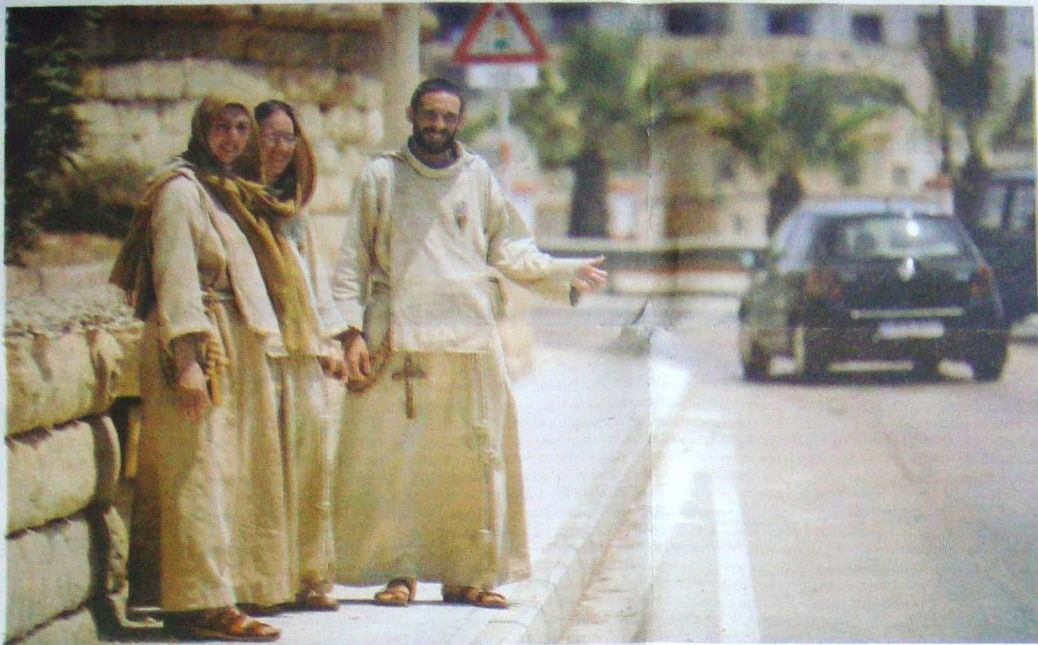


National



Relying on people's kindness... (from left) Sr Letizia, Sr Effatah and Bro. Antonio. Photo: Matthew Mirabelli

Hitch-hiking to heaven

David Schembri

If there is one thing most people work to avoid, it is abject poverty. But this is just what Michael Farrugia, 33, chose, and he seems very happy about it.

A brother with the Poor Friars, a religious community which embraces total poverty, Michael, born of Maltese parents in Australia, relies on God's providence and people's generosity to get through life, and travels around Europe just by hitch-hiking.

When contacted by The Times to arrange an interview, Brother Antonio, the name chosen when he joined the order, politely enquired whether it would be possible to get a lift from Qormi to Birzebbuga, where he was living with his family.

Speaking to him and two other members of the order - Sr Letizia and Sr Effatah - in their natural habitat, a car, Bro. Antonio explains what his life entails.

"The total poverty we have chosen to live enables us to meet lots of people... they don't have to be Catholic but people who help us can be anyone of goodwill - I've been to Ireland, Germany, France, Lourdes, Paris, and also Mexico," he says in an enthusiastic voice.

"We never ask for money, we do not want money, we do not touch money. Money is not a sin, but we choose to live without it."

This allows the members of his community to rely totally on God's providence, following a biblical passage where Jesus had sent 72 of his disciples to go into cities with no food or money and rely on what locals gave them to eat, drink and sleep.

Using this poverty as an excuse, they hitch rides and while there, they "try to send people back to confession or Holy Communion," or if their drivers are not Catholic, they "try to complete their religion with Jesus".

While the results might be hard to see, Bro. Antonio says he saw people with negative attitudes towards the Church change within the 15 minutes of the journey.

