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The Effects of COVID-19 on Religious Activity in Malta

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The unexpected COVID-19 pandemic that struck the world has negatively affected all kinds of everyday activities. Besides the effects that this pandemic has had on the economy, social life and political scene, it has affected religion in various ways. The effects on religion are manifold. The immediate regulations issued by the local government for social distancing, the prohibition of mass gatherings, and the closure of all religious places has disrupted all aspects of everyday religious life. Meanwhile, tourism has suffered immensely, and this has also negatively impacted the international aspect of religious tourism. The negative impact on religion is wide ranging – from all churches being closed, all religious services being suspended, to no baptisms, holy communion or confirmation, weddings or funerals being held. The drastic decision of suspending all popular parish feasts this year has also been taken. The disruption that has come, practically unexpectedly, to the communities has led to innovative activities being organised by individuals, street communities and even the church itself.

In this paper I aim to look at some of the changes that have affected Malta and its local communities regarding religious aspects due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key Words: COVID-19 pandemic, religious activities, innovative

Introduction

Statistics of tourism to Malta from 2019 were very encouraging. More than 2.8 million were registered to have visited the islands, an increase of almost 6% over the previous year (NSO, 2020). The statistics for inbound visitors to Malta during the first two months of 2020 indicated a good increase, or more than 16% increase over the same period of 2019 (NSOb, 2020). With the advent of COVID-19 the situation has changed drastically. The impact that this pandemic has created is unprecedented, and it not only negatively affected the tourism industry and the number of visitors to Malta with a religious agenda on their travels, but it has also drastically effected religious services in Malta for its own citizens.

During February it was already clear that the situation needed to be tackled on an international level. Each country needed to have its own resources in place, and the various restrictions were to be the responsibility of the individual authorities. Government officials, especially the Health Minister, were in discussions with their European counterparts throughout February. According to the official government reports, until 25th February there were no cases in Malta (Government of Malta, 2020). In the meantime, a cruise liner which was scheduled to enter harbour in Malta created heated discussions. While there were those that felt it was not necessary to stop the liner from entering Malta, others were against such a decision. Eventually, the cruise liner was not permitted to proceed into Valletta harbour (Government of Malta, 2020).

The first patients were reported on 7th March. The day after that, all flights to Milan were suspended by the national airline. Furthermore, on 11th March all flights were suspended between France, Spain, Switzerland and Germany, while persons arriving to Malta from anywhere, were required to quarantine themselves for fourteen days. On 12th March all educational establishments were closed for a week, while all mass public events were cancelled (Government of Malta, 2020). The local Church authorities issued a press release on the same day, in which they also suspended all religious services (Diocese, 2020), with more restrictions being imposed in the following days. The daily press conference by the
Discussion

In recent years religious tourism and pilgrimage have been recognised as a secure part of the hospitality industry\(^2\). Pilgrimages have been increasing, and new routes were being established. The increase in traffic was consistent, and there did not seem to be any reason to doubt that there would be a downward trend in the numbers of people travelling for religious purposes. It must be noted however that in certain regions with conflicts and other disruptions, religion can be a contested issue. In their introductory chapter, Raj and Griffin state:

> religious tourism has increased in the 21st century, while at the same time, looking at world affairs, it would appear that religion and freedom of expression are frequently in tremendous conflict (Raj & Griffin, 2017).

Even though the authors maintain that ‘the demand for international tourism has been healthy, regardless of the number of conflicts in the world (Raj & Griffin, 2017), the incidence of this pandemic has brought a completely new scenario. While freedom of expression (especially referring to religious views) has been resilient, even during conflicts, the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were unprecedented, and the intensity of disruption is still not fully understood. Under COVID, The State has imposed restrictions on all kinds of meetings and gatherings and the Church authorities have been obligated to comply with this new situation. While this was somewhat accepted, at the same time it has raised other questions regarding the long-term effect on religious freedom.

Religious gatherings for Passover, Holy Week, Easter and Ramadan were all disrupted by the stay-at-home orders and bans on gatherings of 10 or more people. To say the very least, these measures imposed an immense burden on religious communities and on the precious rights of religious freedom. While we must view them now as legitimate, we must also constantly review them and demand that they end as soon as possible.

We must not permit any governor, legislature or judge to use the crisis as a pretext to undermine religious liberty (Farr, 2020).

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1 During a press conference on Monday 18 May, by the Prime Minister of Malta, the Minister for Health and the Chief Superintendent of Health announced that a number of restrictions would be lifted.

2 Tourism statistics in Malta do not classify religious tourism as a separate purpose for visits, and it forms part of the section labelled ‘Other, including educational, religious and health tourism’.
During this period, churches were to remain open for private and individual prayer, while adhering to strict social distancing requirements (Diocese, 2020). Certain churches provided spaced seating arrangements in order to follow the instructions as issued by the Health authorities regarding social distancing (Figure 1).

