

Il-Lehen tat-Tama

"THE VOICE OF HOPE"

47, Mannarino Road, Birkirkara BKR 08, Malta - www.adventist.org.mt

BY THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH IN MALTA

JESUS WAS REALLY RESURRECTED AND YOU ARE THE PROOF!

Have you ever been the proof of a miracle? It would be an exciting experience, wouldn't it? Well, you are such a proof, even if you didn't know until today. You are the proof of one of the greatest and most meaningful miracles that ever happened, a miracle that changed the history of our world and of our lives: Jesus' resurrection. Why are we saying so?

Strange as it may be, not all Christians believe in Jesus' resurrection. Which is an absurdity for, as the apostle Paul says, "If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!" (1 Cor. 15:17).

Recent discussions on the Sunday Times show how this issue is still hot, and we can understand why, for if Christ was indeed resurrected, then He really was what He said: the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. While, if He wasn't, at the best, Christianity would be only a moral philosophy, great for many aspects, but only based on a good but mistaken man. In such a case, all Jesus' promises and our hope for salvation and eternal life would be just a fantasy without substance.

So it is of extreme importance to know if Jesus has been resurrected or not. Why should you believe that He was? What are the proofs of this extraordinary event? Many can be offered, but we wish to point to one of the simplest and most practical ones, YOURSELF, if only you consider yourself a Christian. Let's explain.

Christianity started with a man, Jesus, affirming to be a great manifestation of God's love and power. He was received as such by thousands of people who strongly believed He was the promised Messiah and Saviour. Their expectation, even that of His strictest disciples that we call "apostles" was that very soon, by the power of God, Jesus would destroy the oppressive

Roman Empire and give Israel a kingdom that would cover all the earth for all eternity.

This expectation included a war. The Essenians, a very important Jewish group, had planned even the minimum details of how that war had to be done. The Zealots, another contemporary group, were already fighting for such a kingdom before the Messiah would come. We do not know what Jesus' disciples thought of such a perspective, but we know for sure that Peter had a sword, and he didn't hesitate to use it to defend Jesus when his hope was threatened by the guards coming to arrest his King (John 18:10).

To avoid misunderstandings, Jesus had to clarify that His kingdom was not of this world, but nobody understood Him, for what Jesus said fully contradicted the deepest expectations of their hearts.

(Continues on the back cover).



An angel announces Jesus' resurrection to the mourning and discouraged women.

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BIBLE DOCTRINE

KNOW THE IMAGE AND THE TRUE

A BIBLE STUDY ON THE SANCTUARY OF GOD IN THE OLD AND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.
2ND PART: PRIESTS IN THE OLD AND IN THE NEW COVENANT.

Have you ever needed a mediator? Maybe it was to be successful in a business, or to restore a friendship, or just when you were a shy child and your mother helped you establish some good friendship. A mediator may be a very vital resource.

Its presence reveals a problem of communication, a lack of confidence, a fear, and the mediator's mission is to establish better understanding, trust, and co-operation.

The Bible says that we need a mediator to help us establish a better relationship with God. If you are aware of this need, you will enjoy this article.

The Israelitic sanctuary and its priests

In the last issue of our newsletter, we discovered that when God commanded Israel to build a sanctuary for Him to "dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8), it was intended to be a symbol of God's caring presence among His people, for God always wishes to be the "Immanuel, which is translated, 'God with us'" (Mat. 1:23).

So, the same presence of the sanctuary among Israel was a proof that God loved them and wished to stay with them. Nevertheless, in reality, common people could not get directly in touch with God. His shechinah, His glorious presence, was manifested in the most holy place of the sanctuary, above the ark of the covenant (Lev. 16:2), but common people couldn't see it for only the high priest, and only once a year, could enter that room (Lev. 16:2, cf. 23:26). When people offered sacrifices for their sins, the blood of that sacrifice had to be presented to God within the sanctuary, but they were not authorized to go there: priests brought the sign of their sacrifice there on their behalf (Lev. 4:5,6).

Who were the priests?

The original word for priest is "kohen" in Hebrew and "hiereus" in Greek.

The modern English word for "priest" comes from the Greek word "presbuteros," elder, which had, in the first Christian church a different meaning than the one held today (see frame in the next page).

A priest is a "person duly authorized to minister in sacred things as a mediator between man and God, and to offer sacrifices for the sins of men (Heb 5:1; 8:1-3; cf. v 6)" (SDABC).

Why did they need priests?

Why should people need such authorized persons? Why shouldn't anyone be able to go to God directly and take care of all the sacred elements necessary for us to get in touch with Him?

The reason lies in the nature of sin and of our human corruption. Sin is a rebellion against God, a break down of our relationship with Him. As the prophet Isaiah says, "your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear" (59:2). On the other side, God's holiness and glory are so great that we, sinful and corrupted as we are, cannot any longer stand His presence. God Himself says, "no man shall see Me, and live" (Ex. 33:20). Sometimes God's glory was manifested to all the people, but the result was that they themselves asked not to be exposed to such a glorious presence (Ex. 20:18,19).

For these reasons the people were not allowed to enter the sanctuary and get in the direct presence of God. They could enter the yard surrounding the sanctuary, but they had to stop there. To bring their offerings and sacrifices to God, they needed other people, the priests, which God had chosen from among the tribe of Levi, the family of Aaron, Mose's brother.