When they go into a city, they ask the Catholic Church there for lodging. At times they are turned down for some reason or another but they somehow always manage to get by, even managing to hear Mass almost every day.

Asked whether he and the sisters knew what they would be eating that day, they answered that one of their hosts was cooking lunch; they never pay for a meal.

When it comes to travelling abroad for some reason or another, they do not ask for money

to pay for the tickets but depend on someone to give them the ticket.

Since the order embraces the Franciscan value of poverty and the Carmelite value of contemplation, in winter they spend some time in their cloisters - separate for men and women - in contemplation, as this is the main way to understand God's will.

Born and raised in Australia, Bro. Antonio returned to Malta to celebrate his first Holy Communion at 12 before returning Down Under where he lost his faith in school, university, work, alcohol, drugs. At 21 he was back on the island.

As he travelled round Europe, his emptiness increased - and having to give up on his artistic ambitions because of an injured wrist made him slightly depressed. At that point, he still didn't believe in God.

While on the way to Malta in 1999 through the streets of Catania, he said a prayer and met the founder of the community, Fra Volantino who asked him if he wanted to become a saint. The words stuck, and Bro. Antonio was on his way to becoming a priest.

Sr Effatah, 30, born Miriam Välter, is from Germany, and her life was marked by suffering after a traffic accident claimed her right leg at the age of four.

Raised a protestant, she went on the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage and in her prayers she often came across a passage where Jesus had instructed 72 of his disciples to leave, carrying nothing - and used to feel guilty because of her heavy backpack.

Upon meeting members of the Poor Friars, who told her they had made the trip from Sicily to Spain carrying no money and no food, it ignited a "fire in her heart" as it showed her it was still possible to live the Gospel in its fullness.

Going back to her life as a media student in Germany and her boyfriend, she lost her inner peace completely, but the community she met remained at the back of her mind.

She had planned to go to Hamburg to continue studying but instead left her boyfriend and her home to join the Poor Friars' community in Sicily, travelling on her bicycle, where she was welcomed with an open heart. After three months of prayer she converted - and the difference was imprinted on her face.

Despite being far from home, the priorities of Bro. Antonio and Sr Effatah are clear: "What's most important is that we're in the will of God - we only have peace if we're in His will," Bro. Antonio says.

No social side to Vision 2015 - UHM

Matthew Xuereb

The government's Vision 2015 was devoid of the social aspect and only sets economic goals, Union Haddiema Maghqudin general secretary Gejtu Vella charged yesterday.

In view of the lack of this aspect, the union was embarking on an exercise, which it called the 2015 People's Social Vision, to draw up social goals to complement the government's vision.

Mr Vella said this project, which would be coordinated by Fr Peter Serracino Ingloft, would balance the vision and focus on six social aspects which the union identified as important for the country's future. These included the IT revolution, health, the family, education, better quality of life and institutional and democratic structures in the country.

The government's Vision 2015 focuses on ICT, tourism, manufacturing, health, education, health and Gozo as an eco-island.

Addressing a press conference outside Parliament in Valletta, Mr Vella said that, for the government's aims to be reached, they had to be based on social values.

He said its vision did not take into account people's social well-being, adding that the fear of the creation of social strata became more of a reality if economic visions did not put people at their centre.

On health, Mr Vella said services at Mater Dei Hospital and the community sector had to be improved. Regarding education, he said the country should place stronger emphasis on lifelong learning because knowledge was growing rapidly and no one could be satisfied with what he learnt only in his youth.

On quality of life, he said it was not enough to have laws to guarantee social justice but assistance had to be given according to the different needs of the people.

Within the context of the family, Mr Vella said the union did not yet have an official position on whether Malta should introduce divorce.

Notwithstanding this, he said, the union believed in measures to strengthen the family unit and measures had to be taken to first strengthen families, followed by other measures if people continued to face difficulties.

Mr Vella said between now and the end of September, the union would be collecting feedback from people and would publish the first draft of its document in time for its 44th anniversary.

He said this document would continue to be discussed, including at the union's general conference next year.



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