God is present in our life and wants to be a part of all that we choose to do. This thought should help us to be responsible for what we do. When we do something wrong, we say that our conscience '**pricks**' us, because it knows the truth. After making us acknowledge that we have erred, our conscience leads us to ask for pardon and, out of our own free will, we change course and go in the right direction along our journey on this earth.

The older we get, the more difficult our decisions will become because circumstances change. In these situations, we have to do our utmost to make the best decisions with the help of the cardinal virtues: prudence, fortitude, temperance and justice. We can ask for good advice and above all, ask for the help of the Holy Spirit.

OUR CONSCIENCE HAS TO BE EDUCATED

It is our duty to **form our conscience** so that it can give us good advice. The education of our conscience should be a life-long process. When we are still children, both in the family and at school, we start learning what is right and what is wrong and what God wants from us through his Word.

Throughout our life, we grow in reason and our free will through grace and love. Even conscience has to be educated, step by step. We see the role of conscience when we feel a sense of guilt and shame after doing something wrong. Conscience pricks us when we err but it also instils in us a sense of peace when we do something good.

Parents, the family, as well as the Church and society should help children form their conscience through the **continuous discovery of that which is true and good**, which is found in the **Word of God**. For the formation of a Christian conscience, it is good to remember the brief and good advice of Our Mother Mary, "*Do whatever he tells you.*" (John 2, 5).



FORMING OUR CONSCIENCE

In some cases, conscience can go wrong. Why does this happen? If a compass is placed next to another metal or if it indicates any direction except North or if it is used without a map, then it is nearly worthless. In the same way, if our conscience is influenced by the selfish wishes of our heart, it can lead us in the wrong direction. To give us good advice, our conscience should be formed according to the teaching we find in the Word of God.

Among the persons, who in the Old Testament gave a good example, we find Ruth, a woman who learnt how to make good decisions because she had great faith in God. Ruth lived a simple and hidden life; yet she had a

strong character. She shows us that it is far from easy to do the right thing. In fact, very often we have to sacrifice ourselves to do good. Ruth was free to leave and go back to her family, go back to her gods, choose another husband to take care of her. Yet, she made another decision; Ruth chose to stay with her husband's mother, Naomi and dedicated herself to the God of Israel and she decided, "*Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.*" (Ruth, 16). Ruth is an example of a person who had a well-formed conscience. In the New Testament, through his example and his teachings, Jesus helps us to form our conscience well. With the help of the Holy Spirit, who is given to us by Jesus, we can reflect more on his teaching and make the right decisions.



HOW ARE WE GOING TO FORM OUR CONSCIENCE?

Conscience can be formed in different ways. Adults who take care of us, the Church and society are in duty bound to help us form our conscience well. Our family and those who care for us when we are young, can be of great help to us as we try to understand what it means to be in a relationship with God and live according to Christian principles. When he was young, Jesus, learnt from the advice and good examples of Mary and Joseph how to keep God close to him; indeed, he called God 'Father' as from when he was a young man.

One of the best gifts that parents and families, as well as mature Christians can give us is how we can enter into a relationship with God through prayer and good behaviour. When we are still young, we learn that God talks to us through the Bible; therefore, through reading the Word of God, we start listening to God himself talking to us in our conscience.

In this relationship with God, we start realising that it will be of benefit to us to obey this voice of God in our hearts, because he has created us and knows what is good for us. Even though Christians have great faith in God's love and God's wish for their salvation, they should renew their efforts to practise the Commandments and acquire virtues which will help them to make wise decisions.

In cultures which are indifferent or hostile to Christianity, a great number of persons find the formation of conscience difficult. When we

ourselves face such difficulties, we can ask for help from adults who are able to help us, like parents or the leader of a community or a priest. It is a good practice if we have a regular confessor or a spiritual director. One of the dangers we should avoid in the formation of our conscience is to allow our personal emotions to override our reason enlightened by faith. We should also take care that we are not carried away by currents of prevailing values that go against the teaching of Jesus.

PRACTICAL POINTS ABOUT THE BUILDING OF CONSCIENCE

As we have already said, conscience should be built in the context of a good relationship with God. After all, our conscience should lead us to make decisions which bring us closer to God and make our relationships with others better. Therefore, the first thing we should do is to pray to God to guide us in the way he wants us to follow. The frequent reading of the Scripture will lead us to the truth, through the Word of God and all that it teaches. By practising the values which we find in the Word of God, we continue to grow in the spirit of Jesus.

To find the strength to put into practice what our conscience tells us, we should receive Jesus in the Eucharist and the other sacraments, especially the sacrament of Reconciliation. This sacrament is a great grace to us, as it it renews our soul and helps us heal from our mistakes. The Eucharist is a sacrament which unites us with Jesus and urges us to seek for the truth and inspires us how to behave in a morally good way.



It is important that we learn how to examine our conscience and look on the ten Commandments and the Beatitudes as our guides as true Christians and be careful about every decision we make. It is good if we discover what the Catholic Church teaches by referring to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and other good Christian reading, which we can find on good internet sites. To build a good conscience, we should inform ourselves about what the Church says and understand why the Church takes a particular stand. If we do not understand, we can always ask our parents or our youth group leader (if we attend a group) or a priest in our parish or church where we attend.

Our environment is also a thing we should consider as we are surrounded by all sorts of media. In the same way that we check what we eat, we should check what we feed our minds and souls. We should therefore, protect ourselves by making sure we are surrounded by persons and activities that are as close as possible to our morality, so that we are strengthened in our behaviour. We should seek models we can imitate, persons who lived or live a life of virtue, individuals who can help us follow the right road by always seeking that which is true. Jesus said that he is the way, the truth and the life.

A LIGHT FOR OTHERS

A well-formed conscience is a very useful tool for us, as it helps us to see the truth. The moments we feel a sense of remorse after doing something, may be blessings, as our conscience may be telling us that we have done wrong. Moments like these may lead us to **take action**. Because we are created in the image of God, we feel the need to regain peace after we have gone astray.

When these sentiments cause us to repent our mistakes and go to Confession, even the worst sins are forgiven. For example, King David committed grave sins but his sins were forgiven, mainly because he was sincerely sorry for having committed them.

Today, unfortunately, there are many persons whose conscience is, in fact, **dead or insensitive**, that is, their conscience no longer sends cautious messages, a sense of shame or guilt. There are also others who do not even know what conscience is. It is therefore essential that we, who know how important conscience is for us to lead a good life, by our example, help others to understand that conscience is the voice of God, who created them and it is heard in their hearts. They should listen

to this voice and open their hearts to it.