Conclusion for the Israelitic sanctuary and priesthood

What we have seen can help us draw some conclusions. 1) The Israelitic sanctuary expressed God's willingness to be with His people in a con-



The high priest incarnated, at its highest level, the Israelitic priesthood. The image shows as he had to be dressed according to the law. Each element of the apparel had a special spiritual meaning.

tinuous way, to assure them of His constant love and care, of His will to forgive and save them (We will consider this last function of the sanctuary in the next issue). 2) On the other hand, the people were not in a spiritual condition to get into a direct relationship with their most holy God. They had to humbly recognize that, not to underestimate God's closeness. 3) The priests were the solution provided by God. As mediators they represented man in front of God, bringing to Him their sacrifices; and God in front of men, announcing His teaching and working for their salvation.

In the Christian dispensation, do we still need priests?

Yes, sure. As the earthly sanctuary was a shadow of the heavenly true one, so its priesthood was a shadow of the true priesthood, that of the New Covenant. With a very important difference, that while the old earthly sanctuary had many

imperfect human priests, the new heavenly one has just one, perfect and divine priest, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The letter to the Hebrews considers this fact the climax of its teaching: "Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest (Jesus), who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man" (Hebrews 8:1,2).

When the first Christian church was created, the majority of her members were Jews used to worship God and look for salvation according to the structure of the Old Testament teaching. For them, the sanctuary, or temple, kept a primary importance. The temple in Jerusalem was, we can say, the first and main Christian meeting place as they met there "daily" (Acts 2:46). They were also used to have part in the rites of the temple, as it is shown in the experience that would become the cause for the arrest of the apostle Paul (Acts 21:26). The risk was that these Christians, used to the glory, the apparatus, the rites of the temple, might remain fascinated by all this at such a point not to give sufficient attention to what Jesus had done and was doing for them. Trapped by the earthly visible glory of the symbols, and by the habit of their past experience, they could forget the new spiritual reality inaugurated by Jesus, and represented by His ministry in the heavenly sanctuary.

Because of this, the Author of Hebrews says that the glory and the rites of the earthly sanctuary were nothing but a passing shadow of the true reality of the heavenly sanctuary. In the same way, the priests of the Old Covenant were just a pale representation of the glory of the true Priest that represented them in heaven: Jesus Christ, our only Mediator (Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24) and our only way to salvation (John 14:6; Heb. 10:20).

Jesus, Hebrews says, is much higher and trustworthy than anything else they could imagine. The letter opens with a representation of Jesus glory: "God ... has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (1:1-3).

Being in such a high position, Jesus is, for the Christians, even more important than the angels: "having become so much

better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they" (1:4). How much more important than any human being should He be considered then?

The character of Jesus' priesthood

A very important text, is that of Hebrews 7:23,24: "Also there (in the old sanctuary and covenant) were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing. But He (Jesus), because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them."

The consequences of this teaching are many. 1) As Christians, we have no longer human priests but just one in heaven, Jesus, for He has a priesthood that is, as the Greek text says, *aparabatos* - unchangeable, permanent, untransferable. While the Israelitic priesthood was an image of Jesus', Jesus has a priesthood that cannot be passed to others or represented by others. 2) As our High Priest, Jesus is our only mediator to represent us in front of God, the only person through whom salvation can flow from God to us. In other words, we do not need any longer men to work as the priests of the old Israelitic sanctuary, for we have all we need

in Jesus, "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:14-15).

Why only Jesus as a mediator?

What is extraordinary in Jesus' priesthood and mediatorship is that He is, at the same time, both God and man. In Jesus, God becomes a man to give us the certainty that He can understand our pain and weakness. At the same time, in Jesus, humanity has the highest representative we could hope for. A great, holy, perfect representative that can allow us to feel comfortable in front of God. Could we wish anything better? Surely not! No human being, as holy as he or she may be, can compete with Jesus, and this is why only in Jesus we can be fully assured of God's love and salvation.

Pastor Giovanni Leonardi

[In the next issue: "Sacrifices in the old Israelitic sanctuary and in the

Facts about the word "priest"

- 1 The English word "priest" comes from the Greek term "presbuteros" which means "elder," with reference to Christian brothers who, because of their experience and dedication to God, were considered fitted to lead their community. Unfortunately, passing from the ancient presbuteroi (the plural of presbuteros), to the modern "priests" many things have changed.
- 2 The title "priest" is now referred to a man who has made a vow of chastity and who is dedicated to assist the bishop in the leadership of the church. This distinction between priest and bishop has been caused by a long historic process but has no biblical support. In the New Testament both words are synonymous and refer to the same ministry. While elder refers to the age of the minister, bishop (from the Greek *episcopos*, overseer) focuses on his ministry. An example is given in the book of Acts, where we read that the apostle Paul "sent to Ephesus and called for the *elders* (presbuteroi) of the church," and addressed them saying that they had to "take heed to ... to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers* (apiscopoi, bishops), to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:17,28).
- 3 In the Bible, chastity was not required neither to the Old Testament priests, nor to the New Testament presbuteroi or episcopoi (1 Timothy 3:2).
- 4 In the first Christian church presbuteroi or episcopoi were elected by the local communities, and not by a hierarchical superior. Even when the meaning of these words had already changed and the difference between normal priests and bishops had been introduced, bishops were still elected by the same community they had to pasture.
- 5 In according to the teaching that Jesus is our only Priest, the New Testament never calls church's leaders, hieries, priests. They are called apostles, doctors, pastors, elders, bishops, deacons, but never priests.

CHRISTIAN LIFE

HAGAR QIM TEMPLES AND THE TRUE CHRISTIAN ONES

Several thousands of years ago, our ancestors built great temples to worship their gods. These people realized that there must have been a supreme maker, ruler, and creator of all things that exist in this universe. Today some say that these people were sun worshipers, we are not here to argue this point, but one thing we do know is that they believed that something greater than anything on this planet ruled the universe. And it is because they wanted the very best to please their gods that these people went to great physical and mental anguish to build such massive and beautiful structures as the ones we have in Malta.