Due to the decision to suspend all church services, the Church authorities immediately declared that there would be a daily religious service broadcasted on the national station and on other websites and Facebook pages of the Church diocese. Other parishes started to do the same for their parishes by transmitting a daily religious service on their Facebook page. This was highly positive, and led to locals feeling that they were not abandoned by their spiritual leaders. The feedback was so positive that the Archbishop of Malta felt obliged to say daily mass on the national station.

On 24th March another press release was issued by the Church authorities with a call for the cancellation of all religious feasts until the end of the year, or until the Health authorities would give permission for these feasts to be held. This was considered as a drastic decision by the Church authorities, as the very popular annual religious feasts celebrated all over the islands are considered the most important event in each locality. Preparations for these festivities are carried out throughout the year, as

The above quote from the United States of America can also be noted in other countries. Italy initiated various restrictions on 10th March 2020. Some of the restrictions started being lifted on 4th May, but not for religious services. This led the Italian Bishops to write to their Prime Minister to protest the continued ban on church services (Anon, 2020b). This protest is better understood when various other activities are considered. An increase was allowed in the number of people attending funerals (increased to 15 persons), but at the same time, sports teams were given the authority to start training from 18th May.

The Maltese faithful had a similar imposition on their religious activities. This also came just before the Holy Week and Easter period, but much more important for the population of Malta was the impact on the Festa Season. According to a 2018 census commissioned by the Archdiocese of Malta, 92% of Maltese residents are Catholics, while 74% claim to go to Mass at least once a month (Vella, 2018). Meanwhile 40% of the Maltese attend Sunday mass regularly. First reactions to the disruption of attending church services was a level of acceptance and understanding, as the gravity of the situation had not yet been understood. With the passing of time, some of the initial restrictions starting to be lifted, the faithful anticipated that the original imposition to stop church services would be lifted.

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they needs the collaboration and participation of a large number of individuals. In the meantime, the Church authorities in Gozo issued a set of new guidelines with regards to the annual parish feasts. Certain religious activities were suggested to be held in preparation for the feast day. These were mainly connected with religious services within the church. Other activities were being given the go ahead, with the necessary social distancing being taken into consideration. For feast day celebrations, for the main religious service, sacred music could be played, but the orchestra could only be made up of six musicians. For the other services the organist and a soloist could take part.

For the parishioners, typically, the annual festive procession is considered as the apex of the festivities. Yet for this year, the Church authorities declared that no band marches and no extravagant celebrations were to be held. A procession could be organised, passing through the usual route, but instead of a festive activity, it would be held as a pilgrimage (Curmi, 2020). The authorities reminded everyone that these instructions could only be followed if the Health authorities give the go ahead.

The same decision was also taken regarding the Holy Week and Easter commemorations. All were suspended, and there were only televised programmes during those days. The public manifestations during these holy times were missed by many, as besides the spectacle that they offer (Zammit, 2009), there are also religious factors as well. It is still a very common practice in Malta that on Maundy Thursday and early on Good Friday, the faithful make seven visits to seven different churches, where an altar of repose is set up. This movement of people is undertaken to commemorate the Last Supper of Jesus, and the foundation of the Holy Eucharist. During these visits people walk, or even drive from one site to another, visiting different churches and praying at the sites. While travelling from one place to another the Holy Rosary is recited. This devotion could not be carried out this year, but prayers and meditations were transmitted on various Facebook pages and on Television stations.

On a personal note, together with friends of ours, it is the annual custom that myself and my wife usually organise such a visit to seven different churches, during which we recite the prayers that accompany such visits. As this year the activity could not be physically carried out, we had an online meeting, twelve adults in all, and we shared the prayers. Thus, we were together virtually for this annual event. We were able to see each other, in addition to having chosen holy pictures to accompany the prayers. Although very different from the real visit, we were still able to carry out our religious obligations.

The Good Friday processions were not held, but some parish priests decided to go around their own parish with a cross and bless the families who were instructed to stay at home. The parish priest of Vittoriosa, for example, travelled the route that the Good Friday procession usually takes, carrying a cross and accompanied by only one person. Parishioners were either at street corners waiting for their spiritual leader to pass, or on their doorstep and balconies. Other parishes carried out similar activities.

At the end of the Easter Sunday celebration held at the Curia, the Archbishop of Malta proceeded to the doorway of the building, and blessed the street, as a symbol of blessing the whole island and its population during these difficult times.

The restrictions introduced by the health authorities in Malta affected all residents in Malta. The Muslim community in Malta was similarly affected, and no gatherings were allowed to be held in the Mosque. At the beginning of Ramadan, Imam Mohammed El Sadi gave permission for those Muslims that were infected with the virus, especially those immigrants that were being held in the Open Centre, from having to fast during the obligatory period. It was explained that this was allowed in the Holy Koran - those Muslims who are ill need not fast (Anon, 2020c).