On the other hand, we should realise that different persons come from different backgrounds and are not all brought up in the same way. Persons are different for many reasons. Some, for example, are born and bred in environments where they are not taught how to form a good conscience. Consequently, those who have a well-formed conscience should be more sensitive towards others.

We can look on conscience as a **personal judge who helps us to understand our position**. It should not allow us to judge others. Instead of judging others, we should seek ways how to help others to listen to God's voice in their hearts. In this way, we will be promoting love and build each other up. We may sometimes be called to **give advice**, thereby helping other persons to come to the truth of the Evangelical values and to make decisions based on the voice of



conscience. In such cases, conscience gives us the opportunity of becoming a light for others.

A WELL-FORMED CONSCIENCE CHANGES A CULTURE

When we have a well formed conscience, this does not affect for the better only our personal life but also that of others. This happens because **we will be giving witness of how we live and of the values we believe in**. Other persons can observe our good behaviour and imitate us. One can say that the first fundamental step towards the transformation of a culture and society is the **formation of a good conscience**. The education of conscience is the basis of a good society, especially when conscience is formed on the values of the Gospel.

Therefore, when we, as Christians live our life according to the Gospel, we will be leaving **a good moral influence on society** by our message and our actions. By doing so, we will be helping to keep alive the good values and we become a light that shows what God wishes. Persons in a dark room need the light from a lamp to see; likewise, society needs **the example and moral teaching of Christians** to understand the fundamental values of love, respect and solidarity, values that reflect the goodness of God. We should not be afraid or ashamed to behave according to our well-formed conscience, even when we are with those who do not agree with us. Today, we live in a culture in which we are faced with situations, where what we say and do as Christians, is not always understood by others.



We may face **opposition** and persons **who do not agree with us**, who **criticise us** and perhaps **make fun of us**. We should not be afraid to talk when we are defending the values we believe in, as God will help us in these situations. After Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles, they started talking in public about the Good News. The Gospel and its values should not be kept hidden due to fear or indifference, even in situations when we are dealing with persons who do not agree with us.

WHERE IS OUR STRENGTH COMING FROM?

From where is our strength to be the light for others coming? We acquire this strength from our great faith in God who is always with us to help us spread the values of the Gospel. God will be with us through the power of the Holy Spirit and when we pray for his gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord. In this way, we become able to make our voices heard in a multi-cultural environment. Even where there is the culture of death, we can bring hope, which comes from Jesus Christ, who means life. It is an opportunity for us to show the truth and evangelise the place where we live. Because we really love, we can share with others the way to true success. Jesus reminds us in Luke's Gospel, *"And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God."* (Luke, 12, 8).



THE CALL OF THE CHRISTIAN

Jesus explained the unique role of Christians in society by comparing them with salt and the light of the world:

"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5, 13-16).

The main point of this excerpt from Scripture is that Christians are to live their lives according to the Gospel. This means that Christians should understand what is good, live accordingly and be **examples of the love agape**. Just like salt preserves meat from rotting, so should Christians **preserve good values** and protect the world from being destroyed through wrong choices. Through their message and actions, Christians are expected to leave a **good moral influence** on society.



Like salt and light, Christians should teach others about what God wishes and guided by the Spirit of God, use their conscience to foster **justice in society**. They should be the first to raise their voices in cases of injustices, corruption and lack of love, because as Christians, they should seek first the protection and well-being of those who are vulnerable.

We can find many examples of persons who have worked or are still working to **protect the vulnerable**. There are Christians who: **speak up against abortion and euthanasia**; others **adopt children** who need a family; still, others **help refugees** and work to put a **stop to drug and human trafficking**; others **bring hope to prisoners** or to those who are victims of vices; there are also many others who **take care of vulnerable persons** and even others who are without a roof over their heads. Pope Francis himself is a living proof of his Christian faith.

DIGNITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

One of the main ways, in which we as Christians can show our faith in practice is by **respecting human dignity**. It is a fact that, in a materialistic world, the respect for every type of life is decreasing. According to the moral and social teaching of the Church, the protection of the **fundamental right to life** should be the basis of all the principles on which the social policy of the country is built. Every law and action should be directed towards the fundamental principle of the protection of life and the dignity of each person. We should all work so that life is **protected and defended always** and everywhere.

Christian tradition teaches that a strong community can only be acquired if human rights are protected and if every member of the community shoulders his/her responsibility. Christians affirm that each person should have not only the right to life but also a right to all those things needed to live life in a decent way. Therefore, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, was an important step in the progress of humanity. Among other things, these rights include: the right to life and freedom, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to religious belief, the right to work and education. Everybody should have access to these rights, without any discrimination.

CHRISTIAN LIFE AND POLITICS

Although created in the image of God, human persons are called to holiness by means of the way of faith and their social experiences. We have been created to live in a community. The way we organise our society, both economically and politically, will directly affect the protection of human dignity and the common good. The Church teaches that the role of governments and other institutions is to protect the life and dignity of persons and promote the common good. The common good is achieved when the conditions of social life allow each member of society the **opportunity to live and develop his/her life in a total way**. (See *Gaudium et Spes*, 26). The common good belongs to everybody and we should all work together to obtain it. A responsible society should also work so that future generations can enjoy the common good.



So that persons can live together in a good way and at peace as much as possible and so that the common good can be achieved, there should be order and justice by means of a **strong judicial system, totally separated from any other power**. The Government which administers the country in all its sections, together with Parliament, should pass **laws** according to the real needs of the country, always respecting the dignity of every person, and in the light of the natural law

Essential services, like those of **health**, **social services** and **education** are vital so that the common good can reach everyone. All these services are provided for, by the collection of **taxes**; therefore, it is the duty of a Christian to pay just taxes. Jesus spoke clearly about this duty in St. Mark's Gospel, chapter twelve. One

can extend what Jesus said in this context as an invitation for Christians to participate in politics, such as **voting in a responsible way** and seeking the well-being of everyone. Some Christians are called to **take part more directly in the running of their country**. This is a very difficult vocation in today's world, where the Christian values are being disregarded and replaced by absolute power, egoism and the satisfaction of instincts. This vocation, like every other vocation which comes from God, requires persons to put into practice, like Jesus did, the love agape, in the service given. Christians should be committed to the creation of an environment, where everyone participates in the economic, political and cultural life of society, making sure there is no discrimination, so that nobody lags behind.