Many thousands of years later, up to this very age, many people are still building great temples to honour their divinity. As Christians, we also build magnificent cathedrals, but, beside our honest will to honour God, there may also be some dangers. For example, some times the magnificence of our churches risk not so much to honour God but ourselves. Also we risk to admire these churches as if God were really abiding in these buildings made by our human hands.

The Word of God is very clear on this subject. We read: "God doesn't live in temples made by human hands. 'The heaven is my throne', says the Lord through his prophets, 'and earth is my footstool. What kind of home could you build?' asks the Lord. 'Would I stay in it?'" (Acts 7:48,49, TLB).

Furthermore, it happens too easily that, to make the presence of the heavenly realities more visible, people disregard the first two commandments of God, making images of stone and wood to furnish what they believe to be "God's temple". We do not question the honesty of their hearts and intentions, but it is too apparent that these images risk to become idols when people bow in front of them and honour them.

We should not forget what God commanded: "You may worship no other god than me. You shall not make yourselves any idols: no images of animals, birds, or fish. You must never bow or worship it in any way; for I, the Lord your God, am very possessive. I will not share your affection with any other god! And when I punish people for their sins, the punishment continues upon the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of those who hate me; but I lavish my love upon thousands of those who love me and obey my commandments." (Exodus 20:3-6, TLB).

We are sure that most of our readers believe the Gospel. If it is really so, then we love Jesus and trust His word and example. Jesus is not impressed by the magnificence of man made temples. He Himself didn't come in a wealthy family and He didn't look for rich houses. He preferred a simple and poor life, for He said: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matthew 8:20).

If we have to think of a temple where really God wishes to live, the Gospel offers us something better. Beside the heavenly sanctuary, where God and Jesus manifest their visible presence in front of the universe (Hebrews 8:1,2), we read that God, in His mercy, wishes to abide in our own hearts: "And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For YOU are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.'" (2 Cor. 6:16. See also 1 Cor. 3:16. 6:19. Eph. 2:21-22).

Can we believe this wonderful news coming from the true Gospel of Jesus Christ? Can we obey the Gospel? Jesus plainly says that "WE" are the living temple of God, and God does not need a temple built with stone and wood, furnished with images that too often risk to be honoured like idols. Today, thanks to the living sacrifice Jesus made once and for all for each one of us (Hebrews 7:27), God wishes to dwell in us, in our hearts, and we can be His holy temple. We do not need images to worship God, we do not need to bow before anything that man has made with his own hands. Even more, the Gospel invites us to separate ourselves from such things.

In the text of 2 Corinthians 6:16-18 that we have just read, the apostle Paul was expressing the contrast existing between pagan temples and their idols, on one side, and the Christian belief that We are God's temple, on the other. His conclusion was: "Leave them; separate yourselves from them; don't touch their filthy things, and I will welcome you and be a



Hagar Qim temple's entrance at Qrendi.

Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters." Can this invitation be good for us too?

What kind of temples can we build for God? Everything that exists was made by God. As the prophet Isaiah says "We are the clay, and You our potter" (64:8). We are just poor vessels, can the vessel say to the potter, let me build you a dwelling place?

Hagar Qim temples, built by our ancestors, and the temples which exist today, will not stand. The apostle John wrote that when God's kingdom will come, in the new holy city, there will be "no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb (Jesus) are its temple." Which means that we can worship the Father and Jesus directly, without any object or any people between us and Them; the same as we can do today, for we do not need to go to any special place to meet God, if God is dwelling in us.

Everything that is made by man's hands cannot last forever, but the temple of God and Christ will last forevermore in our hearts, and God will dwell with us for ever, if we now surrender to Jesus and decide to worship God according to His will only, to receive Him in the true temple of our hearts.

The day of the Lord is coming, and the Lord will dwell with us and never leave us: "I heard a loud shout from the throne saying, 'Look, the home of God is now among men, and he will live with them and they will be his people; yes, God himself will be among them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor pain. All of that has gone forever.'" (Rev. 21:3-4, TLB).

Mr. Anthony Stagno

CHILDREN STORY

A BIBLE IN A LOAF OF BREAD



A long time ago, very few people possessed a Bible at home. These few guarded it jealously and often read it because they considered it as a precious gift on the part of God.

In a country, the king didn't look favourably at the people who used to read the Bible. So, one day, he decided to get rid of all Bibles. He ordered his soldiers to search all houses and destroy all Bibles they could find.

This law made all people sad. Some hid their Bibles under the beams of the roof, others in secret drawers, others in some holes made under the floor.

When the soldiers of the king arrived, on their horses, in a village, the people were very worried. Some wept bitter tears while their Bibles were taken away to be burned.

In a road there was a very good family. They loved the Lord with all their heart and had a copy of His Word. One morning, the house keeper, a young lady, was kneading the new bread when she heard the soldiers arriving. What could she do to save the precious book? After praying she had an idea. She took the Bible and hid it inside a loaf of bread? When the soldiers knocked at the door, all the bread was in the oven to be cooked. The soldiers shouted with rage and asked where the Bible was hidden, and the woman told them to search all the house if they liked.

Then the soldiers searched the bedrooms, even the garret, and made a big mess, but they couldn't find the Bible. Then finally entered the

kitchen where they smelt the good smell of the bread coming out from the oven and opened it. There was just bread and nothing else that could make them suspicious. So they closed it and left the house cursing everything and everybody.

God has protected the Bible, for many centuries, up to our days. That time it was hidden inside a loaf of bread. But there is a safer place where God wishes to hide His Word —the same place where

“Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You!” (Psalm 119:11)

How happy the lady was seeing that her Bible was safe! When the bread was well cooked, she left it get cooler and that evening, when all the family was sitting at the table, they opened the loaf and found the Bible intact. Then, before enjoying their dinner, they prayed to thank God for their daily physical bread and also for the spiritual one that had been preserved.

king David kept it: our heart (Psalm 119:11).