Religious tourism, *per se*, in Malta is limited. There are no well-known international pilgrimage sites, although visits to religious sites has always been part of the package tours that are provided. The main concept of religious tourism in Malta is that of visiting religious sites, and this would mainly be for their artistic and historical importance. Yet, pilgrimage in Malta is very much alive - what I like to call domestic pilgrimage. Various communities organise weekly, monthly or annual pilgrimages to various religious sites all over the islands. In recent years there has also been an increase in such pilgrimage to attract youngsters, by organising
penitential walks. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has stopped this year’s pilgrimage activities. Pilgrimages that used to be held during Holy Week had to be suspended.

Devotional processions (Figure 2) following statues of Christ the Redeemer and Our Lady of Sorrows, are always a popular annual devotional pilgrimage. These had to be suspended (Zammit, 2017). A penitential Via Crucis which is held in the village of Siġġiewi, first organised in 1994, was cancelled:

In the evening, participants from all walks of life leave the village square and head towards the path … lined by approximately 3000 flambeaux or flaming torches, leads up to a large cross at the tip of the hill. While ascending the hill, there are a number of stone statues showing different episodes from the Passion of Christ. Devotees pause at these statues and recite prayers (Zammit, 2018).

The same thing happened with a 30-km penitential walk that has been organised since 2003, held on Maundy Thursday (Zammit, 2018).
Another penitential pilgrimage that owes its origin to the mid-16th century, is usually held on the Wednesday following Easter. This was still held this year, but in a completely different way. Instead of having the Cathedral Chapter, led by the Archbishop of Malta, Confraternities and the public taking part, the pilgrimage was held in the same way, but on in a much smaller way. The Archbishop accompanied by five other clergy (Figure 4) walked the route and prayers were said to ask for divine liberation from the pandemic (Anon, 2020).

With the withdrawal of certain restrictions on commercial activities, the Church authorities held a number of meetings to discuss the situation regarding the opening of churches and providing more divine services to the faithful. While many commercial premises, like restaurants, shops, barbers, hairdressers and similar commercial activities were given the permission to open, there was still no decision taken about the re-opening of churches.

It is interesting to note that there was an increase in writing, reporting and commenting on previous epidemics that hit Malta during the previous centuries. A number of Catholic saints were invoked during past plague and cholera epidemics, but the main ones were St Roque and St Sebastian. Devotion towards these two saints has increased in recent weeks. Parishes, which had processional statues of these saints, displayed them more prominently in the churches. Locals sought to show their devotion more public, by putting up candles in front of statues that are located in the streets. Historians wrote about past epidemics in Malta and compared them to the present situation. News articles have been written about our past (Mifsud, 2020), thus trying to show that even in the past we had similar situations.

Another aspect that has been negatively effected is the outbound tourism. Due to the cheap flights available, a number of Maltese do travel abroad for religious purposes. Flights to Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugorje and other pilgrimage sites have been organised for decades. These visits abroad have increased throughout these last years. Yet, this year all of this had to be suspended, and no dates have been communicated when these flights could restart. At the time of writing, the airport and harbours of Malta are still closed, and therefore no commercial flights are allowed.
Conclusions

It is interesting that this pandemic has brought the Church authorities and social media closer. Up until the outbreak of COVID-19, there were no religious services transmitted daily on the national station. Neither did the various parishes and individual priests turn to social media (such as Facebook) to broadcast their services live to their parishioners, in the same way that they were doing previously. Now, this has become accepted, and even welcomed. There is also the possibility that this might be extended beyond the pandemic, as the broadcasting of these services were a solace to a number of the faithful who still find it difficult to leave their homes to attend churches.

Circumstances have dictated changes, rapid changes in the sphere of religion and how to communicate with the faithful. The Archbishop of Malta has become a daily face on the national television station, and not because of any controversy, but due to his celebration of daily mass for the faithful.

How pilgrimages are going to change and / or resume is a different question. Various suggestions and plans have already been mentioned – one suggestion being the holding of a national pilgrimage at the end of the pandemic (Figure 5). Parish organisers are already suggesting pilgrimages to local and foreign sites. Foreign travel will still be a problem.

There are still strong recommendations by the Health authorities for the over-65, considered as vulnerable people – to stay at home as much as possible. The idea of going abroad is also being considered risky at this time, as there are no clear indications of what happens when one enters another country or when one returns back. Would there be quarantine at any stage? Would there be restrictions? Would the pilgrimage sites be open as before? One still needs to see how things are going to develop in the weeks and months following the lifting of all restrictions that have been imposed.

The lifting of restrictions on various mass activities, has given hope to the believers that church activities will resume. Yet, for a good majority of the faithful, the organisation of the annual village feasts of their patron saints is still an enormous concern - there is a mystery whether some concessions are going to be given or not. Church services were returned on 13th June, but this does not mean that all would be back to the ‘normal’ that existed before the COVID-19 epidemic. There are still a lot of restrictions imposed on those who attend, and we need to investigate how the faithful react to this new situation.
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