IN FAVOUR OF WHAT IS RIGHT

As Christians, we believe that all persons form **one human family**, notwithstanding the difference in nationality, race, economic status or ideology. We are called to follow the example of Jesus and love all persons **without distinction**. In this way, we will be living the value of solidarity and not merely giving it lip service. Solidarity leads to the common good. The Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (par. 38) says that we are all responsible for everyone. In this sense, **solidarity is a virtue that helps to build the common good**. In the Gospel, we find the warning of Jesus that we have to give our life for the genuine service of each other: *"And whoever wants to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life in ransom for many."* (Mark 10, 44-45).

There cannot be a common good if there is no solidarity and peace among people. The spirit of solidarity is seen where there are projects that unite persons and social groups. Good examples of solidarity are when money is collected to help mission countries and when groups of persons go to do voluntary work in other countries. As Christians, we seek to understand where there is division; through **collaboration** and **understanding**, we can achieve peace, which does not only mean no fighting and wars but also involves reciprocal respect and trust among people. Where there is the common good, there is solidarity and where there is solidarity, there is peace, which is the fruit of justice. Pope St Paul VI, in his Message on the Day of Peace in 1972, wrote, *"If you want peace, work for justice."*



JUSTICE IN PRACTICE WHEN WE OPT FOR THE POOR

An important aspect in the ministry of Jesus was the emphasis he gave to the help given to those most in need in society. Following this example, the Church has always sought to serve

the poor in every society. It was this sense of service that spurred St. Theresa of Calcutta, among other saints, to live the Gospel in giving service to the **poorest of the poor**.

In a society where respect for persons is based on their material wealth, the Church urges us to live the Beatitudes and work for justice with the poor.



Poverty can exist in various forms; it can be **material, moral, ethical, intellectual, cultural, religious** or **spiritual** poverty. Ever since its institution, the Church founded various works of charity, which have always been, and still are, indispensable everywhere. Taking its cue from the Gospel, the Church teaches that we should help others in their various needs and create services in the community, that show compassion with the needy and give hope of a better life. In our country, there are many persons and groups within the Church that contribute to the service of vulnerable persons in our society. It can be said that, in all sectors of the social services, the Church has been at the forefront in the help it gives to orphans, persons with disabilities, emigrants and refugees. It also offers services for the rehabilitation of persons with drug addictions and provides help to prisoners and victims of domestic violence, besides caring for the elderly.

The practice of charity is not simply limited to the giving of alms and the helping of individuals. Real charity is actualised when some **Christians make their voices heard politically** to address the problem of each type of poverty at its very roots. Therefore, it is beneficial that Christians expose the truth of what is happening around them in society and speak up so that justice can be done. It is also recommended that we identify those systems that are causing any form of injustice in society, so that those situations that are creating suffering in the life of persons can be changed. Christians are urged to fill their hearts with a joy that lasts, the result of their choice to help the poor and the needy, instead of hoarding treasures of material goods, which disintegrate and disappear. Chapter 25 of the Gospel of St Matthew clearly reminds us to give priority to the needs of the poor and the vulnerable.





THE CARE OF CREATION

Man is part of creation. When we work for justice among persons, we are also **working for the good of all creation**. We can show a sense of gratitude to God the Creator by **caring for the natural creation around us**. We are called to protect the planet and live our faith in harmony with all of God's creation. We should remember that we have the ability to transform and develop the world through our work and that, first and foremost, nature is a **gift from God**. Our role is that of **co-operators with God** in the work of creation but if we put ourselves instead of God, we end up abusing nature. This creates a rebellion in nature because nature finds itself more dominated by us than worked by us.

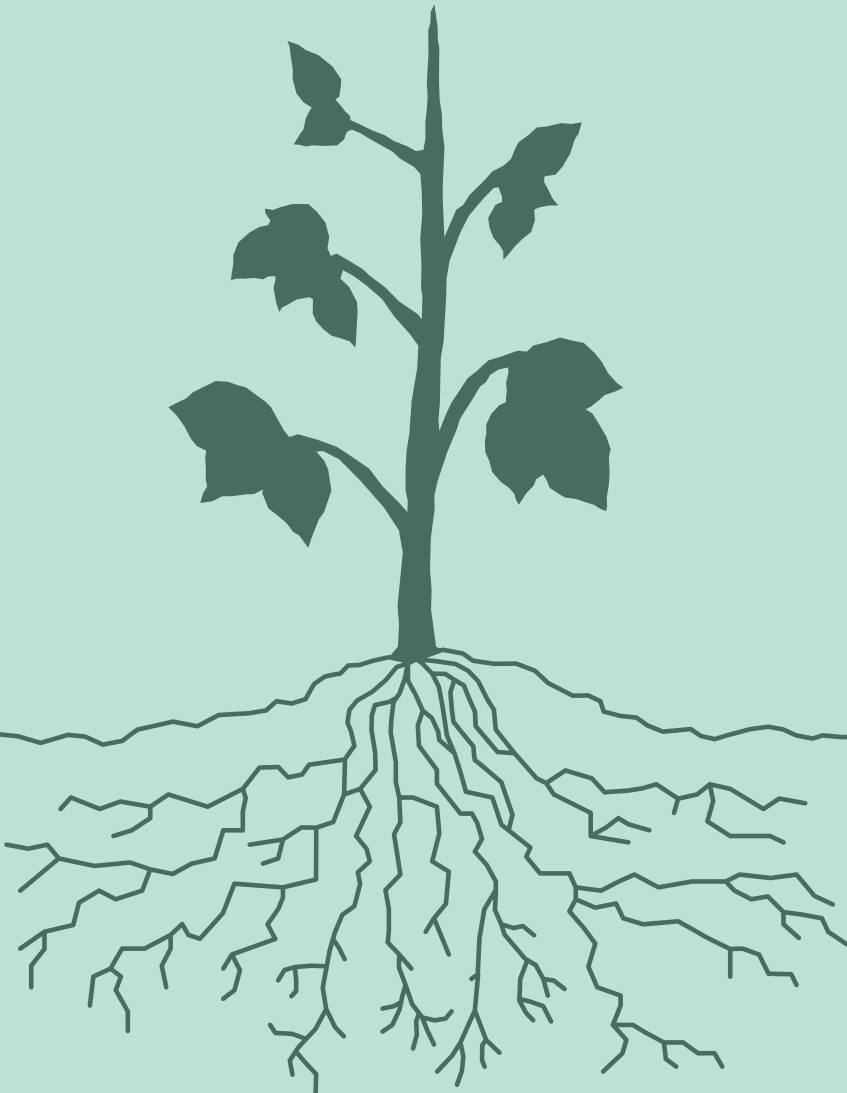
This challenge we face of respecting the environment has moral and ethical

dimensions of great importance. Care for the environment is a question of a common and universal duty, with respect for a creation created for everyone. Therefore, creation – animals, plants and the elements – should not be used simply to satisfy one's own wishes and economic and egoistic needs.