You too can keep the Bible in your heart and we do so by studying and meditating its words.

(Translated from “Incontri con Gesù”, edited by Fiorella Carrelli Ferraro)

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HAPPINESS IN JESUS

JESUS' PROMISES FOR YOU

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light. (Mat. 11:28-30)

Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. (Mat. 6:31-33)

Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:1-4)

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. ... If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you." (John 15:5-7)

I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever — the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. (John 14:16,17)

Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life. (John 4:13,14)

I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:20)

GIVE ME COURAGE

**Lord, give me courage to live.
A joyful courage, Lord.
Help me smile even when the heart trembles.
May the signs of a smile
around my eyes
leave a trace on my cheeks.**

**Lord, give me courage to live.
A courage coming
from the assurance of your pardon.
Courage to face myself.
Courage to be your witness in front of those who
treat me.
Courage for I know that you receive me.
Always.**

**Lord, give me courage to live.
Courage when hours seem to have no meaning.
Courage to challenge the violence of the powerful.
The courage of faith in He who is able
to overthrow the thrones,
to overwhelm with goods those who hunger
and to send back, empty handed, the wealthy.
The courage of justice and peace.**

**Lord, give me courage to live
if feelings disappear.
And if I'll lose something or somebody,
help me not to lose myself.
Help me remain close to You,
knowing that You exist, are alive
and You walk by me
all the days of my life. Amen!**

(From Riforma, 9 May 2003)



Please, send without obligation, and free
(Mark what you wish)

Next issues of *Il-Lehen tat-Tama* (if you do not already receive it regularly).

The illustrated Bible Correspondence Course "Discover" in 26 lessons.

I would like to have a personal meeting with Pastor Leonardi to know better about your faith and/or discuss some problems.

■ You can use the space below for a question or an opinion. (Card n° 29)

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MOVING?



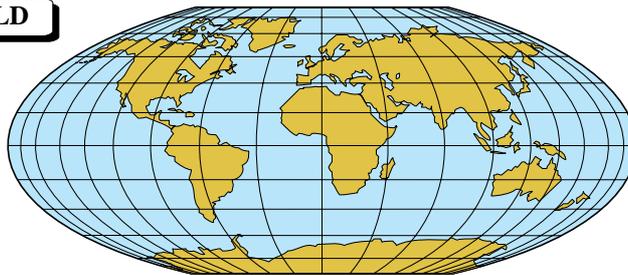
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NEWS FROM THE WORLD

Spiritual congress of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Italy
Bellaria di Rimini, April 30 - May 4, 2003.

The Adventist Church is a democratic Christian fellowship



Seventh-day Adventist church leaders, seek to make the gospel message “liberating” to its hearers, a church leader emphasized.

“We are removing those barriers that keep people from hearing and participating with understanding” in what the Adventist Church is proclaiming, said Michael

Ryan, director of the church’s Global Mission.

At the same time, church leaders emphasized that any efforts at contextualization should not promote syncretism, which is defined in dictionaries as “the combination of different forms of belief or practice.”

“Contextualization must be faithful to the Scripture and meaningful to the new host culture, remembering that all cultures are judged by the gospel.”

“For the first time, we are making serious inroads into [non-Christian] cultures and world religions where we are exploring solutions to missiological problems that we have not had in the past,” Ryan explained. “These problems largely centre around method rather than issues of theology.”

Ryan said that a study of data on church growth world-wide shows a failure to effectively penetrate cultures that are predominately Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and communist. He claims this is due to a decidedly “Western” approach not resonating with many of these peoples. By communicating the Adventist message “in a way that is attractive, meaningful and understood,” he added, new believers can be attracted to the gospel.



The Malta delegation at the spiritual congress of the Adventist Italian Church.

in which each member is called to participate to her mission and leadership. As it happens in all the countries of the world, even in Italy, every five years, representatives of each local community, elected by all church members, meet to discuss the general affairs of the church and elect their leaders. We call these congresses “administrative”. But since the time between two administrative congresses is too long, our church mem-

bers asked for a spiritual congress at midpoint between them. These congresses offer the joy of meeting other brothers and sisters in Jesus, and receive edification. For the Malta Adventist Church it was a great joy to send a delegation to the last one.

The motto chosen for the occasion was “Faithfulness, unity, evangelization in Christ.” Main official speaker was Prof. Jacques Doukhan, an Adventist theologian of Jewish origin, who led us into a deeper understanding of our Christian experience with God. Also very inspiring was the testimony of our special guest, the Hon. Tano Grasso, a member of the Italian Parliament, known for being one of the most courageous and effective opposers of the Mafia. His testimony about the need of fighting to protect our freedom and dignity, even if based on humanitarian reasons, had a great impact on our Christian understanding of life too.

Contextualization makes the Gospel liberating
Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
[Mark A. Kellner/ANN]

New “Guidelines for Working With Non-Christians,” approved in June by

New service for our readers

You can receive *Il-Lehen tat-Tama* also through the Internet, either as a PDF file or as an e-mail. The PDF format brings the Newsletter to you as it is in its printed form: it is ideal for storing all the issues on your computer (we can give you all the past issues in this format). According to how many photos are included, you need from a few seconds to about one minute to download it. The e-mail format is much smaller but without photos and with a simplified layout.

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CHRISTIAN TESTIMONY

JESUS HAS TAKEN MY LIFE

All of you know my name, since it appears in each issue of *Il-Lehen tat-Tama*, but only a few know me personally. I have been called to teach the Gospel, not to preach myself and this is the reason why I have almost never spoken about myself. But I also know that what we say can be better understood if we know the one who speaks, what is in his heart and the direction of his life.

