

Notes on Archbishop Michael Gonzi's Vision of Education

Sergio Grech

sergiogrech@yahoo.com

Abstract: Before the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church believed that the responsibility for rearing children belonged to parents and she also contended that education belonged pre-eminently to her domain. In practice, she forbade Catholic parents from sending their children to non-Catholic schools that were neutral or mixed. Such teachings are to be kept in mind while understanding Archbishop Michael Gonzi's position as regards the role of education in Malta. Archbishop Gonzi was in office between 1943 and 1976.

Keywords: Archbishop Gonzi, History of Education, University of Malta, Holy See

Introduction

Before the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church firmly believed that the responsibility for rearing children belonged to the parents of the respective children (O'Kane, T.J., 1961). Education was seen as "the information of mind and the formation of character" (O'Kane, T.J., 1961). She asserted that "education belongs pre-eminently to the Church by reason of a double title in the supernatural order, conferred exclusively upon her by God himself, absolutely superior therefore to any other title in the natural order" (Pope Pius XI, 1929). It therefore followed that the State had no absolute right over the education of children but only a relative and qualified one (O'Kane, 1961). The Catholic Church opposed "every system of education which had its foundation and inspiration in naturalism" and above all rejected co-education

(O’Kane, 1961). The Church forbade Catholic parents from sending their children to non-Catholic schools whether those educational units were neutral (from which religion was excluded) or mixed (open to Catholics and non-Catholics) (O’Kane, 1961).

In the encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri*, the Catholic Church maintained that boys and girls had to be educated separately (Pope Pius XI, 1929). That model was adopted in Malta’s educational system and prevailed also in the *modus operandi* of Catholic lay organisations. Catholic organisations like the M.U.S.E.U.M. (established in 1907) and the Malta Catholic Action (founded in 1930) had their respective branches for boys and girls and also for men and women. For instance, on 21 May 1959, the Catholic Action’s *Direttorju*, the highest authority within that organisation, was against its Tarxien Male Section’s demand to involve female actors in a theatrical production produced by them.¹

Hence, the Catholic Church believed that religious studies had to be part of the academic formation of the student. She maintained that it was a grave violation of natural and divine law to hamper or hinder or reject the teaching of religion in schools. The Catholic Church held that “those who attempt such a policy violate the rights of God, the rights of the Church, the rights of the parents, and the rights of the child.” (O’Kane, 1961).

The Episcopate of Archbishop Michael Gonzi

Such teachings are key in understanding Archbishop Michael Gonzi and the position of his episcopate vis-à-vis the role of education in Malta. Archbishop Gonzi was in office in a transitional period between 1943 and 1976. He himself was trained in post-Risorgimento seminaries and universities during the pontificates of Popes Leo XIII (1878-1903) and Pius X (1903-1914). That was an epoch when the Roman Catholic Church, because of the Italian unification, had lost the Papal States whilst “it was battling on against a liberal, nationalist, materialistic and scientific age” (Bokenkotter, 2004). Mgr Michael Gonzi, a former Labour Senator, rose through the ranks of the Church organisation, first as Bishop of Gozo (1924-1943) and, from October 1943 as Archbishop of Malta.

¹ *Minuti Direttorju Azzjoni Kattolika*, 21 May 1959, Malta Catholic Action, Catholic Institute, Floriana, Malta.

Apart from leading the Maltese archdiocese, Mgr Gonzi was an influential political figure. His political clout was recognised by the (British) Colonial Office, and everybody treaded carefully to maintain good relations with the spiritual leader of Malta's diocese. For Archbishop Gonzi, the British were a protecting power. As long as the British remained in Malta, he felt that the Church was safe and would be protected.

For Mgr Gonzi, Dominic Mintoff, the leader of the Malta Labour Party as of 1949, was an apostate and a communist. Archbishop Gonzi's assessment of the situation was that Mintoff wanted to "*staccare il popolo dalla Chiesa e relegare questa alla sacrestia*" (Grech, 2004). On the other hand, Mr. Mintoff regarded Archbishop Gonzi as an obstacle in his attempt to do away with what he regarded as medieval privileges enjoyed by the Catholic Church in Malta. Furthermore, Mintoff based his crusade against the Church's hegemony on six issues, that is to say the separation between Church and State, a secular state which tolerated all religions, civil marriage, a limitation of the privileges enjoyed by the Church, censorship to be in government's hands and the use of violence in certain situations (Koster, 1984).