God created us according to his image. That is why he blessed us and said, *"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have domain over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."* (Genesis 1, 28). Let us remember that God could completely trust us for he was aware of the good he sowed in us.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MATURING AS CHRISTIANS



MY ABILITY TO DECIDE

In the Book of Genesis we read that **God created us in his image** (Genesis 1, 27). These words refer to the spiritual image. They mean that God gave the human person qualities not given to any other being. Among these qualities, God gave the human a **soul** and the ability to make **decisions** of a moral nature, as well as the ability of entering into **an intimate relationship with him**. He gave the human being the quality of **authenticity**, together with the ability to **respect and co-operate with others**. A human person has also been given the qualities of being **responsible and of communicating** with others. But, above all, God gave each person the qualities of **reasoning and loving**. All these qualities render the human a whole person.

It is important that in life, we put to use the qualities of the mind, and try as much as possible to make good decisions, as each decision we make, whether good or bad, has its consequences.

From the moment of waking up to the moment of going to sleep, a person is continually making choices and taking decisions. There are choices of small importance, like what to wear or what to eat, but there are also choices and decisions of far greater importance, such as what course to choose or whom to marry. These are decisions of importance as their consequences will last a lifetime.



These choices may not only affect the persons involved but also those around them. When faced with such choices, the individual should ask, "What should I do to make a good choice?"

WHAT MUST I DO?

The first thing a person must not do is to **act in haste**. There is a Maltese proverb, which translated literally, says that a hasty cat produces blind kittens. One wrong decision may change life completely and may make it difficult for one to amend the situation. So, it is wise for one to obtain the advice of someone who has been in a similar situation, before taking a decision. One can seek advice from a trusted priest or from a good counsellor. Yet, one must keep in mind that the final decision is the individual's, because nobody can decide for someone else. However, one can be guided and helped to weigh all the consequences.

It is important for a Christian who has to make a decision to **pray** for help to make a good decision. God should be an integral part in the life of a Christian and therefore, it is opportune that even at a young age, the Christian **gets used to involve God in all things** ... even in

small things. When persons follow the principle of allowing Christ to live in them and to mould them in his image, they will be walking along the road to holiness and along the road of real success.

WHAT MUSTN'T I DO?

One must be careful **not to give in to the bad pressure** which can come from a group of friends. Friends exercise great influence in life, but one must not take a decision just because one's friends have taken it. One must keep in mind that what is good for one person is not necessarily good for another person. One must also be careful about the pressure coming from strangers or from what one watches on television programmes. Another important thing is to check whether one's decision is coming from the mind or from the heart. It is good to **allow the heart to guide**, but one has to reason and think because not everything that one feels is really beneficial. One must do one's utmost not to be conditioned by one's emotions and fears. Certain decisions may cause



fear but may not be harmful. Indeed, Our Lady herself was afraid when faced with the decision she had to take.

Before Christians take decisions they should ask themselves these questions: "What would Jesus do in this situation? How much does this decision agree with the thought and spirit of Jesus?" To be able to choose according to the thought and spirit of Jesus, we should know what Jesus taught and did. So, to choose well, we should **form our minds and hearts on the values of the Bible**, mostly those of the Gospel. We must know

what the Bible contains and therefore, it is good that we read it. That is why we have always been taught that the Bible is a guide book because it guides us in our life and enlightens our minds when we have to take decisions.

We should also keep in mind **the teaching of the Church** as brought to us by the Pope and Bishops.

These are some of the aspects one has to consider when taking a decision, so that one makes the right choice, resulting in good consequences.



THE ABILITY TO MAKE USE OF CONSCIENCE

As a young person, Mark always wanted to be a graphic designer. For the last three years worked with a major advertising company and was doing quite well. Everybody was pleased with his work and he felt satisfied and successful. One day he received an e-mail from another company offering him a job. Mark reasoned that there was nothing wrong in finding out what he would be offered by this new employer. So, he went for an interview with the owner, who knew Mark's abilities in the field and wanted to employ him. Mark was immediately offered double the pay he was receiving from his company. Mark reasoned that this was an opportunity not to be missed. So, he asked what would be required of him.

The owner informed him that the company was planning to publish a local review showing pictures of girls in indecent poses; the owner was sure that this review would prove to be a huge success. He wanted Mark to take responsibility of this magazine. Mark felt confused because, though the job was financially to his benefit, his conscience told him that the concept went against his Christian morality. After reflecting serenely for some time, Mark decided to refuse the job and kept the job he had, even though it paid less.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you agree with Mark's decision?
2. Would you have done the same? Why?
3. Do you think he was right to listen to his conscience?



Mark's experience teaches us that in delicate situations, where we need to take wise decisions, we cannot base our choice on the emotions of the moment. We have to use our minds and reason to choose between right and wrong. It is important that we **do not take decisions in moments of anger or moments of great joy**. Like Mark, we have to take some time to think in silence, to hear the voice of God in our heart by means of our **conscience**, which is the best tool we Christians have to help us decide in a wise way. It is therefore important that our conscience is well formed. Christians cannot consider only material things, like how much money they are going to make, but must also live a life like that of Christ. These are the qualities which make us really good Christians and which will finally lead us to holiness.

Conscience, which starts being formed when we are young, keeps on **developing**. Parents are the first persons in our life who teach us what is right and what is wrong. Then, school educators continue building on our parents' teaching. This does not mean that we should stop forming our conscience when we stop attending school. We should go on learning by attending meetings organised by youth groups. It would also help if we read the life of a saint, as well as get used to read the Bible, receive the Eucharist and go to Confession regularly. All these measures help us to continue forming our conscience and aid us to make good and wise decisions in life.



WHAT CAN HINDER THE VOICE OF CONSCIENCE?