My life is a very normal one, like, I suppose, that of most of you. But each life is a gift of God and as such has a great value and something to say to those who wish to listen. I hope you may give me the honour of listening a little to me, while I wait to receive the joy of listening to you.

My parents

I was born in a poor family of Sicily fifty five years ago. I remember my father Carmelo going to work having for a meal just a large piece of bread and some olives or a red pepper. To support the family, my mother Antonia used to wash the blankets of some rich families, or to go to the country to collect some wood to heat the oven for our home made bread. I was happy to go with her, for sometimes we could find some fruit tree and enjoy its gifts. I was very proud of her when, in the evening, she could return home with a large faggot of wood on her majestic head, and some wild vegetables in her bag to prepare our dinner.

I owe a lot to my parents, for even if they were poor, I never had to suffer any hunger except for one day, when I stubbornly refused to eat a slice of bread because it had got too dry. At first my mother told me: "You will not eat anything else until you eat this bread!" And so it happened ... until the next morning, when my stomach started to be in pain and I started to cry. No loving mother would resist, and mine forgot about her decision and prepared an egg with some fresh bread for me. I didn't consider that a victory.

My first religious experience

My family was not especially religious. They believed in God like almost everybody else, went to church for some special occasions and took part in the feast of the Patron Saint. At Christmas I enjoyed going to the country to collect the leaves of wild asparagus with which we prepared the vault of our crib, and the

moss to imitate the grass and the trees. Also nice was when we celebrated the Madonna and covered with flowers the road where she had to pass. I felt the tenderness and the poetry of that gesture. I felt how great and loveable the person in whose honour we were doing that, had to be. I couldn't realize the spiritual implications of that religious manifestation, but I enjoyed it. As I enjoyed the many great fires prepared to lighting Jesus' way to heaven for His ascension. And while the fires were there, many people used them to manifest their courage and ability, jumping through the flame to reach the other side of the pyre.

My religious experience was formed by these popular feasts, but I hadn't any teaching coming from the Gospel, and I didn't really understand the meaning of what I was doing. Most surely my mother tried to give me some teachings about the Christian faith, but what I remember are the feasts. I think the same happens to many others who are Christians because of the popular religion they are used to live, without having so much understanding of what Christ really means to them.

My first encounter with the Gospel

The first time I heard of the Gospel was through an old and simple man, a cobbler. I do not even remember his name, but I remember his goodness for, in a time of general poverty and of many children going around barefooted, he prepared a special pair of sandals for me, strong as the rubber tyre of which they were made.

He was a believer in Jesus, but he didn't go to worship in the parish where I was used to. The meeting place of his small group was a room. Once I went there with him. One day he gave me some small booklets. On their cover was written, "Gospel according to Matthew", "Gospel according to John". I started to read them, and I shared them with my godmother. The II Vatican Council was yet to come with its encouragement to ecumenism and to Bible reading, and my godmother was used neither to one nor to the other. She and all her family were very good Roman Catholics and went to church everyday. She also was a catechist, but when she saw those Gospels, the only thing she said was: "Throw them away for they are heretic, there is no imprimatur on them." So the Gospel had to receive human approbation to be



The child Giovanni Leonardi

the true Word of God. Thank God, my mother, a much simpler woman, told me not to worry for what I heard and to continue reading them.

That gobbler was a Protestant, member of the Baptist Church. That time, only Protestants were used to read and to encourage to read the Bible. A long time has passed since that time. Now, our Roman Catholic brothers have permission to read the Word of God and better relations exist between members of different Christian Churches. Unfortunately not everybody takes advantage of this privilege. The Bible remains an unknown book for most believers, and many prejudices continue to exist. A few days ago, a friend of our Seventh-day Adventist Church bought a Bible from the ship "Logos". It was a very good and appreciated edition, the "New International Version". But it is a Protestant edition and there is no imprimatur on it. Because of this, when this lady showed the Bible to her daughter, a very good person that I personally know and appreciate, the reaction was: "There is no imprimatur, it cannot be a true good Bible." It seemed to me that fifty years have passed in vain, but I know it isn't so.

Illness and parish life

Notwithstanding what I have said about the absence of the Gospel, when I think of my experience in the Roman Catholic Church, my feelings are of joy and gratefulness.

When I was seven, I spent three days in my bed with fever. The morning of the third day I tried to stand up but my legs were totally unable to support my weight. I was one of the last cases of polio in Italy. Thank God, it was also a time when some treatments were available and, little by little, I recovered my full ability to walk. I can escalate mountains and only by looking at me carefully people can notice some small differences from the normal way of walking. But when I was a child, it made me suffer a little, not so much for the illness itself, but for the reaction of some other children who continuously used my strange way of walking as a reason to insult me and have fun at my expense.

When I look back at those years in a Christian perspective, I can see how true it is what the apostle Paul wrote about the sufferings of life. "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose," he says in Romans 8:28. The apostle doesn't mean that all that happens to us comes from God. But he says that God, in His grace, wishes to transform everything that happens to His children, even the evil, into something good. And I am grateful to God for helping me learn, from that sad experience, to become more sensitive towards the problems of people in need, more sensitive toward the spiritual dimensions of life. If I am what I am now - a Christian and a minister of God - most probably I have to thank that experience of illness and troubles.

That time, a great comfort came to me from my Roman Catholic parish. There I found a protected and protecting environment. The priest was a very good young man that helped me to feel totally comfortable. We called him "Padre Cannone" which sounded a little funny for a young priest. But he was a "cannon" of kindness and good initiatives to honour God and his neighbours.

He tried to include me in the choir but without too much success (to be honest I have to say that others tried and failed in the same way with me, and I suspect it didn't depend on their inability).

