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Letters intended for publication in *The Sunday Times* should be as brief as possible and include the writer's full name, address and telephone or mobile number. They are also subject to editing. Those sending letters by e-mail should still include their particulars. The same letters should not be sent to any other newspaper. Letters carrying a nom-de-plume will not be published.

The Arab-Christian pact

■ Godfrey Wettinger's piece (*The Sunday Times*, March 21), shorn of its frills, makes one objection to the thesis in *Trista ex Melitogauda*; namely, that the *dhimma*-pact put forward in the book is unacceptable because the pact in question was something else.

In his opinion, this referred to the deal made between the free Muslims occupying Malta in 1048-53 and their slaves (*ghabida*) when confronted by a Byzantine attack. But Prof. Wettinger is contradicting himself, unless he has changed his mind since 1989.

The pact mentioned in the book, abrogated in 1127, was a pact between Christians in Gozo and the Muslims. Twenty years ago Prof. Wettinger wrote (*The Sunday Times*, November 19, 1989): "The slaves were undoubtedly Muslims, seeing that they were told by the free that they could expect only death at the hands of the invaders had the latter been successful."

Further on, he posits that "in view of all this, it is probable that the *ghabida* of 1048 mentioned by al-Qazwini in his well-known passage actually refers to the descendants of the survivors of the original Christian inhabitants of Malta who presumably earned, in the eyes of the Muslim conquerors, either by their stalwart resistance or the suspicion that they were in concert with the Byzantine force trying to recover the island, the harsh treatment meted out to them.

By 1048, still retaining their humiliating status of *ghabida*, they had, not surprisingly,

become completely assimilated in culture, language and religion to their conquerors."

But, as noted by Anthony Luttrell (*The Making of Christian Malta*, 2002), had the slaves of 1053 been descendants of the pre-870 inhabitants, they would probably have remained on the island with their women so that the men would have had no pressing need to marry the free Muslims' daughters.

The logical conclusion is that the pact, "between Christians and Muslims", abrogated in 1127, could not have been the deal "between free Muslims and Muslim slaves" drawn up in 1053.

But let us consider what the abrogation, in 1127, of the deal of 1053 could have meant. The latter concerned giving the slaves of that year freedom, equality with their masters, and women, which they would have enjoyed for a full 74 years.

Now, in 1127, their descendants, three generations later, would be saying "chuck the deal". What precisely would they be renouncing?

The deal was actually something of the distant past and would not concern the Muslim ex-slaves in the least. I honestly do not see anything "falling into place" in all this theorising.

Coming next to the other relevant point raised in Prof. Wettinger's letter relating to the antiquity of "the pact of old" broken in 1127, the Christian community that was still bound by it, including their priests who "had departed from the pact of old (*anò*)", could not have been one

implanted by the Normans on Gozo after 1091.

Such a community would have been free and in no need to strike any deal with the Muslims, only suffered by the Normans to remain on the island on tolerance.

If it pre-dated 1091, then the Christian community bound by this pact would have been a non-servile group under the Muslims, which would then clash with what was said above and with the information in Malaterra concerning all Christian slaves on Malta being foreigners.

This would be contradictory, that is, unless Malta and Gozo were treated differently, which is not as Prof. Wettinger would have it now but which was something that he vaguely contemplated in 1989.

Then he wrote: "One is faced by the difficulty of explaining how this could have happened. Were some indigenous inhabitants considered to be less blameworthy than the others by the Muslim conquerors, earning for themselves the mildly inferior status of *dhimmi* rather than that of actual servitude or *ghabida*?"

The book gives a concrete proposal of how this could have come about, as well recognised by Ugo Mifsud Bonnici in his review (March 14) regarding the much more historically convincing way of explaining the continuity of Christianity in these islands during the Arab occupation.

Stanley Fiorini
University of Malta, Msida

No wrong in lunch with magistrate

■ Georg Sapiano (*The Sunday Times*, March 28) claims I went out to lunch with Magistrate Consuelo Scerri Herrera, implying that I did so to influence her decision in a case I am a defendant in and which she is hearing. He makes a reference to "people at the top openly scratch(ing) each other's back".

I can categorically deny ever having gone out to lunch with Dr Scerri Herrera. Dr Sapiano is probably referring to a lunch I attended to celebrate the birthday of a mutual acquaintance in which Magistrate Scerri Herrera was seated at the same table as I was together with about 18 other friends. This dinner featured prominently in Daphne Caruana Galizia's blog after one of the patrons of the crowded restaurant we were in contacted her with the 'scoop'.

The case he is referring to is a libel case instituted by two Labour MPs, Charles Mangion and Karmenu Vella, against me following a statement I was directed to make by high-ranking officials in my party a week before the 2008 general election. This is one of the many libel cases which are to be settled by a blanket agreement between the two major parties, an agreement Dr Sapiano is surely aware of.

Why should I meet up with a magistrate to try to influence her decision about a case which is to be settled anyway? If I did try to influence anyone would I do so in such a public place? Even if this were the case, Dr Sapiano must have a very poor impression of our magistrates if he seriously believes they can be influenced by someone buying them a plate of pasta.