As has already been discussed, it is wise to identify those factors that may hinder us when we are choosing what is right and what is wrong. First of all, we should be well informed about what we are going to choose, because **ignorance or lack of information** can be a hindrance. We should also consider our environment, which may affect our choice, as when, for example, we

conclude, "Isn't everybody doing so?" The goodness of a deed does not only depend on the number of people doing it. Today, we are living in a society where Christian values and moral principles are being set aside. It is our duty as Christians to keep considering this fact.



MATURITY

An expression, which we sometimes come across, is "How much he has matured!" But, what does it mean exactly? One matures in diverse aspects of one's humanity: **psychologically, physically and spiritually.**

PSYCHOLOGICAL MATURITY

Psychological maturity refers to how one behaves emotionally. It is the ability of reacting satisfactorily in different situations of life. One reaches satisfactory or adequate or acceptable maturity in life when one is able to know how and when to act in particular situations or circumstances.

Maturity also means that one does what one is expected to do and does it seriously. Mature students study and seek to learn and also strive hard to do what they are asked to do. When we were young, we did not bother about the way we behaved or about what we were not supposed to say in particular moments. Indeed, children delight grown ups with their innocence. Now that we have grown up, we realise that things have changed, that our emotions have changed and we even take care how to behave. We notice that we become attracted to others with whom we want to start a loving relationship. One is psychologically mature when one

knows which is the **limit** in all that one does. One does not allow one's emotions to run away with one; thus, one knows when to joke and when to be serious, when to chat away and when to remain silent and listen.





SPIRITUAL MATURITY

There is what is called **spiritual maturity**, which refers to **an individual's relationship with God**.

This type of maturity measures the depth of one's relationship with God by allowing God to guide and lead one. For one to grow in a relationship with someone, one has first to get to know that someone. To get to know God, one has to become familiar with God's Word and read spiritual writings. One can also acquire a mature spiritual relationship with God through prayer. Spiritual maturity does not only mean that one gets to know a lot about God or that one feels deeply about God. One reaches spiritual maturity by growing in what are called **virtues**. Among these virtues, we find **humility, patience and love**. Humility is the particular quality of how one looks at oneself and at others.

Humble persons know their capabilities and are not conceited. They are not proud or arrogant and do not look down on others.

The virtue of tolerance means that one is able to tolerate others who are different, both in appearance and in their beliefs. It also means that one is perseverant, willing to be patient and wait. Another virtue that makes us spiritually mature is that of love. Love incorporates diverse qualities. St. Paul says:

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

(1 Corinthians 13. 4-8).

Every aspect of maturity that we have talked about is a **lifelong process**. One never ceases to mature and each stage in life has its own particular maturity. Not everyone reaches maturity at the same stage in life; there are those who mature early, while others take longer. One must not compare oneself to one's friend because everybody is different. Persons come from differing backgrounds. All life experiences help one to grow up and mature.



GUIDED BY CORRECT MORAL DECISIONS

Imagine you are walking along somewhere and on the ground you see a wallet containing a large sum of money. What do you do: take the wallet to the nearest police station in the hope that the person who lost it would ask for it there or do you keep it? The answer to this question is tied to what we call **morality**.

But, what exactly is the meaning of morality? Various thinkers over the ages have tried to answer this important question. Morality has to do with the **good one ought to do and with the wrong one is not supposed to do**. Each society has a set of moral qualities which establish for each citizen what to do. For example, one must not steal or evade

tax. One must not harm others because they are different and one must respect the opinions of others. Anybody who disregards these qualities is penalised. These rules are enforced, so that there is **order and stability** in society.



CHRISTIAN MORALITY

The sources of **Christian Morality** are found in the **Bible**, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. There is also the **Church Magisterium**, made up of the teachings of the Pope and the Bishops, who shed light on the moral

issues of contemporary society. Every now and then, the Pope issues what is called an encyclical or exhortation or apostolic letter to give a clear picture of the way the Christian has to behave when faced with moral issues, such as abortion and euthanasia. This is not a question of what one likes to do or what one does not like to do. This is a question of the good one has always to do in order to be a better Christian.



BELIEF IN GOD MAKES A DIFFERENCE

A question, which is sometimes asked, is: "Can a person be morally good without God?" Many are of the opinion that this is possible because there are many unbelievers who are good persons. But, now we are going to see the **difference which God makes** in our lives so that we can be morally good persons. If one does not refer to someone or something, one cannot say that what one is doing or believing in, is right or wrong. Also, if one does not learn that something is wrong, one cannot understand that what one is doing is wrong. It is God who provides us with an objective reference to moral values. Objectivity means that something is universally good for everyone.

As Christians, we believe that God is loving, patient, merciful, good, forgiving and just. Having God as a reference, the Christian realises if something is right or wrong. Those who do not believe in God lack this reference and their actions are based only on their own perception of what is right or wrong. Their ideas may be subjective and may not necessarily be universally good. This is what is frequently happening in our society: we are manipulating what is good or bad according to the ideas of individuals and not because there is God, who is the source of all good in life. Individuals have come to rely too much on their own subjective ideas of what is good or bad. They reason like this, "Once I am all right, everybody else is all right as well! Once I feel comfortable, why should I care about others?"

The history of humanity shows how far man can go without God. One can end up killing and torturing others, like Hitler did in the Second World War. This happened because God was not present in the life of man, to serve him as a reference about what he could do or not do. If one places God at the centre of one's life, then one respects oneself and is able to respect others and one's environment.

THE COMMANDMENTS

The commandments God gave us through Moses are the **basis of Christian morality**. God tells us, "Love your neighbour as yourself." This is the foundation on which one builds what is objectively good, such as **generosity, sacrificing oneself for others, equality** and various other qualities which transform a person into someone of good morality. The commandments also help one to identify what is bad, such as egoism, abuse and discrimination.

If one goes through life trying to do that which is morally good, that which agrees with the teaching of the Church and that which reflects God, consequently, one achieves a spiritually mature life. If a law is about to be implemented in a country, one must form an opinion based, not on what one thinks but based on one's Christian morality, on what God says is good and which, after all, can be found in what we call natural law. It is to be stressed that one reaches Christian maturity by praying and receiving the sacraments regularly.