During the British period, the Catholic Church had penetrated all spheres of Maltese life. As Fenech (1997) contended, she had succeeded where the secular leadership had failed, obtaining a relationship of parity with the colonial power. The Church in Malta was a strong institution that responded to the spiritual and temporal needs of the people and offered security in an era when insecurity was the order of the day (Manicaro, 2004). Archbishop Gonzi's episcopate was during a period of time when Malta progressed from a colony to a sovereign state, and economically it had to seek adequate measures for survival in an epoch when its strategic value was losing its importance (Spiteri, 1997). In fact, this transition interested Archbishop Gonzi closely since he was concerned that the changes in the mentioned areas would rock the Church's traditional role in society, and that secularism, along with communism, would take over instead.

The Pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church's View regarding the Teaching Profession and University

The Church classified good teachers as “those with a clear professional Catholic conscience, a soul burning with apostolic zeal... Good teachers... are careful to educate rather than merely to instruct. They are capable, above all, of forming and moulding souls chiefly through contact with their own” (Pope Pius XI, 1929). It was not a coincidence that the Catholic Action organisation had branches for teachers and graduates.

One of Archbishop Gonzi's first speeches as the spiritual leader of the Malta diocese was dedicated to the teachers' community. He made it clear that theirs was not an easy profession since it carried a lot of responsibilities. He referred to them as one of the biggest moral forces in Malta (Gonzi, 1949). Archbishop Gonzi expected teachers to lead an exemplary private life (Gonzi, 1949). His message was very clear: the Catholic principles had to set in all pores.²

In the 1960s, the Labour leader, Mr Dominic Mintoff, was objecting to the Malta Church having a final word in the education sector. During the Independence talks, he raised the point that parents should have the right to decide if their children should attend religion classes or not.³ Such comments were not welcomed by Catholic factions. The religious organization, Catholic Action, responded that only the children of non-Catholic parents were exempted from catechism classes in Maltese schools.⁴ The same principle was upheld in schools administered by religious orders; students who were not of a Roman Catholic creed were not obliged to sit for examinations.⁵

Catholic parents were obliged to give religious education to their children, and such education was viewed as more important than civil education.⁶ Catholic Action posed the question why parents were not given the option to remove from their obligatory lessons the other subjects namely Maltese, English, Mathematics or Geography.⁷ The Labour Party was arguing that lessons in

² “Il-principji Kattoliċi jidhlu fil-pori kollha tagħha. Kollox mela għandu jkun Kattoliku.”

³ *L-Emendi li jolqtu l-Knisja proposti mill-MLP fl-Abbozz tal-Kostituzzjoni ta' Malta* (Malta, Empire Press, 1966), 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

religion were being used to counterattack the arguments that Labour was making from time to time.⁸ One should add that the Catholic Action agreed with the notion that the State should provide religious instruction in government schools.⁹

Mgr Gonzi and the Royal University of Malta

At university level, the Catholic Church ‘mounted pressure’ against Protestant lecturers. In March 1962 Archbishop Michael Gonzi reported to Cardinal Giuseppe Pizzardo, Prefect of the Congregation for Seminaries and Universities, that the Royal University of Malta was employing non-Catholic professors to teach English Literature, Chemistry, Biology and “*qualche altra materia*.”¹⁰

The University of Malta specified in its statutes that no inconsistent teaching with the Catholic religion was allowed (Bonnici, 1975). Promotions at the Royal University of Malta, particularly in the area of theology, required the Malta archbishop’s approval. In fact, the Office of the Lieutenant-Governor had asked for the confirmation of Mgr Joseph Sapiano as Professor of Patristics and Liturgy.¹¹ Some months later, Archbishop Gonzi was asked to confirm Reverend Paul Tabone as Professor of Canon Law.¹²

University students asked permission from the ordinary of their diocese to be able to consult books that were on the *Index Prohibitorum*, a list of books deemed immoral and heretical by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. For instance, Mr Godfrey Zarb Adami had written to Archbishop Gonzi claiming that “whereas your predecessor had been pleased to grant permission to the undersigned to read and retain books and newspapers condemned by the Church, and whereas the period cover said permission is now over, petitioner, whilst professing himself a faithful son of the Holy Mother the Church, most humbly begs the same reason expressed in his first petition, that is to say for

⁸ *Il-Helsien*, 16 August 1963.

⁹ Meeting MLP National Executive and Parliamentary Group on 19 March 1965,

Minutes MLP National Executive and Parliamentary Group 18 March 1964 to 10 June 196

¹⁰ MCA, Letter from Archbishop Michael Gonzi to Cardinal Giuseppe Pizzardo dated 26 March 1962 in AAM, *Fondo Gonzi: Corrispondenza 1962*, Vol. LVI.

¹¹ MCA, Letter sent to the Bishop’s Secretary (17 Mar 1944), *Corrispondenza Gonzi*, Vol. XLII.