He refers to a possible vote on Magistrate Scerri Herrera's impeachment in Parliament, implying I may be influenced by the fact that I know the magistrate in question. I can reassure readers and my electorate that I will not hesitate to vote in favour of her impeachment if sufficient evidence is presented to back such a motion. On the other hand, I will not let myself be swayed by any other factors, and will not be pressured by anyone into voting against my conscience.

Perhaps, if Dr Sapiano, who is a candidate for the Nationalist Party, channelled his energy into other, more positive, efforts he would garner more popular support in the next general election. Surely he must appreciate that slandering his colleagues is not going to gain him any respect.

Jeffrey Pullicino Orlando, Mr Zebbug

Let the professionals do their job

■ I refer to your front-page story last Sunday concerning the rights of the police to 'stop and search' without apparent justification. I suggest that this development is part of a growing mistrust and resentment of dedicated professions across our society.

Teachers, doctors, nurses, police officers and others - all these people have chosen their professions because of an innate desire to serve or help others; and all, without exception, are suffering from a considerable drop in public esteem.

While those who have suffered abuses deserve to be heard and to have their complaints investigated, I would like to put things in greater perspective.

This drop in public esteem can be explained in several ways. The misdemeanours of one individual (or even a single case) are enough to give an entire profession a bad name, and more so when fuelled by hostile media attention.

There are cases where citizens disagree with how and why a service is provided, while in others some believe that they know what goes on in the minds of others as they seek to make complex decisions based on experience. Thus, teachers are being increasingly bullied by students and parents, and cameras may be installed in the future to give parents more control over what happens in the classroom.

Healthcare professionals sometimes face hostile patients and are tried and found guilty although they do their best to act in patients' best interest. And the

police may soon be told who they can and cannot stop and search when they are trying uphold law and order.

I do not think complaints are the cause of this problem - they are the solution. Feedback is necessary to improve services and to ensure that anyone who is not living up to the standards of his or her profession is made to toe the line. Trust can be rebuilt if complaints are dealt with in a way that is transparent and consistent.

What is particularly worrying is when society (represented by the government or by Parliament), takes it upon itself to control dedicated individuals so as to be seen to act to avoid complaints.

Members of the dedicated professions are being required to prove their dedication by 'shutting up' in the face of growing public discontent provoked by the failures of Western society. I fear the ultimate outcome may be as sad as those misfortunes that lead us to these crossroads.

As people, now called to serve, find their freedom of action increasingly hampered by legislation and public suspicion, they may become more and more defensive. Those who once chose their work willingly may stop acting from the heart altogether, and our serving professions will be driven mechanically and 'by the book', more preoccupied with avoiding trouble than with serving.

It may be the beginning of the end of dedicated professions as we know them.

Thomas Lofaro
Balzan

Grounds for marriage annulment

■ Fr Hilary Tagliaferro's interview (*The Sunday Times*, March 28) was most inspiring, for it showed among other things how a priest can be a priest and share in the humanity of the people around him.

However, there was one point he touched upon and which I find could be expatiated upon, and that is the state of marriage in Malta. For it is not so much that things will change in 10 years' time or so... but that they actually have changed.

My experience with marriage tribunals abroad taught me that the changes made in Canon Law and especially with relation to marriage some decades ago could benefit Malta if they were applied.

We start from the premise that marriage is indissoluble - 'till death do us part'. Yet the revision of parts of the Canon Law some three decades ago or so, especially those that relate to

marriage, seem to find only an onerous passage on their way to here.

One big breakthrough made then, and for which marriage can be considered as not having taken place, is known as *debita discretio*, which covers a multitude of sins but, basically, if it can be shown that before marriage the couple were not mature enough to enter into this relationship then there are grounds to believe that the marriage did not take place at all.

The same can be said about Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which is magisterial doctrine that every act of sexual intercourse among a married couple must be open to procreation.

At the time of its publication this caused a furore in Catholic circles.

Yet any non-observance should still be considered a violation (*contra bonum prolis*) and

if either of the couple enters into marriage with this in mind, the marriage is null.

Another factor that is peculiar to Malta is the signing of the agreement between the then Apostolic Nuncio, Mgr Pier Luigi Celata, and the local Church whereby couples have to sign, before being married in Church, that they had to go through the local Church authority were they even to think of getting a separation. Such an attitude goes against the indissolubility of marriage.

These are only some of the grounds on which a number of marriages can be declared null and one is still within the bounds set by the Canon Law of the Church. One could go on.

No, Fr Hilary: a great number of marriage hardships could be avoided if Canon Law itself were applied to local dioceses.

Joseph Abela
Naxxar

Missionary's thanks

■ Sr Dolores Gauci, along with the other Dominican Sisters who run our orphanage in Chak, Pakistan, thank the Mission Fund for the donation of €1,200. This sum is being used to cover the children's everyday needs, for educating them and sometimes even helping

their near relatives. This contribution helps us to give them something they cannot get.

I thank all our generous benefactors and promise them our prayers.

I kindly ask your readers to send donations, used stamps and

mobile phone cards to the Mission Fund, 72/2, St Joseph's Flats, Triq il-Farinal, Mosta MST 07, so that it can keep on helping Maltese missionaries in Third World countries.

God bless you all.
Sr Tessie Sciortino
Chak, Pakistan