LEARNING TO THINK OF OTHERS

As a member of a sports team, like football or netball, one cannot think only of oneself but plays as part of the team. A player achieves success not only by showing his or her skills by scoring and helping the team to win but by exercising **teamwork** with the other members of the team. The team scores because there is good co-ordination among all the players and no self thinking. A player works and sees that the other players are also striving because the final aim is that the team wins. The success of the individual and that of the team go hand in hand. Nobody should be excluded in a team and everybody is important.

THE COMMON GOOD

The example given above helps us to understand the meaning of the words "Common Good." In his encyclical 'Mater et Magistra', Pope John XXIII described the common good as a **social characteristic which gives men opportunity** both personally and even as members of a community. This social quality also helps one to better one's life and achieve one's life ideal.





The common good should be **accessible to everyone** so that all can make use of it, when and as often as needed. As citizens, we also have the possibility of making use of it and nobody should be restrained from obtaining what it can provide. A few examples of the common good are: **education, healthcare and social help**. Citizens are in duty bound to contribute to the common good. They pay **taxes** so that the government can augment the common good and provide more benefits from the wealth accumulated from all. When persons give their contribution to society, they are improving their own social life and that of others, as well as being responsible citizens.

By acting in this manner, we are not only **responsible citizens** but also **good Christians**. Jesus himself talked about how the Christian should behave in society, when he said, *"Give therefore, to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."* (Matthew 22,22). A Christian does not reason, "What is important is that I have a good relationship with God. And that is enough." One should show one's Christianity in all one says, in all one thinks and in all one does. Indeed, to be a Christian means to live a life that is fitting to the God in whom you believe.



One cannot keep what one has to oneself. **Sharing what one has** is a good thing. One should be responsible and not think only about oneself; this behaviour is egotistic or selfish. For example, teachers cannot keep to themselves all that they have learnt. They share what they know and have studied with their students, in order that these are able to make their own life better and have a satisfactory position in life later on. This is an example of how one can give one's share to the common good.

WHAT AM I GOING TO DO?

How can I, a student, give my share to the common good as a responsible citizen? First and foremost, I should **appreciate what I have** and also all that my parents and others, who wish me well, do for me. Secondly, I should straightaway **stop being an egoist** and share any talents

I have with my colleagues; I can share subject notes or offer physical help to anyone in need. I can also **care for the environment** and the materials I use that are derived from it. Examples of this aspect are the library books which I borrow, the school desks and chairs and the gym apparatus. As a Christian I cannot claim that I can break them or damage them because they do not belong to me. Future students would like to use them like I have done.

These qualities will help me to become a responsible citizen in the future. The common good works in this way: One makes use of the things, benefits and resources one needs but, at the same time, **does not abuse of them**, so that everyone can enjoy them without hindrance.

EXPLORING THE WORLD OF WORK

Although the Bible does not give direct systematic principles about the world of work, it contains various references to different types of work. Jesus himself referred to the worker and different sorts of work in his parables, like the farmer, the shepherd and the fisherman. This shows that Jesus showed great respect to every type of work that existed at the time. Even God is presented as a worker who took six days to create the world.

The Bible does not provide us with direct answers to the various difficulties workers face today in the world of work. We, therefore, have to turn to

the teaching of the Church to see how the Church interprets the fundamental orientation of the Bible in the light of the present circumstances.

There are many **Church documents** which deal with work. The first important document in this field is Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 1891. Other encyclicals elaborating on the subjects treated in *Rerum Novarum* were published on diverse anniversaries of this same encyclical. Another important document of Vatican Council II, known as the pastoral constitution of the Church in today's world, is *Gaudium et Spes* (1965).



It is in these documents of the Church, together with references found in the Bible, that Christians seek the religious and moral principles when trying to solve particular concrete problems connected with work, which crop up from time to time.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO BRING GOD TO OTHERS

To Christians, the place of work can be an opportunity of evangelization, since, by the way they behave, they can bring God to others. Often they meet with difficulties at the place of work, like pressure and stress; yet, if they deal with these difficulties correctly, they can be a **light to their colleagues**. Obviously, Christians can also bring God to others by word of mouth, by giving good advice to their friends. If Christians understand this and commit themselves to bring God

to their work colleagues, the work place becomes a welcoming environment, a pleasure to work in. Work is no longer considered as being compulsory.

THE AIMS OF WORK

The principal aim why one works is to **earn one's daily living**. This is very obvious because one cannot live if one does not acquire what is needed in order to live. Indeed, one can only survive by working. Work is also a **partnership with God's work**. Through work, one is constantly changing and developing the environment, making it more fitting for oneself and for others. Being the image of God, one is called to develop and "create" new things from those already existing. This follows from God's command to man, "*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.*" (Genesis 1, 28).



Another scope of work is that through it, one can continue to **learn and develop** one's talents and capabilities. Finally, work is considered to be a means of **development in solidarity**. In time, work developed into work with others and work for others. In the past, man was autosufficient, doing everything by himself and for himself. He reared animals to eat, sowed crops and used his skills in woodworking and construction. When life developed further and man built towns and life became more hurried, he began to do more specific work. This led to more solidarity, as everyone started to depend on the work of others.

HUMAN RIGHTS AT THE PLACE OF WORK

As persons are created in the image of God, it is important that their **rights** are protected at their work place. Persons should never be denied their rights. What are these rights? The main right is that persons **find work**. This is why all political parties always include the theme of work in their electoral campaign agenda. Whoever is in government, strives to decrease unemployment and increase the citizens' work opportunities. Workers have the right to **learn and be trained** in their work to be able to develop their skills and abilities.

Another human right is that workers are **paid a just wage**. Employers should not abuse of their workers but should give them the pay they deserve. Workers have the right for **good conditions** at their work place, with time for rest and reasonable working hours, in an environment which cares for their health. Those who work have the right to **join unions or associations** which defend their interests and they also have the right to go out on **strike**.

It is also important that there should be a **sense of equality** between men and women and also with individuals of different sexual orientations. Everyone should feel comfortable at work, no matter the sexual orientation. There should be no discrimination at the place of work.

DUTIES OF WORKERS

All individuals have duties to observe at their work place. They should **work responsibly and not shirk their work** or waste time. It is to be remembered that workers are paid and if they do not do their duties, they are guilty of theft. Workers have the duty to **do their work in the best way possible** and not shoddily . Obviously, they should **take care of the assets** at the work place, such as machines and tools with which they work. They should not have the mentality that what is not theirs can be damaged.

RESPECT FOR LIFE

The Christian believes that God created man in his image and that life is a **gift** given to him by God. Man does not only have to **take care of it and protect it** but also has to increase and develop it: *"Increase and multiply and fill the earth."* (Genesis 1, 28). This is a responsibility God gave man.

