

A Two-faced MKSU:

Are we suffering from amnesia?

Beginning a new year always brings to mind a most vibrant stream of images invoking both past experiences and future hopes. Newness is always a trenched battle between old and modern, stability and change, tradition and innovation. This double-sidedness of all beginnings was aptfully expressed in ancient Roman religion. Janus, with the epithet Bifons, was the god of beginnings – gates, seasons and years. His two sides represented this Roman concern to preserve tradition and enhance change at the same time. Living in an “amnesic society”, within an increasingly postmodern culture that continually repudiates the past and parodies the concern for a deep-rooted identity, I am proposing that remembering our identity and not forgetting our roots in the past is fundamental for the future of MKSU.

MKSU’s birth dates back to 1929, an important date in Maltese political history. After an impassioned eloquent speech about Mexican youths’ resistance in the anti-Catholic Mexican revolution (1913-1929), some University students decided to found a Catholic organisation to be a similar testimony to Catholic truth at University. Thus originated the “*Lega Universitaria Cattolica Maltese*”, whose name clearly indicates the Italian bias of the Church in the local language question, by Giovanni Theuma (its first President) and Mikiel Azzopardi (its first Secretary) who were both later important churchmen in Malta. Under the guidance of Prof. Daniele M. Callus OP (1888-1965), a noted medievalist historian and philosopher, our organisation began to take root. Reflecting deeply pre-Vatican II Maltese Catholicism, the new lay organisation followed a strictly-set religious evolution. On the 19th February 1930, Mgr Maurizio Caruana approved the organisation with a right to accept or deny the nominated president, a right still theoretically retained today. The deeply religious nature of this first group should be understood mostly in terms of the Catholic Action lay movement propounded some time earlier by Pope Pius XI. As Professor Andrew Vella said in “*Tribute to Professor Daniel Callus*” (1965), the Lega was the first nucleus of the Catholic Action in Malta. Even though sometimes Professor Callus is considered its founder, it would later be firmly implanted through the efforts of both Giovanni Theuma and Mikiel Azzopardi. This is fundamental to understand the nature of our mission at University. In fact since the first statutes available, four principal aims were always the guidelines of MKSU: (1) propagate Christian values and give Christian service to all students; (2) unite the students of different religious organisations to work together as a single church witnessing a living Christ; (3) provide a group for Catholics not involved in other organisations; (4) promote the values of faith, justice and peace.

The great pro-Anglo shift in Maltese attitudes in the post-war era is reflected in the change of name to “*University Students Catholic Guild*” (USCG) in 1949. The organisation continued to grow giving emphasis always to its lay vocation in University thus highlighting spiritual formation and an adequate preparation for Christian workers. Another important date in MKSU’s history is surely the 29th May 1967 when the Senate approved it officially as a University organisation; thus ranking it amongst the oldest in the actual conglomeration of University organisations. One

can note a great amount of work being done especially in the publication *Ricerka*, a great amount of religious and social activities and self-evaluative tasks to inspect its effectiveness with students. Another highly interesting aspect is its international dimension - keeping up connections with a large number of similar organisations in other European universities has always been a top priority. By September 1974 the organisation changes its name again to “*University Students Catholic Movement*” (USCM) until 1987 when, reflecting popular culture, it was given the current Maltese name of “*Moviment Kattoliku Studenti Universitarji*” or MKSU.

Despite the great changes in university culture and religious mentality, the less apparent amount of work being done, the less number of interested active members and its minimal effect on university’s ever-increasing population at large, apart from the great proliferation of “competing” organisations, one should not look back nostalgically at a glorious past and lament at a decadent present. MKSU’s relevance is only ensured in keeping its four marks enumerated before clearly in sight. Only in respecting its lay self-perception but at the same time its deep bond with the local church and the rest of the diocese, in a truly Catholic Action framework, can it remain faithful to its original ideals today. However, one certainly cannot pretend lack of significant changes in the contemporary MKSU outlook. MKSU is no longer acting in a Catholic monolithic culture but within an increasingly secular, postchristian and pluralist society; its former religious services are now mostly supplied by the Chaplaincy whilst other organisations have spearheaded social justice and human values at University. More than ever before there is the need to understand and rediscover our Catholic dimension and identity within university; should it become more Christian in approach rather than Catholic in opening its arms to non-Catholics at University in a true commitment to ecumenism? Perhaps more than strictly religious should our commitment be more social, in line with Church social teaching? Which aim, from the four enumerated above, is MKSU most responsible of in our time and age? Should we not really concentrate on our ecclesial dimension - as part of the church - thus focus on the unity of the diverse organisations as fostering the unity in the local church which the synod emphasized so much? How are truly convinced Catholic individuals, not pertaining to any religious body, or searching Catholics, sought and provided a group either directly with MKSU or indirectly through the Chaplaincy?

Undoubtedly MKSU’s contemporary identity is or should be an intelligent blending of new and old. As I have been trying to point out, without entering into too much boring and useless historical detail, the old is as important as the new in our identity in order to be more authentic and fruitful in the achievement of our ideals and aims. Our most important concern, however, should be our loyalty to the ideal motivating those students around Prof. Daniel Callus back in 1929; being witnesses of the living Christ in our world, the light of the world that is so ancient yet always so new.

Mark Farrugia
