

Standing Committee on Gozo Affairs
2 June 2020

The Impact of COVID-19 and the way forward

Presentation prepared by Diaconia Office
Diocese of Gozo

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The impact of Covid-19 on the Church in Gozo and its charities - 1

- Most church offices/activities/services have been closed altogether or been drastically reduced, both on a diocesan level and community one.
 - The lack of religious social life and community religious well-being added to the initial sense of fear and helplessness of the local community.
 - Social distancing has hindered the Church's ability to follow people through one-to-one contact.

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The impact of Covid-19 on the Church in Gozo and its charities - 2

- Church charities have had to adapt, but their action is/was very limited. Online communication helps in some cases, not in others where the physical contact is fundamental to help a person.
 - Central Caritas office closed. Some help still being given by Fr Michael Borg directly from Marsalforn church.
 - The local Church has no emergency helpline where people may call. Some people in Gozo have called Caritas Malta for help, and have been subsequently referred to us for follow up action.
 - Home visits to the elderly and housebound stopped. Funerals cancelled. Direct burial at cemetery without mass and community support has created a lot of added pain.

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The impact of Covid-19 on the Church in Gozo and its charities - 3

- Church charities have had to adapt, but their action is/was very limited. Online communication helps in some cases, not in others where the physical contact is fundamental to help a person. (cont./)
 - Hospital chaplaincy ministry reduced to administration of last rites and prayers.
 - Dar Arka had to close down not only to family visits but also to external clients who sought respite services.
 - Ta' Pinu Counselling Centre had to adapt to social distancing measures. People requesting urgent sessions were still attended to; some opted for social media sessions. Counselling services are returning to normal after easing of measures.

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Some generic observations regarding the impact of Covid-19 from the viewpoint of the local Church - 1

- The Church and church life are still very much an important dimension for the overall well-being of our people and communities.
- However, a considerable part of the Gozitan community (Gozitan, Maltese, foreigners) is not reached by the Church, both through the parish-village structure – and particularly in some areas of Gozo (eg. Marsalforn, Xlendi) where blocks of flats have substituted the traditional Gozitan houses – and social networking. In such cases, the local parish structures have no or very limited knowledge of the situation and consequently offer little to no support in difficult situations.

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Some generic observations regarding the impact of Covid-19 from the viewpoint of the local Church - 2

- Inclusion is a very important element in reaching out and creating networking and support. Where and when this is done, the parish reaches out even to people who are not part of the parish community. There are some very beautiful examples in some parish communities.
- The local Church and parishes are very limited in what they can offer in such difficult situations. Professional human resources are next to none. Apart from church schools services, we have no social workers employed with the diocese. Professional outreach in such cases is very limited, if any. We have no way of professionally assessing people in need. Profiling is at an infancy stage.

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Some generic observations regarding the impact of Covid-19 from the viewpoint of the local Church - 3

- Most of the “charitable” work carried by parishes is done on a personal level directly by the parish priest in complete confidentiality. Parish priests help in various ways, including payments for rent.
- Parish priests refer that Gozitans facing economic difficulties often find it very hard to come out and ask for help. Sometimes, maybe due to fear of labelling, they even refuse support.
- We have noticed a growing number of Maltese people opting to live in Gozo due to lower rent availability. Some already present social problems on coming to Gozo. In some cases, people were already on social help in Malta or followed by social NGOs.

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Some generic observations regarding the impact of Covid-19 from the viewpoint of the local Church - 4

- The situation of many foreigners, particularly non-EU nationals, is quite unstable. On more than one occasion, they move from one place to another, maybe due to renting difficulties.
- Has poverty grown in Gozo? Indirectly and from our professional contacts, we hear that the number of people asking for or in need of help (economic or otherwise) is growing.
- As a Church, we do not have numbers, but some people are facing economic hardships mainly due to lack of employment in the private sector. Both locals and mostly foreigners (both EU and non-EU nationals) are facing added hardships.

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Some generic observations regarding the impact of Covid-19 from the viewpoint of the local Church - 5

- Some people (both Gozitan and foreigners) had precarious work before Covid-19, and suffered due to the loss of work and not being able to access social benefits or free hospital treatment.
- From a mental health situation, the Ta' Pinu Counselling Centre refers that while situations of anxiety, stress and depression have increased, mainly due to being closed at home and economic hardships, they have not witnessed extreme cases of mental disorders.

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The Church in Gozo and its reaching out action - 1

- From an organizational and structural viewpoint, Caritas is unprepared for such a situation. We do not have any staff (professional or otherwise) to cater for, follow and professionally help.
- We are creating networking and working closely with professional services in Malta and Gozo (Caritas Malta, Kummissjoni Emigranti, JRS, FSWS, Social workers at the Gozo General Hospital, State schools and Ministry for Gozo, Order of Malta, Friends of the Sick and the Elderly Gozo). Probably, in some cases we are helping the same people in need.
- Most often, we refer cases to the appropriate services and agencies to be followed up professionally.

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The Church in Gozo and its reaching out action - 2

- We help people and families both directly (through Caritas and parishes) and by offering resources (money, food, vegetables) to other social workers who, in turn, deliver them to their clients.
- We are receiving a good share of vegetables on a weekly basis from the Pitkalija, that is distributed to the local community through volunteers and social services.
- Directly (through Caritas, parishes and Marsalforn church), we are regularly helping around 80 people (adults and children). Help consists of groceries, vegetables, vouchers (meat and groceries) and other house needs (such as gas cylinders). In one case, we sponsored a person to receive the meals on wheels service.

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The Church in Gozo and its reaching out action - 3

- Besides, through goods or money, we help other professionals and local NGOs reach out to their clients.
- Number of clients is slowly growing due to a better coordination and reaching out service.
- The Diocese has gathered funds for the acquisition of a ventilator to be used by the Health Authorities. Hopefully no one will come to need it!

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Suggestions for a possible way forward

- Church:
 - Caritas Gozo greatly needs the professional services of a social worker. If the government or a state agency can help in seconding a social worker with Caritas, this would greatly enhance our work and response.
- Professionals
 - Networking by professionals working in the same field is important to better serve clients. This would improve collaboration and good practice sharing (in respect of confidentiality and data protection).
- People and families in need
 - Temporarily widening the criteria of eligibility for people to receive the meals on wheels service to include a group of people and their direct family members who fall below a determined threshold of income or who have lost employment due to Covid-19. These could include both Maltese and foreigners.

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- “An emergency like COVID-19 is defeated in the first place with the antibodies of solidarity.”
 - Pope Francis (Vita Nueva, 17 April 2020)
- “We... cannot remain indifferent before the passion people are going through because of the COVID-19 pandemic... [W]e too should bear part of the present burden.”
 - Mario Grech, Apostolic Administrator for Gozo (3 April 2020)

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