Everybody likes receiving presents. One must always show gratitude to the person who gives one a gift. The donor is pleased on seeing that the receiver is making good use of the present. The same applies to God who gave us life. The difference is that while God gave us life as a gift, God still assumes absolute power on our lives. **Nobody should replace God** and take decisions for himself or others, where life is concerned. No person has the right to commit suicide or take the life of others. The commandment **"You shall not kill"** (Ezechiel 20,13) strongly prohibits and

condemns any grave harm one can cause to others, not only by deed but also by thought. As believers, we should do no harm but help and do good to others.

When God sent his son, Jesus, on earth, he showed great respect for life. This can be seen in the Gospels which record the miracles which Jesus worked on the sick and needy. He wanted to deliver persons from various forms of obstacles in their life. These miracles are proof that Jesus was interested in the **good of the whole person**, that is, not only the person's soul but also the person's body.

Although the teaching of the Church with regard to the protection and respect of life is clear, it is not always obeyed. Many pro-life values, which we as Christians should protect, are being questioned and effaced. Today's society considers some types of killing as human rights. Here we are referring to **abortion, euthanasia,**



terrorism (which, lately, is constantly in the news) and **other forms of killing**, which are gradually being introduced in various societies around the world, as being good and just.

ABORTION

Abortion means the **removal of the foetus from the womb of a woman** who is pregnant. In many countries of the world, this has become legal and considered as progress. One argument declares that a woman has the right to decide what happens to her body. Others do not fully agree with abortion, but reason, that in certain circumstances, like rape or where there is danger to the woman's life, abortion should be considered.

The Church insists that life should be protected and respected from the very beginning of its existence (from its conception, the time of fertilisation). As soon as it is conceived, the life that has started is distinct from the life of the mother. According to genetic science, the fundamental characteristics of the individual are already potentially present in that small life. The fertilised egg is already a human being. This means that the mother is carrying a life in her womb which is not part of her body, on which she can decide. In her womb, she is carrying the life of another person, who has the right to live. The right to life should never be denied to anyone for any reason whatsoever.

IVF

When considering the respect for human life from the moment of conception, one includes the **freezing of embryos**, which is on the increase in many

countries. But what is it exactly? A couple who cannot conceive naturally is helped by medical interventions through which the woman becomes pregnant. The technical word for this process is IVF (In Vitro Fertilisation). It is a procedure whereby the man's sperm is joined to the woman's egg in the laboratory and when fertilisation takes place, it is placed in the woman's womb. The problem is that with this laboratory-assisted system, many lives are being fertilised and not all are placed in a womb. IVF in itself raises several ethical issues for Christians. There is a more difficult question of what to do with the other lives that are not used, that is, with the other embryos. Some of them are used for medical research and experiments; others are frozen in case the woman would want to use them later on or are given for adoption to some other woman who cannot have children (surrogate mother). In certain cases, these lives are discarded as trash. According to the Church, this practice is creating medical, psychological and legal problems. Indeed, are we taking good care of the life that God has given us?

There are two Church documents that deal with this theme. One is *Donum Vitae*, published by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith in 1987 and the other is *Dignitas Personae* of 2008.

In article 18 of *Dignitas Personae*, the Church refers to each embryo that is not implanted in a woman's womb as an orphan, to whom the gift of life is denied. These two documents condemn the use of embryos for scientific experiments, when they are given in adoption to another person and even when they remain frozen.

EUTHANASIA

Euthanasia is the **disguised killing of individuals who are terminally ill** as their illness is incurable and are in great suffering. This is considered as another type of killing, which goes directly against God's will. No one has the right to take things into one's own hands and decide when to end a life. God's grace continues to work, even though one is ill and there is no hope of being cured. There have been cases when persons, who had no hope of recovery, were miraculously medically cured. Moreover, others became converted, changed their lives and succeeded to find God in the most difficult periods of their lives. What appears to be impossible to us, is not impossible to God. According to the teaching of the Church, even in dire and painful circumstances, no one has the right to end one's life; no one has the right to commit suicide or ask someone else to help one do it.

TERRORISM

Terrorism is a form of threat to humans all over the world. All countries are constantly fighting all types of terrorism. The aim of terrorism is to **intimidate large masses** of persons, by killing many innocents, even children. This type of killing also goes against the right to life.

SUICIDE

Suicide occurs when one **decides to kill oneself**. One may commit suicide by various means and in various forms. When persons reach this state, it means that they have lost all hope in life and their problems are so great that death

seems to be their only solution. Often, they do not realise what great problems they create to their loved ones, by choosing this way out. The Church does not pass judgement on these persons and it is always ready to offer its help, when possible, to these vulnerable persons. It is very important to seek help when one falls into a deep depression. Nobody should feel embarrassed or uncomfortable about asking for help. A life can be saved with a little help.

THE DEATH PENALTY

The death penalty is a court sentence which the Church condemns. This is a sentence passed on those who commit great crimes in society and are condemned to death by the law courts of some countries. In Malta, the death penalty is no longer part of the country's legislation but there are various countries where it forms part of their legislative system. Christians cannot accept the fact that persons are killed because they themselves have committed murder or some other serious crime. This is not different from the concept of "a tooth for a tooth" mentality, which Jesus condemned. One who has killed should be given a suitable punishment but not the death penalty. One must be given the opportunity to understand one's evil and change one's life. Paragraph 2267 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, "Christians should seek to do their best so that those who have erred are given help to repent and change their lives" (Paragraph 2267). Nothing is solved by imposing the death penalty, as one wrongdoing cannot be justified with another wrongdoing.

It is worthwhile to think about how one is to decide in an ethical and moral way when faced with difficult decisions, such as these that have been mentioned. It is true that in life one is presented with difficult situations, but one must never decide in an egoistic way. A young girl may be raped or becomes pregnant from a relationship, but she cannot deny the gift of life that God gives to individuals. She may feel that her life is going to change or that she is not capable of bringing up the baby; she still must try to find a solution or ask for help. She is not going to solve the problem by ending the life in her womb. Often, after aborting the baby, she will face greater psychological problems.

It is likewise with euthanasia. It is true that nobody is pleased to see dear ones suffering in vain, but God's will is greater than physical pain. One should appreciate this and keep on fighting for life till the last moments.

