

Satisfactory, I suppose, in a melancholy way to find one's gloomiest predictions (in this case about the instability and unreality of the Sunningdale settlement for Northern Ireland) actually fulfilled while they were being printed last month, but by a special self-denying ordinance I restrain myself from commenting on Ireland this time—except to say that I have been sparing a thought for those who maintain that a province with only a million and a half inhabitants living in 5,000 square miles, with a mere 250 miles of coastline and 200 miles of land frontier is altogether too small to be a viable modern state. I have been thinking of them because I have just been to an independent modern state where one third of a million people live on a hundred square miles and where the furthest you can travel without falling into the sea is seventeen miles. This is the island of Malta which in recent years has been a very independent state indeed. (Not all its citizens live on Malta itself; twenty thousand of them live in the even tinier island of Gozo where there are already rumblings of a campaign for Home Rule.)

Of course Malta is beset with economic, political and religious problems, but the Maltese seem at least as capable of coping with these as are the people of much larger states. She is a poor country but nowhere is there the inhuman misery to be found in, say, the United States or Latin America. She has struggled for independence and, having achieved it with relatively little fuss, is now a little unsure of whom she is and what independence means. She is a country of both European and Arabic tradition but wary of both and yet dreaming of forming the focus of a Mediterranean culture. Her people from pre-historic times have had a strange passion for catacombs and caves; she was for centuries ruled by a predatory gang of immensely wealthy foreigners—the Knights of St John of Jerusalem—who occupied their leisure in constructing around themselves and their baroque treasure enormous, fabulous and quite useless fortifications; there is a siege mentality and 'No surrender' built into her history (to be seen at its most striking in what was the most reactionary Catholic Church in Europe) and yet her people recognise that her meaning and her future can only lie in an openness to all the civilisations surrounding her.

Malta shows, if it still needs showing, that the small community can be as resilient as the massive state—and certainly her life-expectancy looks a lot better than that of the EEC. She also shows, what still does need showing, that the small community can sometimes provide more contrast and variety than the larger one. In its seventeen mile length I was told much about the conflict between rural and urban cultures. A lady in Ghar Lapsi on the coast explained that certain words were used quite differently in 'Zebbugi'—the language of Zebbug some three miles inland. Most villages have

not one but two patron saints expressing rivalries a degree fiercer than that between Liverpool and Everton supporters though expressed in much the same way. Perhaps because she is the most crowded country in Europe her people have developed privacy and local and family loyalties to an extraordinary extent. Out of this system of tension has come the meditative music of Charles Camilleri ('organised chaos', he calls it), the painting of Emvin Cremona ('creation through destruction') and the powerful sculpture of Gabriel Caruana, all of which belong to a world much larger than Europe.

With thoughts of this in mind it was interesting to find awaiting me on my return the new proposals for replacing the nineteen dioceses of England and Wales by thirty-seven much smaller ones. The report itself is severely demographic and when compelled to speak of the significance of dioceses contents itself with quotations from Vatican II, but would it be too optimistic to hope that this might be the occasion for a new look at and a new attitude to the local Churches? Could they, in their new and more manageable size become more like communities? At present only the clergy ever feel that they 'belong' to a diocese. Most people have a sense of belonging to some parish or group with whom they worship, combined with a consciousness of the international body to which this relates. Perhaps the new dioceses might develop their own distinctive characters and provide an intermediate focus of loyalty, neither parochial nor international but Catholic.

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