He was more successful in preparing me for the first communion which I took with a simple heart even if my spiritual preparation was made of a list of answers learned by heart to some canonical questions. But I understood that that ceremony was something serious and important. My mother told me not to eat before communion and I obeyed. After the rite, I was welcomed with a true enthusiasm by the other boys of the parish and I am still grateful for that moment of honest spiritual joy.

But I never received confirmation, for something important happened that changed my life and my religious understanding.

My uncle teaches me the Bible

We cannot be Christians without automatically receiving the mission of being Jesus' witnesses. The Gospel doesn't say that we have to be a priest or a pastor to share our faith, for Jesus taught that all His children have to share with others the blessing of salvation.

My uncle Salvatore was a simple man. He was not learned and not rich. But he was rich in Jesus and he loved God's Word with all his heart. He also understood that he had to be a missionary wherever he was, and he considered it a joy and a duty to preach the Gospel using the tools and the few gifts he had received.

When he moved to Misterbianco, the town next to Catania where I grew up and where many Maltese people go shopping, the first thing he did was to give me a full Bible. I started reading it that same evening, and I read it so longly that, in my memory, it seems as if I read half of it just that night. Naturally it cannot be, but truly I was fond of it and its reading changed my life as anything that comes from God.

By the Bible I became aware of the true teaching of God, and I accepted with simplicity everything it said without worrying if it was contradicting my previous understanding. When you are young it is easier to accept the newness of the Gospel for your heart is still unencumbered with habits. Maybe this is one of the reasons Jesus said that to enter God's kingdom we must become like little children (Mat. 18:3).

My uncle was a Seventh-day Adventist believer, and my mother and I started to gather with this Christian community all Saturdays, according to God's commandment that requires to keep the seventh-day of the week as a holy day dedicated to God (Exodus 20:8).

For my uncle, keeping Saturday - or the Sabbath as we like saying according to the Biblical custom - was sometimes a painful privilege. Because of the Sabbath, many times he lost his job, but he never got discouraged, at least so I remember. If a job was lost, he just looked for another. God provided for him and his family to

have what they needed. His faith was a great encouragement to me.

I was about eleven that time, and I continued to enjoy my parish life. My uncle never told me not to go. I was just studying the Word of God and let it lead me.

So, on Sundays I continued to go to the Roman Catholic Church, and on Saturdays to the Seventh-day Adventist. Till when I spontaneously decided to be baptized according to the Gospel and become member of this Christian fellowship that I believed, and even more I believe now, has been raised by God to witness the fullness of His teaching, grace, law, and hope.

My decision was not against anybody, but in favour of God. I still love my Roman Catholic friends and I have many. But while honouring the honesty of their hearts, and enjoying their communion whenever I have the possibility, I think that I have to follow my God according to my love for Him and for His teaching. Jesus is the One Who died for me, and from Him I learned to love everybody. But also I learned that He is my only Lord and that I have to follow Him alone.

Pastor Giovanni Leonardi

(In the next issue pastor Leonardi will describe his struggle with his faith and how he became a Christian minister.)



"Unless you become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

CHRISTIAN HEALTH

JUVENILE ALCOHOLISM AND CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE

And so the Malta condition of youth as to alcoholism is the worst in Europe (Philip Farrugia Randon, *The Times*, May 13).

As Mr. Richard England points out (*The Times*, May 17), "The damaging are not only the possible tragic loss of life due to accidents caused by drink-driving but also the more probable loss in terms of an unfulfilled potential of future adulthood and the risk of producing a forthcoming alcohol-dependent generation."

We totally agree. We just doubt that the suggested solutions may work. Raising the minimum drinking age from 16 to 18, and working seriously to enforce the law in a strict way, can surely help a little, but would just convince the youngsters that drinking alcohol is the desirable privilege of adult people, as it happens with cigarettes when parents say, "You are too young to smoke!"

In our understanding the problem is especially a moral and spiritual one. We should enquire on the reasons why so many young people are tempted by alcohol. There may be existential problems that they try to falsely overcome by drinking, but there is also a pro-alcohol culture that encourages most people to consider alcohol-drinking as part of a friendly, joyful, and successful style of life.

In the above perspective, if a better legal initiative should be undertaken, it should first point to the elimination of all direct and indirect advertising about alcoholic beverages. Alcohol should be considered for what it really is, a drug to which hundred millions of people are addicted in the world, that has contributed to the destruction of entire civilizations, and is among the first causes of personal and familiar unhappiness ... without considering the economical cost for the community. Can anybody accept that such a curse may be advertised as something enjoyable and profitable?

A second line of initiative should be that of a better example given by the Christian Churches. We know that all Churches try to encourage not to drink in exaggeration. This is already good, but it misses the main point: if alcohol is a drug, maybe the time has come for Christians to assume a more resolute attitude and completely refuse it.



All celebrations have their negative hero: beer. It doesn't matter if people are celebrating the victory of a football team, the Patron Saint, or a political success: what is sure is that after each event, the roads are full of cans and bottles

Just think of what happens every day in all Roman Catholic churches and on most Sundays in the Protestant churches too, when Communion is celebrated. Alcoholic wine is used to represent Jesus' love for the perishing people, while alcohol itself is destroying many of these same people Jesus wishes to save. You can easily see the contradiction! So, why do we not decide to celebrate Communion by using a pure unfermented grape juice? We know that the idea may seem to be totally against the Christian teaching, but a deeper investigation of the Bible would help discover a quite different picture from what people usually know. We offer you some facts which all people of good will can consider.

