

# CIVILISATIONS IN CONVERSATION: AN INITIATIVE FOR VALLETTA

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## *1. Globalization*

The speed of development of Technology as well as the globalized economy has far surpassed the capacity of different cultures to develop at their own pace.

The Western consumerist model of development, garbled and confused as it has become because of these same forces, is increasingly becoming dominant in people's minds, whether by way of active or resigned acceptance or by way of increasingly violent rejection.

Technology has imposed a life-style of immediacy, often depthless, displacing the importance of communitarian memory in the development of culture.

Immediacy has often become a predicament, where a sense of identity and value has fallen victim to a search for mere quantitative, and fleeting, gratification and contentment.

A new kind of polarization within and between people has thus tended to set in, with on the one hand, old certainties on the great questions of truth, life and identity being brushed aside as mere irrelevant icons of antiquity, and on the other hand a strong resurgence by way of reaction, of absolutism with modern clothes, in the guise of the various fundamentalisms that have been sprouting all over the World.

## *2. A politics of identity*

Indeed, where the last Century saw the development and clash of politics based on ideology, the new Century can see a confrontation and possible clash of politics based on identity.

As the only known species on the planet that fundamentally tends to seek meaning in life, these reactions are understandable, but cannot be left to their own devices without being offered a new direction by the Community of Nations.

The challenge we face is to transform these tensions into positive drives for rediscovering dignity in diversity, where different identities and civilisations are seen as an enriching factor rather than a threat. Where mankind can rediscover, adopting Sacks' term, "the Dignity of Difference", avoiding the clash of civilisations as posited and reflected upon by Huntington.

For mankind to be successful, it must find ways of encouraging conversation among different civilisations, and the different manners of understanding identity.

Issues associated with Religion, and confrontation based on different religious fundamentalisms, has emerged as such a powerful presence on the world stage because, as noted by Sacks, religion is indeed one of the great answers to the question of identity.

The politics of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century cannot continue to insist on the strict division of the secular from the religious that developed in the West since the age of enlightenment. However, a new language and approach is needed, embracing diversity as opposed to fearing it.

As noted by Sacks, the way forward would appear to necessitate two fundamental conversations. The first would be between religious leaders on the one hand, and politicians and business leaders on the other, as to the direction globalization can or should take. The second conversation, no less urgent and important, would be between religions, or civilisations, in Huntington's words.

Sacks puts it succinctly:

"globalization is summoning the world's great faiths to a supreme challenge, one that we have been able to avoid in the past but can do so no longer.... Can we recognize God's image in one who is not in my image?"

With the recent passing of John Paul II, already being widely acclaimed as John Paul the Great not least for his consistent efforts to promote inter-religious dialogue, respect and fraternity, many would encourage communities everywhere to spur on such efforts with renewed commitment and vigour.

### **3. *A new vocation for Malta?***

In our view, the community of nations needs a beacon for mankind, inspiring it along such a path. If there is such a thing possible, this will have to be a nation small enough to be seen as friendly, rather than a threat, by all nations. It will have to be a nation that has been imbued by different cultural

and political influences, but who is sovereign in its own right, as to claim and command respect among the family of nations.

We believe that Malta, as a European island State with a historical Mediterranean vocation, can evolve into a *World Centre for the advancement of dialogue and solidarity among Civilisations*, where such conversations and dialogue can take place. A new United Nations centre, based on the celebration, as well as appreciation of and learning about the diversity of culture among mankind, as an important element in understanding the multi-faceted identity of man.

Malta, having been a playground upon whose soil foreign powers have battled each other for Centuries, can now come forward with its own vision of and proposal for different civilisations to come together, not to become one, but to celebrate the dignity and mutual enrichment of their diversity.

A Centre where different civilizations meet to learn more about each other, rather than persuade each other that their own truth is somehow truer than the truth of the other. A Centre where we can all learn to understand that if truth has many faces and view-points, this would not be an argument for mere relativism, but a celebration of the fact that our own view-point can be enriched by and because of the view-points of others.

#### **4. *Valletta, the perfect microcosm***

Valletta, in particular, can become such a Centre for different civilizations to come together in conversation born out of such mutual respect.

Valletta's origin as an example how leaders from different countries can cooperate in confronting a common enemy in war, can evolve into a vocation where looking at a stranger as an enemy is as misconceived as projecting onto others the weaknesses we find within ourselves.

Valletta's fortifications were built by one group of foreign powers against another. The Maltese, who hosted and suffered, often unwittingly, as a result of such polarisation, can only respond by offering a transformation of such bastions of separation into bastions of containment. A containment that celebrates the dignity of mankind. A dignity that is enhanced and enriched by the diversity in the political, cultural and spiritual aspirations expressed by man around the world.

#### **5. *The New Parliament***

This initiative originated from among the ranks of the Caravaggio Foundation, as a proposal to build a Caravaggio Centre for the Arts and Mediterranean Civilization on the site of the ruins of the old Royal Opera

House. The Maltese Government has since declared an intention to use the site to house a new Parliament building.

This has led the Foundation to reflect further on the importance of building better liaison between politics and culture, with ideas that Malta must find its own vocation, areas where it can continue contributing to the Family of Nations in its own unique way, as opposed to necessarily copying others, and trying to be who and what we are not.

As a result, the Foundation has considered that the proposal should go beyond the confines of the Foundation itself and become a National proposal born out of a careful reflection on our heritage and roots, coupled with the effects of globalization and technology.

The artist known by the name Caravaggio was in many ways an enigma, a victim of his own circumstances, but nevertheless an expression of the often tragic genius of humanity. We consider it apt that his name be tied, even if only in inspiration, to such an initiative and project.

**An initiative that will be Malta's own contribution for Global dialogue commencing from art and culture, so that people do not remain victims of circumstances, in an inexorable chain of action and reaction, cause and effect. The dignity of man ultimately rests in the fact that he can break such chain with the fundamental gift with which he has been bestowed: the gift of choice.**

Within Valletta, the Royal Opera House was a celebrated palace of culture that fell victim to the disastrous capacity of man to wage war. What should be rebuilt on the same site should be a testament to the future of man's capacity to turn tragedy into new hope.

*A World Centre for Celebrating Civilizations in Conversation* will surely be such a testament. A friend and contributor to the Caravaggio Foundation, Architetto Giovanni Trevisan of Venice, has drawn up preliminary sketches of how the site of the Royal Opera House as well as Freedom Square can appear following such a development, and can be viewed in the Foundation's web-site at [www.caravaggio.com/projects/valletta/operahouse](http://www.caravaggio.com/projects/valletta/operahouse)

Of course this was done prior to the publication of the Government's decision to designate the area for future development as the Nation's Parliament. If a World Centre proves incompatible with having the chambers of Parliament (another venue for civilisation in conversation) in the same location, then another suitable site can hopefully be found within the walls of Valletta itself.

**Thus, an initiative for Valletta will become a new initiative for mankind as a whole. A further contribution of this small island state to the common heritage of mankind.**

**Such a contribution has already been made once, and acknowledged by the UN and the Community of Nations when Malta had just emerged from colonialisation in the 1960's.**

**Now that we have joined the Union of European Nations, our intrinsically Mediterranean vocation would appear to prompt us towards such a direction.**