¹² MCA, Letter to Archbishop Gonzi (12 Oct 1944), *Corrispondenza Gonzi*, Vol. XLII.

areas of study that said permission be renewed.”¹³ Mr Joseph Zammit Tabona was given permission to read Charles Darwin’s *The Origins of the Species* on condition that the book would not be in reach of other readers while he was perusing it.¹⁴ Advocate Michele Tufigno had petitioned Archbishop Gonzi to be allowed to keep in his personal library a copy of Ugo Foscolo’s *Le Opere*, Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, and Antonio Fogozzaro’s *Leila*.¹⁵ Mr Giuseppe Zammit appealed to Archbishop Gonzi to be granted permission to read *Messianic Prophecy and Aramaic Approach to the Gospels*.¹⁶

Teacher Surveillance

The Church in Malta has had its own schools since medieval times (Dalli, C., 2017). By 1974, the Malta Church had on its roll sixty-eight schools catering for 17,642 students (Bonnici, A., 1975). But one should also add that generally, a Catholic spirit prevailed also in Maltese government schools. In fact, from time to time, these schools were “scrutinised” by the inspector of religious instruction. The latter’s duties included the supervision of the teaching of religion by the class teacher, which was held on a daily basis, and the work done by the Spiritual Directors, who were responsible to hear confession, saying mass and supervising religious teaching. In some schools, there were adequate spaces so that even a chapel could be organised (Grech, 2004).

Furthermore, during his pastoral visits, Archbishop Gonzi made it a point to literally examine students in religious knowledge and to rebuke their teachers in the event that religious knowledge was not being delivered in the correct manner. In fact, the archbishop recorded in the Qrendi Primary School’s Visitors’ Book on 20 November 1970 that “during my third pastoral visitation of the archdiocese, I had the pleasure of visiting this school in connection with my visit to the parish of Qrendi. I personally examined many of the pupils in Religious Instruction and was satisfied with the way most of the pupils

¹³ MCA, Letter from Godfrey Zarb Adami to Archbishop Michael Gonzi dated 8 February 1945 in AAM, *Fondo Gonzi: Corrispondenza Gonzi 1945, Vol. XLIII*.

¹⁴ MCA, Letter from Joseph Zammit Tabona to Archbishop Michael Gonzi dated 23 May 1947 in AAM, *Fondo Gonzi: Corrispondenza Gonzi 1946-1947, Vol. XLIV*.

¹⁵ MCA, Letter from Michele Tufigno to Archbishop Michael Gonzi dated 7 June 1948 in AAM, *Fondo Gonzi: Corrispondenza Gonzi 1948-1949, Vol. XLV*.

¹⁶ MCA, Undated letter from Giuseppe Zammit to Archbishop Michael Gonzi in AAM, *Fondo Gonzi: Corrispondenza Gonzi 1948-1949, Vol. XLV*.

answered my questions. Naturally, I had to take into consideration the fact that the visit took place at the beginning of the new scholastic year.”¹⁷

On the other hand, Archbishop Gonzi rebuked Mr Piju Spiteri, a school teacher at Hal Ghaxaq Primary School, for failing to cover certain aspects of the Religious Instruction syllabus, thereby limiting his students’ knowledge in matters of faith. It later transpired that the teaching to which the archbishop had referred to did not in actual fact form part of the syllabus.¹⁸

While the Curia exercised strict surveillance in schools, control over teacher formation was exercised through two religious congregations, the Nuns of the Sacred Heart and the Brothers of Christian Schools (Bonnici, 1975). Both set up institutions of teacher training, keeping men and women segregated while bordered.

In addition, the Church also had a presence in the awarding of scholarships. The British Council used to ask the archbishop to nominate his representative to serve on the selection board of two scholarships.¹⁹

Compulsory Schooling

In Malta’s case, and in other Catholic countries too, each time the syllabus of religious instruction was updated, the archbishop, or his delegate, was involved, as this was also enshrined in the Constitution of Malta. Pope Pius XI argued that the syllabi had to be designed with the Church’s guidance (Bonnici, 1975). For instance, on 26 September 1955, Rev. Arthur Bonnici, secretary to Archbishop Gonzi, informed the secretary of the Labour Minister of Education, Agatha Barbara, that the Archbishop “has thoroughly examined the new syllabus for religious instruction in secondary schools prepared by the government instruction board and is glad to be able to authorise it as archbishop... he wishes to recommend an addition to the syllabus of an item about the Blessed Virgin: her immaculate conception, virginity, maternity with Assumption.”²⁰

¹⁷ Qrendi Primary School’s Visitors Book, Qrendi Primary, St. Benedict College.

¹⁸ Taped interview with Mr Piju Spiteri, Blata l-Bajda Private Residence, 18 March 2016, Sergio Grech Private Collection.

¹⁹ MCA, Letter to Archbishop Gonzi (18 Dec 1950), *Corrispondenza Gonzi*, Vol. XLVI.

²⁰ MCA, Letter from Archbishop Michael Gonzi to Minister of Education Agatha Barbara dated 26 September 1955 in AAM, *Fondo Gonzi: Corrispondenza 1959*, Vol. LIII.