1) The Bible strongly condemns drunkenness: "Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9,10). When we consider that in our occidental world, two out of five moderate drinkers be-

come involved in serious alcohol-related problems, it is like having a dog that bites two out of each five guests we receive in our houses. Would we continue to keep such a pet at home? My family is not perfect and I have with my son all the problems parents have. But when my teenager son is nervous, sad or upset he is not tempted to look for a beer or for a whiskey ... simply because we do not have any at home, and he has never been used to it. I thank God for this.

2) The Bible seriously admonishes against the use of alcohol: "Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaints? Who has wounds without cause?"

Write to Il-Lehen tat-Tama

We are pleased to receive comments and opinions. You can comment on our articles. You can write about spiritual, familiar, and social problems, about your hopes and troubles. If you wish we do not publish your letter, we will answer personally. If you wish we do not write your full name, just let us know. We are at your service and with your co-operation we will be able to serve you better.

Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger long at the wine, Those who go in search of mixed wine. Do not look on the wine when it is red, When it sparkles in the cup, When it swirls around smoothly; At the last it bites like a serpent, And stings like a viper. Your eyes will see strange things, And your heart will utter perverse things. Yes, you will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, Or like one who lies at the top of the mast, saying: "They have struck me, but I was not hurt; They have beaten me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake, that I may seek another drink?" (Proverbs 23:29-35).

3) Even if the Bible let people drink alcohol, yet it clearly educates people to consider that the best for God's children is not to drink any alcohol at all. We offer four examples.

A. Priests. As representatives of God and educators of the people, priests were requested to honour their responsibility by not drinking any alcohol, at least while accomplishing their ministry, so that their minds could always be able to distinguish between what is good and what is evil: "Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, that you may distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean, and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them by the hand of Moses." (Leviticus 10:9-11). Wouldn't God appreciate even today if His ministers would obey this commandment?

B. Nazirites. Nazirites were not priests, but common people who were dedicated to God for a while or for life. In the Bible, wonderful people such as Samson, Samuel or John the Baptist were nazirites. To express his particular spiritual dedication, among some symbolic elements, God requested the nazirite to "separate himself from wine and similar drink" (Number 6:3). Most probably to stress the danger present in the wine, but only for the nazirites, God forbade even the simple use of raisin, so as to avoid anything that could take them, both physically and psychologically, close to wine.

God considered wine so dangerous that even the mother of a nazirite as Samson was invited not to "drink wine or similar drink" (Judges 13:14). Now we know that the bad habits of a mother, like that of smoking or drinking alcohol, evilly affect the foetus. The ancient Israelites couldn't know, but God knew and He provided the best conditions for

the life of His future representatives, starting from their conception.

C. Kings. Kings were representatives of God, judges and leaders of the people. Because of their special function, they too were requested not to drink wine: "It is not for kings, O Lemuel, It is not for kings to drink wine, Nor for princes intoxicating drink; Lest they drink and forget the law, And pervert the justice of all the afflicted." (Proverbs 31:4,5).

D. Christian elders. The elders - also called "bishops", which means "overseers" - were the leaders of the Christian communities. So, the standard of their life had to be very high. The apostle Paul lists some of the characteristics they had to possess: "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, *temperate* (nephalios), sober-minded (*sophron*), of good behaviour, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine (*me paroinon*), not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous ..." (1 Timothy 3:2,3).

In reality, a better knowledge of contemporary Greek literature, would let us translate in a better way. The main meaning of *nephalios* is not that of being temperate, but abstinent from wine. In other words, the apostle Paul continues the Old Testament teaching about God's representatives asked not to drink alcohol so that they might have a clear mind and not confuse what is good with what is bad. This understanding is also supported by the presence of *sophron*, "sober", "sober-minded", "vigilant". The elders had to be *nephalios*, "abstinent", to be *sophron*, "clear minded".

Some scholars, used to the idea that the Bible encourages moderate drinking, refuse the previous translation arguing that Paul could not ask the elders to totally abstain from wine and, in the same time, not to be "drunkard", *me paroinon*, which would mean that they were allowed to drink moderately. In reality, "drunkard" is not the first meaning of *me paroinon*, but a possible consequence of it. We explain: the literal meaning of *me paroinon* is "not close to wine", in the sense of a person who doesn't go where usually people drink wine, for if they go they risk to become drunkards.

So Alfred Barnes, a respected interpreter of the New Testament, comments our text: "The Greek word (*paroinos*) . . . means, properly, by wine; that is, spoken of what takes place by or over wine, as revelry, drinking-songs, etc. Then it denotes, as it does here, one who sits by wine; that is, who is in the

habit of drinking it. . . . It means that one who is in the habit of drinking wine, or who is accustomed to sit with those who indulge in it, should not be admitted to the ministry. The way in which the apostle mentions the subject here would lead us fairly to suppose that he did not mean to commend its use in any sense; that he regarded it as dangerous and that he would wish the ministers of religion to avoid it altogether." (Albert Barnes, Notes, Explanatory and Practical on the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon (New York, 1873), p. 140.)

Professor Bacchiocchi, in his book *Wine in the Bible*, concludes: "Understood in this sense, *me paroinos* does not weaken *nephalios*. On the contrary, it strengthens it. What Paul is saying is that a bishop must be not only abstinent, but he must also withhold his presence and sanction from places and associations which could tempt his abstinence or that of others. This fits well with Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 5:11, "I wrote to you not to associate with any one who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber—not even to eat with such a one."

Synthesis. The conclusion may be just one. If it is true that in the Bible we see God being patient toward those who used alcoholic drinking such as wine or beer, nevertheless it is clear that His ideal for His people was that of total abstinence as the best way to represent Him. It is to each one of us to decide if we wish to follow God doing the minimum of moderation or the best of abstinence.

