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LIFE, ST. PAUL, MALTA

Nation's Prime Minister Comments on Papal Visit

By Serena Sartini

VALLETTA, Malta, APRIL 17, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Respect for human life isn't just a value held by most Maltese, it's part of the national identity, says the prime minister of Malta.

Lawrence Gonzi, 56, said that in preparation for Benedict XVI's two-day visit to the nation, his office organized an exhibition that showed the relationship between St. Paul, the value of life, and the national Maltese identity.

In this interview with ZENIT, given ahead of the Pope's two-day trip to Malta this weekend, the prime minister comments on what he expects from the Pontiff's trip, and the role Malta plays in promoting Christian values in Europe.

ZENIT: Benedict XVI will visit Malta for the first time. Which hopes and expectations does your country place in this visit?

Gonzi: Most of us expect a site-specific variation on the one great constant theme of all his discourse: How to respond to the geo-historic challenges facing us in the light of Christian teachings of which he is always spelling out the far-reaching, concrete implications -- for instance, in his last encyclical in relation to the global crisis of prevailing economic structures.

We regard Benedict XVI's visit as a follow up of the two visits by his predecessor, John Paul II. On these two occasions, the Pope highlighted two tasks for our country -- first, to witness to Christian-inspired human values in Europe; second, to promote dialogue between the Northern and Southern shores of the Mediterranean.

We anticipate that Benedict XVI will help place these two tasks in the over-arching perspective of his personal development of multiculturalism and the social teaching of the Church.

ZENIT: What do you think of Malta's Christian roots? Do you think they can be regenerated by the Pope's visit on the anniversary of St. Paul's shipwreck?

Gonzi: For the occasion of the Pope's visit, my Office has organized an exhibition

about St. Paul and the formation of the Maltese National Identity. In the Maltese traditional artistic depiction of St. Paul, he is always portrayed as the rescuer and glorifier of the sanctity of life -- a value which is an important central part of our identity.

Pope Benedict constantly insists that the dignity of the human person and the ecological integrity of the world have their firmest foundation in our Christian faith. His message calls us back to our sources and to a contemporary rediscovery of our identity as a people.

ZENIT: What is Malta's role in the European Union?

Gonzi: Malta has already contributed decisively to the European Union's awareness that its sea-territory is as important as its land-territory. It is, of course, well known that Malta originated the introduction of the principle in international law that ocean space is "common heritage of humankind" as an initial working out of the vision set out by Pope John XXIII in "Pacem in Terris." Malta was able to do this successfully since, because of its small size, our country can never be suspected of imperialist ambitions. Benedict XVI is giving us an example of how the Church can promote its world vision not through power and imposition, but precisely, humbly and lovingly.

ZENIT: Immigrant landings and their being turned back is a contentious issue for many States. What is your opinion on this matter? Do you think the Pope can contribute to a solution?

Gonzi: There are two principles in the context of the immigration issue that the Pope certainly contributes to upholding and that are of vital importance to us as to many others. The first is that of human solidarity, which requires all of us to be hospitable to all those others who are driven into exile by any kind of injustice, including the first instances that the world is already experiencing of climate-change driven wars. The second is that the burdens to be borne by the host-countries be as equitably shared as possible, particularly at the European level. The experience of the Holy See could be invaluable in devising the appropriate international mechanisms for both purposes.

ZENIT: What do you think of the European ruling on the removal of the Crucifixes? Do you think that a Court can rule on such matters, so entwined with human rights, like religious freedom?

Gonzi: We do not see how the Strasbourg Court could deem that the Crucifix in schools and other public places was an infringement of the human right to religious freedom of anyone, whatever his beliefs or unbelief. The figure of the Crucified Christ merely points to the source of cherished values that are not offensive to anyone.

In the Convention that led to the Lisbon Treaty, it was made very clear that matters related to religion, since they are so closely interwoven with national identity, are of national competence, not of European. The same applies to such matters as abortion laws, in spite of the European Parliament's resolutions on the matter.

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