

Celebration of simplicity

He's a man – cast into an extraordinary position – who values the ordinary

ALESSANDRA DEE CRESPO profiles the Auxiliary Bishop-elect, Mgr Joseph Galea-Curmi, in this exclusive interview for The Sunday Times of Malta

Mgr. Joseph Galea-Curmi welcomes me into his office in the Curia in Floriana in his usual genial manner. He offers me a seat round a table covered with baize, and as I look around me, I spot a painting that was not there the last time I visited. “Oh, that was just put there because the other one is being restored. This one is too big,” he says while dismissing it with an apologetic shrug. As Curia offices of senior prelates go, the new Auxiliary Bishop’s office, which he has occupied ever since he was named Vicar General by Archbishop Charles Scicluna in 2015, is sparse, pared down to the bare essentials. There are no personal touches, no framed photographs with the great and good, no elaborate curtains, no knick-knacks or the medal he won for placing second in the world in the LCC typing examinations before he joined the seminary. It is quite ordinary, just like his attire, a dark suit and a clerical collar. I was hoping to inspect the pectoral cross Archbishop Scicluna put round his neck upon his appointment one week ago, but it was nowhere to be seen. Mgr Galea-Curmi has never struck me as image driven or power hungry. “I go for the essentials, for simplicity,” he told me when I remarked about the Scandi minimalism of his office. Truth be told, this should not come as a surprise to people who have known him for years. He is known to be a man of simple tastes, a sharp sense of humour, the common touch and few words. A quick search on Google only yields the sparsest of biographical information. His presence on any social media platform is non-existent. The new Bishop might be an unknown entity to wider Malta, but in Balzan, where he has served for 27 years, Fr Joe, as he is known, is a very familiar figure on the streets of the neighbourhood. “I have been walking everywhere in Balzan nearly every day for 27 years,” he said, listing all the shops, businesses and clubs, in their proper sequence, that he encounters on his way from his home in Birkirkara to the parish church in Balzan. “Many a time people ask me in for a chat,” he continues, “and when I was walking with the new parish priest once, I pointed out where people lived or who a certain car belonged to,” he said with obvious relish. The new Bishop has married babies he baptised and baptised their children too. He still plans on walking to church every day, even more so now. “He has always been a priest for the people,” a parishioner told me, remembering how he used to catch up with her while they waited companionably at the bus stop together. “I used to tell him, ‘You will be bishop one day!’ ” she tells me joyfully. Even in his seminary days, the new Bishop yearned to be among ordinary people. As part of his seminary formation, he chose to work in a factory, “because he wanted to know what it feels like to put food on the table” as he was overheard telling the parents of another parishioner. It is very telling, then, that Mgr. Galea-Curmi’s favourite Gospel passage is that in which Jesus washes the disciples’ feet. For him, this is the text that has inspired his priestly ministry, the desire to be of service, to bring people to Jesus, not the institution or to a particular person, but Jesus himself. “This is one of the major challenges for the Church,” he countered, “because of the relentless march of cultural Christianity that prioritises the outward expression of religion over the adherence to Gospel values.” Not only that. Mgr Galea-Curmi does concede that the institution is in the doldrums in a certain section of society. The new Bishop is worried about the insults that are hurled at the Church and Archbishop Scicluna, but he is more concerned about the perpetrators, for their behaviour

uncovers the hatred that lies deep in their hearts. “It says more about the person who does the insulting than the one who is insulted. This is not how we were brought up in my family,” he said. Mgr Galea-Curmi’s family looms large in his life, and he credits his faith-filled upbringing as the soil where the seed of his vocation took hold and flourished, citing his uncle Mgr Ġużepp Mifsud Bonnici and the Curé d’Ars, two unassuming but deeply spiritual role models, as major influences. He speaks with great affection about his parents, both departed, Paul and Josette, about the values of honesty and integrity they both instilled in his brother and sisters, recalling an anecdote about when his father, who worked for the Education Department for years, found a pencil marked ‘GM’ (Government of Malta) that the young Joseph was using at home. He was adamant that the boy should not use it. “You could have said it meant [former Archbishop of Malta] Ġużeppi Mercieca,” I joked lamely. “It would not have washed with my father. It was not mine to keep, and that was that.” The Bishop’s mother, Josette, sounds like Marmee March, the beloved matriarch in the novel *Little Women*. “We were eight people at home, but she still helped people in need, distributing food and clothes.” She once even took for charity the trousers he had just bought for himself, he recalls fondly. “It was a genuine mistake.” It doesn’t sound like he minded much at all. “My mother taught me the theology of kindness in practice.” Mgr Galea-Curmi’s voice softens when he tells me that the date of his episcopal ordination [August 4] also happens to be the date of his mother’s funeral. Pause. “She will be with you in spirit, then...” I state the obvious, hoping to puncture the silence that has descended. Longer pause. “Yes,” he said finally. One of the greatest lessons he learnt from his tight-knit family was how he perceives and treats people who have different opinions. Like many families in Malta, his family too contains members who hold diverging political beliefs. Mgr Galea-Curmi credits his healthy family environment for preparing him for what he imagines is in store for him with this appointment. “Certainly, there were difficult times, but we always managed to discuss issues respectfully. Of course, we did not shirk from stating our opinions clearly or making the choice between right and wrong, but this never divided the family. We never resorted to insulting each other.” He looks and sounds genuinely mystified at how so many choose to allow their political passions to get the upper hand over relationships, families and common sense. What does he make of the people who are already feverishly writing that his brother, Edgar, served as the personal assistant to former prime minister Lawrence Gonzi? Mgr Galea-Curmi smiles enigmatically. “Perhaps others will be saying one of my uncles was the leader of the Malta Labour Party and a Labour prime minister.” Pause for effect. “Few people know that Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici is also my godfather,” he discloses. That must confound a great deal of people, I chuckle, hoping to elicit a response. No reaction. He is inscrutable, no matter how long and hard I examine his face. Is there hope for this country, or is it a lost cause? Ever the optimist, The Bishop cites Balzan as an example of a well-adjusted and integrated community, and he talks animatedly about how this town, generally speaking, goes about its business without much care given about people’s personal political beliefs – “As it should be,” the new Bishop adds for emphasis. He is also very proud of the well-integrated, close-to-100-strong immigrant community that lives in the building belonging to the Good Shepherd Sisters. “The parish has also welcomed altar servers from this community,” Mgr Galea-Curmi says with a tinge of satisfaction in his voice. He’s a man – cast into an extraordinary position – who values the ordinary. The Auxiliary Bishop-elect is evidently still very proud of the diocesan synod he oversaw between 1999 and 2003. The synod was called to discern issues that concerned the Church and her relationship with society and then set about working on and implementing a plan of action. Long before the word became the buzzword of the current pontificate, the synod of nearly 20 years ago was all the rage, and in some ways it

