



Malta



Stable / Unchanged —

Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **97.8%**
- Agnostics : **1.7%**
- Others : **0.5%**

420,000

315 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Article 2(1) of the constitution of Malta states: “The religion of Malta is the Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion.”^[1] This does not indicate that Catholicism is the state religion. The constitution, in article 40(1), also upholds the principle of religious freedom: “All persons in Malta shall have full freedom of conscience and enjoy the free exercise of their respective mode of religious worship.”^[2] Anyone in Malta is therefore free to practise whatever religion he/ she desires. The Roman Catholic religion is enshrined in the constitution in consequence of the fact that the vast majority of people in Malta follow the Catholic faith.

Furthermore, the constitution also affirms that the state is obliged to provide education on the Catholic faith in state schools. This is reiterated in the Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Malta, signed on 16th November 1989, and the Modes of Regulation on Catholic Religious Instruction and Education in State Schools.^[3] Another agreement between the Holy See and the Malta, signed on 28th November 1991, guarantees the existence of Church schools there.^[4]

Other Christian Churches have long been present in Malta and most of them have their own places of worship where the faithful can freely take part in services. Indeed, following the norms of the Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism (1993) the majority Roman Catholic Church seeks to support other Churches and Christian traditions, including helping to access suitable places of worship. This is clearly stated in the 1993 document: “Catholic churches are consecrated or blessed buildings which have an important theological and liturgical significance for the Catholic community. They are therefore generally reserved for Catholic worship. However, if priests, ministers or communities not in full communion with the Catholic Church do not have a place or the liturgical objects necessary for celebrating worthily their religious ceremonies, the diocesan bishop may allow them the use of a church or a Catholic

building and also lend them what may be necessary for their services. Under similar circumstances, permission may be given to them for interment or for the celebration of services at Catholic cemeteries.^[5]

The following are examples where the concept of religious freedom is upheld with regard to the provision of places of worship:

The Romanian Orthodox parish of the Nativity of St John the Baptist, led by parish priest Father Ionut Iftimia, was granted the use of Saint Roque's Catholic Church in Valletta. The Romanian Orthodox community meets every Sunday for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy in what was formerly an unused church where catechism used to be taught to children. The building was in urgent need of repair. A Roman Catholic benefactor responded generously when he witnessed the plight of the Romanian community. In addition, an ecumenical service included a collection for the Romanian church^[6]

The Catholic Church of Saint Nicholas in Valletta is shared. As well as being a place of Catholic worship, Orthodox faithful from Serbia, Russia and Bulgaria use the building for the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. In this regard the Orthodox from these Churches enjoy the cooperation and timely assistance of the priests of the Greek Rite Catholic parish in Valletta. This is another example of fraternal cooperation among Churches in Malta.^[7] On 20th August 2017 The Times of Malta reported that Russian faithful wanted to build their own church in Kappara, Local residents and environmental groups had raised concerns.^[8]

Various Coptic Orthodox groups have been using Catholic churches or chapels in Zebbug and in Valletta. The Egyptian Copts have used a countryside chapel in the Zebbug area for a number of years. They have recently requested that they be offered a place of worship which is not as remote as their existing chapel. Many worshippers have had to travel on foot including in the summer heat and in the depths of winter.

On 28th December 2014 The Sunday Times of Malta reported on the situation for Coptic groups, including Ethiopian and Eritrean communities. The article by Peter Newsham demonstrates the positive working relationship between the Catholic Church in Malta and these communities.^[9] These Christian communities celebrated one of their greatest festivities at an outdoor venue to which other Christians were invited to participate.^[10]

In May 2017, the Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox community took part in the State of Europe Forum, held in Malta, and organised by Sallux and the Robert Schuman Centre, the Netherlands. Their involvement was appreciated by other Christian groups in Malta and beyond.

Incidents

Despite the afore-mentioned positive situation, Archbishop Charles Jude Scicluna of Malta has been criticised on a number of occasions in the past year, especially on social media, for his views, especially concerning social, ethical and environmental issues. Sometimes, when the archbishop took part in talk-shows, he was shouted down. Certain prominent bloggers mounted a campaign against him. These incidents demonstrate a degree of intolerance towards the Archbishop in response to his articulation of the Church's thinking on issues of human dignity and other sensitive areas of a socio-economic and ecological nature.^[11]

In July 2016, a 1933 law punishing the vilification of the Roman Catholic religion was overturned when the Maltese Parliament approved amendments to the Criminal Law. Proponents of these changes affirmed that "the law would not allow people to incite religious hatred – noting that the incitement of hatred based on religion, gender, race, sexuality, gender identity or political belief was already illegal as per a more recent law and would remain so ... In a democratic country, people should be free to make fun of religions, while not inciting hatred."^[12]

Opponents to this amendment stated that "freedom of expression should not mean that people are free to insult the things that I hold dear – that is diabolical logic."^[13] Reacting to the new legislation, "Archbishop Charles Scicluna tweeted his dismay at news that MPs had, as expected, successfully passed Bill 133. 'Demeaning God and man indeed go hand

in hand. A sad day for Malta. Lord, forgive them: they do not know what they do”^[14]

Prospects for freedom of religion

Religious freedom is upheld in Malta to a large degree. Members of all religions have the right to practise their faith. The Catholic Church provides support to other Churches and traditions.

The media response to the Archbishop of Malta's pronouncements on matters of social, ethical and moral importance makes clear the need for greater tolerance, especially among certain sections of the press in Malta. The impression created is that everyone has the right to freedom of expression, except the Archbishop.

Endnotes / Sources

[1] Independence Constitution. See <http://justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8566> (Accessed 13th May 2018).

[2] Ibid.

[3] José T. Martín de Agar, *Raccolta di Concordati 1950-1999* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), 625-632.

[4] Op. cit., 633-641.

[5] Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (25th March 1993), para.137.

[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Roque%27s_Church,_Valletta [last accessed 30.4.2018]; https://www.wikizero.com/en/St_Roque%27s_Church,_Valletta (Last accessed 30th April 2018).

[7] <http://greekcatholicmalta.com/2016/01/fr-george-about-the-orthodox-churches-in-malta/> (Last accessed 30th April 2018).

[8] <https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20170820/local/plans-for-maltas-first-russian-orthodox-church.656005> (Last accessed 30th April 2018).

[9] <https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20141228/life-features/An-island-of-Christian-sanctuary.549973> (Last accessed 28th April 2018).

[10] <https://www.tvm.com.mt/en/news/celebrating-joni-mill-in-ethiopian-and-eritrean-christians-celebrate-in-valletta-ara-etjopjani-u-eritrej-fil-belt/> (Last accessed 13th May 2018).

[11] <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2018-04-11/blogs-opinions/Archbishop-Scicluna-should-mince-his-words-6736187903> (Last accessed 25th April 2018); <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2018-04-03/local-news/Petition-calls-for-removal-of-Archbishop-Scicluna-on-false-premise-6736187375> (Last accessed 8th May 2018); https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/comment/blogs/85933/the_war_against_charles_j_scicluna#.WvhOjO-FPMw (Last accessed 8th May 2018).

[12] https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/67475/parliament_approves_bill_decriminalising_porn_and_repealing_religious_vilification#.WvhQ1u-FPMw (Last accessed 5th May 2018)

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.