

Exactly halfway through Pope Francis's pontificate, in October 2019, bishops for the Pan-Amazon region gathered in Rome to discuss "new paths for the church for an integral ecology." I distinctly remember being most intrigued by that synod of bishops, and primarily because of the sharp contrast with my own experience of church, here in Malta.

The churches in the Amazon are young and in the process of inculturation; their territory is green, lush, the very lungs of Mother Earth. They remain attuned to the spiritual realm palpable in the beauty and power of creation. For this reason, Pope Francis asked the peoples of this region to discern on behalf of the world, how their attunement to creation could inform the world to nurture a much-needed mindset of integral ecology to heal from the ills of technocracy.

But here in the Mediterranean, our churches are the most ancient inculturation of the gospel; Christian peoples emerging from Empire... and thus made up of city dwellers and traders; of slaves and citizens; in a ground, tilled by kings, lords and influential patrons, who through the times, struggled for power and built prosperity, through sheer human grit and spilt blood.

Unsurprisingly, over these past five years, Pope Francis has called for a similar Mediterranean process of dialogue—but this time oriented to peace—and that of its very nature has to include the diversity of our tongues, cultures and religions, as we come together as children of these turbulent blue waters.

While honouring his memory, we are gathered here today as a continuation of this vision of dialogue of the late Holy Father. Still, it is striking to me as a woman that in a Mediterranean Greco-Roman culture, even dialogue itself, the art of speech exchange, was the realm of men in the polis, and from which women were mostly excluded.

It strikes me even more, that we are here today, in the island of St Paul, of the quintessential missionary and communicator of the Christian tradition, gathered to dialogue about the reality of women in the Mediterranean. But I trust that the choice (or irony) was not random.

Rather, that our very mode of Maltese "communication"—of dialogue for peace, that since ancient times we have practised as "hospitality"—has something unique to offer to this wider Mediterranean reflection. Indeed, I am reminded of how Paul the Apostle, who preached in homes

and agoras alike, reached our Maltese shores in a most vulnerable state, while risking shipwreck on his way to execution. A man accustomed to Roman culture, to its lofty law and military rules—who was so good with words!—was met in Malta with “unusual kindness” ... indeed, dare I say it?—by a quintessential feminine kindness; the gentleness of a seaport of hope, of a womb for new life, that saved from most certain death. The rest of the story that we Maltese people narrate, you know already: while always a conquered people, who embraced the gospel, we continued to look up to heaven for the protection of Mary, Mother of God and our own Mother, as to this day, sanctuaries and temples dedicated to her, dot our landscape.

It is perhaps equally striking that yesterday, a son of Italian migrants who found shelter in Argentina, the “very ends of the earth,” after the devastation of yet another European (World) War, chose to be buried not in the basilica of the Chair of Peter, behind the walls of the Vatican, but rather among the people of the city of Rome, at the feet of the *Salus Populi Romani*, quite literally, the “Salvific Health of the Roman people,” the Mother who sustains life. “Protectress of the Roman people” is the most ancient title that, in the year 313, the Christianised Holy Roman Empire gave to the Mother of God. To this day, the icon of the *Salus Populi Romani* blesses the people with her tender gaze, as she holds the divine Child. To this day, she not only rekindles a memory of the divine feminine, that here in the islands of Malta, goes back at least 5000 years, but more crucially, she evokes this same feminine style of dialogue and communication—where connection of the heart is both the precondition for fraternity, but also offers true hope for peace.

As forceful and wilful as the masculine spirit can be, in the Mediterranean region, where the line between life and death is always precarious, where even cultural death and reform have been ongoing; liminality, and thus a constant hope for authentic rebirth and transformation, remained the realm of the feminine. Not just as symbolised by ancient female deities, but also by the power of Christian women martyrs, mystics and saints, who while resisting and challenging patriarchal power, remained influential in birthing “the new,” even if sometimes in silence. So today, from these islands, where, as women, we have our particular style of “doing things”; of dialoguing “fluently” through welcoming gestures and not only words, we open this space where voices and—more crucially— experiences, can be exchanged.

We chose three symbolic entry points for this exchange:

- First, our experience of suffering through “abduction” and even violation;

- Second, our experience of periphery between “the inside and outside,” the belonging and being excluded;
- Lastly our ambivalence with silence itself as virtue and curse.

These are common (sadly, even “ordinary”) experiences of women in Malta that we believe will resonate with the struggles of humanity as a whole. Insofar as they illuminate darker aspects of our universal experience, we also offer them in the hope of ongoing healing and reconciliation toward peace... in this Mediterranean region, but also beyond.

Lastly, that this dialogic experiment may bear fruit, we ask all of you gathered, to keep alive the spirit of Pope Francis, who taught us much about fruitful communication. Thus, we encourage all to speak freely, from the heart, with as much personal truth as we can master. For nurturing a culture of true encounter is more healing—more peaceful—than the precision of our words. Words might flee like the wind, but true encounter of souls persists and is the true seeds of the new. May these few moments we will spend together this afternoon, nurture memories of connection, from which seeds of peace can flourish.

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