One should always respect life and think of the consequences rather than decide hurriedly and haphazardly. A hurried decision may change the life of a person once and for all and it will then be too late to go back. Besides having always a formed conscience, Christians may help themselves by following the **teaching of the Church** and seek **advice** from experts so that they reach their decisions with a clean and morally good conscience.



LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Man, created by God in his image and given life as a gift, is an important part of creation. Also, we read that all that God made is “good” and therefore, **the body is a good reality** (cf. Genesis 1, 31). God placed in the body certain qualities which give man, with all his limitations, the potentiality of reaching fulfilment. Man is not made only of body, but of body and soul. In Genesis we read: *“Then the Lord formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being”* (Genesis 2,7). We have to take care of these two attributes, the body and the soul.

It is through the body that we develop our talents and capacities. When our body is tired, we cannot fulfil what we wish to do; when part of our body is ill, we cannot function as we want. It is

also through the body that we enter into relationships with others. Therefore, we have to care for our body as we do for our soul. Co-ordination and harmony should exist between the soul and the body, the heart and the mind. When we act, we should do so with great care.

I WILL MAKE HIM AN APPROPRIATE HELPER

In Genesis we also read that God said, *“It is not good that the man shall be alone. I will make him a helper as his partner ... So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept, then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man”* (Genesis 2, 18, 21-23). These words prove that man has not been created to live alone; for one to love and be loved

is God's original plan. Whatever God created is good and beautiful and **love and sexuality are part of the beauty of the human being**. It is through sinning, that we ourselves have made these bad and dirty. It would be of benefit to us if we do not destroy the harmony that God created. This harmony is disrupted when, we deliberately choose to allow our instincts and desires to control our reason, and we end up annoying and hurting those we love with our actions. To protect well this harmony, we should **not change partners at whim**. In our relationship between the two of us, we should be **able to wait** and not have sexual relations casually. We should **steer clear of the vice of pornography**, which dirties our minds and makes us look on others as objects. It is important that we look on the other person as a creature of God.

THE ATTRACTION TOWARDS OTHERS

It is quite normal that, at our age, we start feeling an attraction towards another person and wish to build a loving relationship with the chosen person. However, it is important to take one step at a time and **not to hurry** because doing things hurriedly can result in undesirable consequences. When one meets someone to whom one is attracted, it is wise for each to get to know the other. The couple should grow together and discuss things to learn each other's talents and qualities. It is also good to find out about any weaknesses in character and together to try to overcome them. It is true that emotions may run high but one should keep in mind that **if one loves a person, one does not use this person to satisfy oneself**. Sexuality is a means of

communication between two who really love each other. Often, young persons say, "We have been together a long time and we love each other.... We cannot live without each other." Many times, persons do not understand exactly the meaning of the word 'love' and, indeed, it is not easy to understand it.

LOVE

In the Maltese language we use the word 'love' to mean different things; this wide usage of this word does not help us to understand what it precisely means. We use the word to refer to material things we like and also to the love between two persons. In the Greek language, there are three words which all mean love, but with different meanings. These are: *eros*, *philia* and *agape*. **Eros** is the **spontaneous or natural** attraction between a man and a woman. Erotic love, hence, is the fullness of love. However, erotic love is never found by itself, because by itself it is unable to fill one's heart..

The love which fills a person's heart is that which **is open to other persons through friendship (philia)** and that love whereby **one gives one's life for another (agape)**. Man is created for *agape*, because man has not been created to live by himself but to be given to others, by seeking the good of others before his own. It is through *agape* that *eros* finds itself, as that attraction which, when orientated and purified, leads to the opening of the self and the total giving of the self to others, body and soul. Here, *eros* does not become a god that has enslaved me, because I become a plaything of my impulses. On the contrary, I live as a free person, without

being commanded simply by my body; indeed, I choose to love as a body and a soul fused together.

One should appreciate that love **requires many sacrifices** and one must think of the other person's interests. Love is not simply the sexual act and no person should be treated as an object. For a Christian, the love between two persons is there so that each will help the other to become closer to God, who calls the couple to marry so that they **both become holy**. When two persons feel that they are ready to give themselves completely to each other, they are then joined together in the **sacrament of matrimony**.

All the great religions believe that the sexual act is reserved to the married couple, where there is something binding and a total trust. In the Catholic religion, conjugal sexuality should be exercised in marriage as it means the giving of self to the loved person and this is something which should be treasured. All religions are of this belief, not to deny persons from enjoying this beautiful reality but to protect the beauty of sexuality and not reduce it merely to an object. When one is the owner of something precious, one does not give it to the first person one meets. First, one gets to know the person to make sure that one is not going to be duped and later dumped as if one has never existed. **Conjugal sexuality is a precious thing** between a man and a woman, who are both willing to spend their lifetime together in mutual

trust. Faith in God helps persons to avoid problems and difficulties which have no remedy. There are difficulties, including psychological and material ones, which render sex outside of marriage rather risky. Sexuality does not refer only to genital sexuality. Sexuality is an integral aspect of every human person, so much so that we speak of a healthy sexuality for all human beings, even those who are not married.

Youngsters, being adolescent, often do not think of consequences as they look only for adventure and consider only the pleasure of the moment. They forget that one playing with fire may get burnt. Sometimes, indeed, we hear of teenagers becoming pregnant. Difficulties have to be faced because looking after a baby requires a lot of work and responsibilities. Moreover, at a young age, persons are neither mature enough nor capable of looking after a baby.

Actually the young mothers themselves need being looked after! Not all parents of pregnant teenagers can afford to look after their children's babies, though the teenagers may expect them to do so. Such a pregnancy can easily dissipate the dreams and ambitions of those involved. Because bringing up a baby requires much money and sacrifices, these teenagers have to forget their careers, their studies and their dreams and start working. Moreover, there is also no guarantee that their male partners are going to back them up, as

there is yet no **commitment** or anything binding between the couple. In this case, these teenagers become **single parents** with grave problems. This is why persons should think things out carefully and weigh things before acting.

When one has an informed and a formed conscience and follows authentic human values in life, one can avoid

such problems. One does well to look at conjugal sexuality as an act to be done in the context of marriage and wait before starting to have it. Sex before marriage is bad not only because the Church says so, but also because it can lead one into **difficulties** for which one is not prepared.

However, let us look at love as that emotion which should guide all our actions. In this way, sex finds its correct place, and through it the married couple can show their love to each other and express their total self-giving to each other.