That same year, Archbishop Gonzi protested with the referred to Minister of Education, arguing that free books and milk should also be given to Church schools. He added that if “Church schools were not to benefit from such concessions, parents – particularly those with a low income – would be deterred from sending their children to private schools... the present policy is obviously contrary to Catholic principles which should be upheld by a government elected by Catholics...”²¹

In March 1944, the Governor corresponded with Archbishop Gonzi on new bills that dealt specifically with the theme of education: a bill to amend the Compulsory School Attendance Act 1924, and an ordinance to make provisions for the arrangement and control of the Royal Malta University and of other educational establishments, making primary education compulsory upon parents and guardians.²² During a meeting held on 27 March 1944, between Governor Lord Gort, the Lieutenant-Governor, and Archbishop Gonzi, it transpired that the latter had no comments or objections to the bill amending compulsory education and the draft education ordinance. Archbishop Gonzi had asked that the words Roman Catholic should be inserted before the words religious doctrine in the third line of the clause.²³ He also asked that the second proviso should be amended to read as follows: “the provisions of this section regarding Roman Catholic religious instruction shall not apply to non-Catholic children.”²⁴ Furthermore, the archbishop asked whether it would be possible to incorporate in the bill a clause or a definition making it clear that religious instruction should be subject to the guidance and control of the ecclesiastical authorities.²⁵

It emerged that in this particular scenario, the Malta Church and the Malta Governor were on different wavelengths. The British were afraid that Archbishop Gonzi’s demands would infringe on religious toleration. For the British, religious toleration was key whilst the Church expected supremacy in control of imparting religious knowledge. A year later, the stakeholders were still disagreeing on acceptable terminology. In fact, Mgr Bonnici, the Secretary

²¹ MCA, Letter from Archbishop Michael Gonzi to Minister of Education Agatha Barbara dated 2 December 1955 in AAM, *Fondo Gonzi: Corrispondenza 1959*, Vol. LIII.

²² MCA, Letter from Governor Sir David Campbell to Archbishop Michael Gonzi dated 17 March 1944 in AAM, *Fondo Gonzi: Corrispondenza Gonzi 1944*, Vol. XLII.

²³ MCA, Document entitled *Note of a meeting held on 27 March 1944* in AAM, *Fondo Gonzi: Corrispondenza Gonzi 1944*, Vol. XLII.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

to the Curia, insisted with Mr David Campbell, the Governor of Malta, that “His Grace is still of the opinion that specific reference to the Roman Catholic Religion in clause 3 of the bill does not constitute an infringement of religious toleration since no disability of any kind is involved, while full liberty of conscience is provided for by exempting non-Catholic children from attending classes in religious instruction.”²⁶

Archbishop Gonzi also discussed the matter with his superiors at the Holy See. The instructions were very clear – “*Clause 3 rimanga come è stata formulata inizialmente*: it shall be the duty of the parent of every child between the ages of five and fourteen to cause the child to receive efficient primary instruction in religious doctrine, in the Maltese and English languages, in reading and writing the same, and in arithmetic, and if such parent fails to perform such duty, that parent shall be liable to such orders and penalties as are provided by this ordinance.”²⁷

The Holy See also asked Archbishop Gonzi “to take official note of the declaration... by the Lieutenant-Governor on behalf of the government in his letter of April 1945. That does not of course imply that the government has any intention whatsoever of altering the present policy and practice of ensuring that children should receive regular and efficient religious instructions in schools, and that such instruction, in the case of Roman Catholic children, should be under the general supervision of the Church.”²⁸

Conclusion

The Church in Malta was a strong force in society. While challenged by the secularity of the Labour Party’s political agenda, the Church under Archbishop Gonzi retained general consensus and legitimacy, and was still a hegemonic force to be reckoned with. Present in all spheres of Maltese society, education constituted an important site of hegemonic discourse (Borg, 2006), with the Church interested not only in its sector but also in State educational provision. Interest and consequent surveillance went to the fine details, from syllabi to teacher training. As secularisation registered significant inroads in Maltese

²⁶ MCA, Letter from Mgr Bonnici to Archbishop Gonzi dated 25 April 1945 in AAM, *Fondo Gonzi: Corrispondenza Gonzi 1945, Vol. XLIII*.

²⁷ MCA, Letter from the Sacra Congregazione degli Affari Ecclesiastici to Archbishop Michael Gonzi dated 14 June 1945 in AAM, *Fondo Gonzi: Corrispondenza Gonzi 1945, Vol. XLIII*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

society, displacing Catholic values in many spaces, the Agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Malta on Catholic Religious Instruction and Education in Church schools, signed in 1989, ensured a curricular and instructional presence within State Schools.

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