still has a prophetic voice. The Bishop says that when people marvel about certain issues brought up by Pope Francis, they forget that the documents from the synod have already spoken of them. Is the Church in Malta due for a renewal of the synod? He does not hesitate to answer, perhaps having already given much thought to this question in view of the massive changes in secular society and the altered viewpoints on certain pastoral issues from the Church. “Yes. However, what is more important? A synod or living synodality?” he muses out loud. For Mgr Galea-Curmi, the synod is but a tool towards living synodality at every level of the Church. Is it working, though? Do we, as a Church, have a mentality of synodality? I ask the Bishop how the Church is going to win over those well-meaning, hardworking people, be they priests or laity, who lead parishes, commissions or agencies, who are entrenched in their fiefdoms, in their way of doing things and thus risk morphing into satellites that orbit round the Church but do not really come together. The Bishop is unfazed. “We must promote a culture of best practice,” he says. “We must promote what is good, what works, because we have the tendency to focus on problems. We tend to share only what worries us and thus end up burdening each other.” Is the ‘us and them’ mentality part of internal Church discourse too? How is the new Bishop going to win over those, even members of the clergy, who are perennially suspicious of the Curia, of the Church, even of the Archbishop? “No matter how hard the Archbishop and his collaborators, including yourself, try, do you feel like you are always at a disadvantage?” I press on half-heartedly, expecting to be fobbed off with a Curial answer, forgetting for a moment that my interlocutor is one of the most straightforward people in the building. “Personal meetings,” he shoots back immediately, without hesitation. So many people who berate the Archbishop online migrate to writing to him personally on email too, he says. They write all sorts of things, he continues, not expecting to receive a reply. The Archbishop meets with them and lets them talk. And they are won over by his humanity and force of personality. But more importantly by “his big heart”. “Encounter,” Mgr Galea-Curmi says almost evangelically. “It’s the culture of encounter that Pope Francis is underlining. You cannot win over everyone, but the Archbishop certainly does his best to put this into practice.” He is too modest to tell me so himself, but Mgr Galea-Curmi does his bit as well. He is trusted and sought by many, including priests, for his willingness to listen and for his wise and gentle counsel. “If it weren’t for him,” one parish priest confided to me, “I would not be where I am now in my priestly ministry.” What this parish priest also admires is the bishop’s knack for putting someone at ease with his sense of humour. It is sharp, I know all too well, having been at its receiving end many a time, but his humour is never malicious and it is never at the expense of others. “People mistake his geniality for a lack of leadership,” another priest told me, “but people in Malta are so used to in-your-face bravado that someone of Mgr Galea-Curmi’s disposition is dismissed as a weakling. Underestimate him at your peril. He knows exactly what’s what.” Still waters run deep indeed. So what’s new with this appointment? What will change? With his nomination, much of the work is the same, but the responsibility is greater, he says. He still plans to live an ordinary life alongside the people he has served and walked with for the past quarter of a century. The value of ordinariness means a great deal to the new bishop. Will this nomination lead him and Archbishop Scicluna to extraordinary heights in a few years’ time? The Auxiliary Bishop laughs and says that he is like Simon the Cyrene, helping the Archbishop carry his cross. And like Simon the Cyrene, another ordinary man with an extraordinary task, he says nothing. Alessandra Dee Crespo is the Chancellor of the Church Tribunal of Appeals.