4. Some may object that sometimes the Bible speaks of the wine in a positive way, and that even Jesus, our best example, made His first miracle by creating a very good wine (John 2:1-10). The problem is that in the Bible, the same word "wine" (*yayin* in Hebrew and *oinos* in Greek) may both mean the fermented and the unfermented wine. This may lead to some misinterpretation if we do not know the ancient cultures and the Biblical language. We have good reasons to believe that at Cana, Jesus didn't create any intoxicating beverage, but a pure and uncontaminated fresh grape juice, so good as all was good when first He created the world (Genesis 1:31).

P.G.L.

(If you have questions or objections on this subject, we will be very happy to consider them with full honesty. If you like, use the included card or any other way to communicate with us.)

(Continues from the front cover)

Jesus' miracles convinced the crowd that He really was the long awaited Messiah, and when He fed them by the miraculous multiplication of the breads, they decided to crown Him as their king (John 6:14,15).

When Jesus was arrested, condemned and crucified, all their hopes vanished. Despite his good will, Peter denied Jesus and all the others fled away in fear and discouragement (Matthew 26:56). Not for the humiliation of a cross Peter and the others had followed their Master, but for the glory of the kingdom. The cross represented for them the bitterest disappointment, a shock from which they could never recover. Jesus was not crowned as the King of kings with a golden crown, but as a rejected criminal with a crown of thorns. Nothing was preparing them to enjoy a new hope, not in Jesus at least.

Three days after, in the evening, Jesus' disciples, "were assembled", but not to rejoice because somebody had said that Jesus was alive. Being practical people, not so much influenced by feelings and tales, they couldn't believe that. They were there, most probably because of their friendship and need of comfort. But nothing seemed apt to comfort them. "The doors were shut ... for fear of the Jews", and their hearths were closed to any hope." (John 20:19)

We see here, good, honest, mentally well balanced people. They are disappointed and scared. All hope have finished. It had already happened with other people pretending to be the Messiah: their death had put a full stop dot to all hopes people had in them (Acts 5:34-39). The same had to happen with Jesus. Israel had waited for such a long time, they would continue to wait.

If there was any hope of a Christian faith and religion, it totally died on the cross. At least, this is what had to happen, according to all intelligent understanding of facts. And nevertheless, things went on differently, for you and me are here believing that that cruci-

fied man really was and is our King and Saviour.

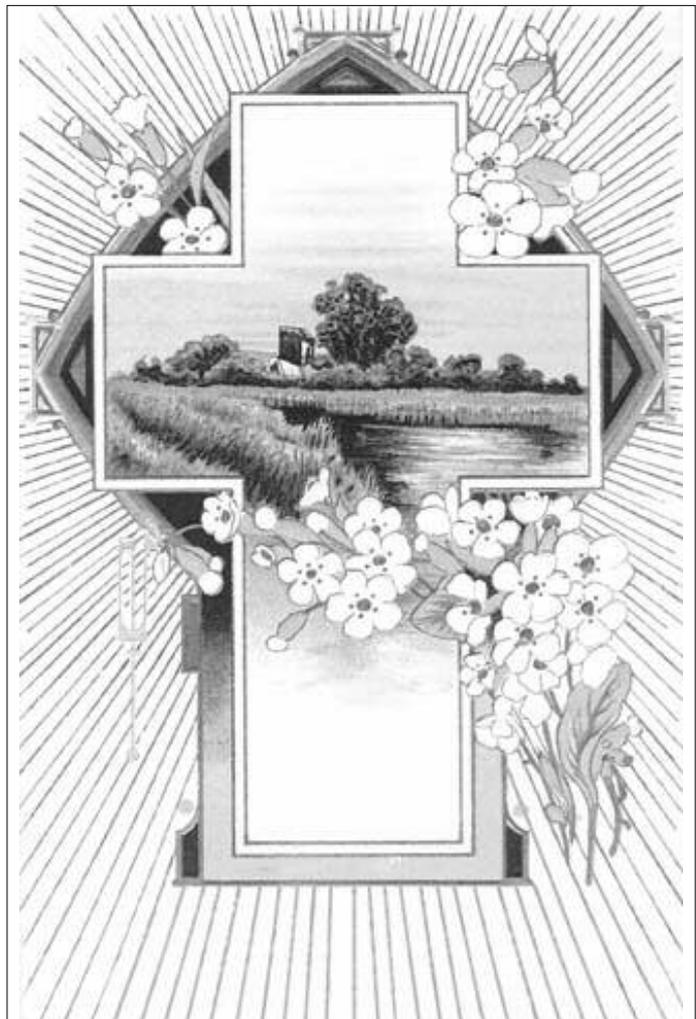
Christianity, with at its centre a crucified Saviour, is a philosophical, psychological, historical absurdity. The apostle Paul, one of the greatest Christian preachers, was aware of this for he wrote: "Jews request a sign (miracles), and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:22,23). In other words, nobody could invent such a religion as Christianity for it was contrasting all social, religious, and psychological laws.

But you and I are here, believing that madness. It isn't important here if we are faithful or unfaithful, honest or hypocritical. What is important is that, in this world, there are still people who know and honour that "foolishness" as something true. How could it happen, that that disappointment has become the hope of billions of people, that that criminal has become the greatest hero of the world, that those scared disciples have become so courageous to offer their life to affirm that the dead

Jesus was their eternal life and that of the world?

I can find only one explanation, the same offered by the once disappointed disciples: the cross wasn't the end of their hope because they met Jesus alive again, and the foolishness of the cross became wisdom, the weakness became power, darkness was changed into light, death into life and you and I into Christians.

If you and I exist as a Christian, it is only because Jesus was resurrected. You and your faith are the proof of His resurrection! Can you see it?



The cross was the sign of death and despair. With Jesus it has become the sign of life and hope. Only Jesus' resurrection can explain why and how it happened.



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