IN JANUARY 1961, the diocesan commission issued a circular which was read in all churches condemning the MLP’s affiliation with the Socialist International and the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organisation. In a bid to wield its power over the god fearing masses, it declared a sin the reading of Labour newspapers and the attendance of MLP meetings.

The events of the sixties would re-carve Maltese society as Gonzi’s ‘holy soldiers’ battled Mintoff’s ‘soldiers of steel’, the total number of people who had voted in favour of Labour’s proposal for integration of the Maltese islands with the United Kingdom.

Malta always lagged behind the times. The church still played an important social role in society. An unemployed son would be recommended to the village contractor by the parish priest. The priest was the village ‘psychologist’. In a decade where progressive cultural revolutions were taking place across all western societies, the regressive actions taken by the Maltese church remain a historical irony. Whilst Pope John XXIII opened up the Vatican to a new spring with the Vatican Council II, moving away from biblical literalism and absorbing the liberal influences of the times, Gonzi wanted to sustain his archbishopric as a feudal prince who had free reign over Malta.

And as the pope declared it no longer a mortal sin for socialist material to be read and propagated, the church’s decree fragmented society to such an extent, that a parallel society was created. Alternatives to mainstream activities were organised. Labourites had their own carnival of flowers, their own snooker tournaments, and their own Labourite brigade as opposed to the scouts.

Both Gonzi and Mintoff can be described as men of vision but whilst Archbishop Gonzi wanted to keep the status quo, Mintoff envisaged a country unshackled by archaic values. Whilst Mintoff wanted to shake up a rigid society so as to catch up with the times, Gonzi was simply enraged by tourists sunbathing in bikinis – even the usually accommodating Nationalist government fended off his lordship’s requests to get the police to clamp down on bikini-clad tourists, for fear of compromising Malta’s reputation as a tourist destination.

In the parallel, Labour society however, Labourite girls felt protected to freely put on their bikinis during beach parties, an acceptable practice in the world of the ‘other’ political party.

Malta Today will be analysing the difficult relations between the Malta Labour Party and the Catholic Church for the future of the island beyond colonialism.

The unholy war

The notorious ‘interdett’ is part of a tragic episode in Maltese history when the island was split between the competing aspirations of the Malta Labour Party and the Catholic Church for the future of the island beyond colonialism.
The mizbla still elicits feeling of God’s grace in unconsecrated ground, attracting a good number of people did not attend the wedding party because they were scared of the church. They would be interpreted as political. But even Guze Ellul Mercer’s nephew Anthony Vella recalls that in the eighties the mizbla was a burial ground for all kinds of deceased, including children. The mizbla was a place where people could be buried without any religious or formal ceremony. Eventually, the mizbla became a place of mourning and grief. Vella remembers that during one particular burial, a priest ran out of a passing bus to administer the last rites. The priest was overwhelmed by the emotions of the family and the congregation. The mizbla was also used as a place for political demonstrations. During one such demonstration, the protagonist of the story, Freddy Micallef, took the microphone and spoke about the need for change and progress in Malta. His speech was met with enthusiastic applause from the crowd. The story of the mizbla is a reflection of the political and social changes that occurred in Malta over the years. It is a story of struggle, resilience, and hope. It is a story of a people who refused to be silenced and who continued to fight for their rights, even in the most challenging circumstances.
For whom the bell tolls

Michaela Muscat

COMPARISONS ARE odious. But one is hard pressed to find a more hateful compariso

n to the devil. “The people miming Befelzabul” baffled Lino Spiteri the former labour

Minister as he was on his way to the Tokk meeting in Gozo.

Spiteri was present along with other Labourites when they spotted fervent

Catholics sauntering around on the Rabat hills whilst grabbing their behinds. “It was a

bizarre moment which would be perfectly captured on film,” he says.

Spiteri says that it took him a while to realise that the catholic crowd were trying to show

the Labourites that they believed them to be the devil incarnate.

Reminiscent of the fear of God inspired by the Inquisition; the Maltese Church attempted to

manoeuvre the political scene in its favour. So the Labour executive and supporters

became accustomed, but never immune to being accused of doing the devil’s work by

members of their own community.

The aura was convinced that Mintoff’s socialism was a Trojan horse for communism. At the

apex of the cold war the extreme sense of paranoia had found its breeding ground amongst Malta’s most conservative echelons. Clergymen, Azzjoni Kattolika and MUSE-UM had mobilised women and children, some of whom were carrying banners and sticks. After every meeting women known as tal-Purparu took to the streets to disinfect the area where the labourites had convened.

Back at St-Trold, the Church had issued an unofficial order to all the shopkeepers to shut-
down their business for the day and all public facilities including the latrines were also

locked up.

Paul Caruana, the father of Gozitan Labour MP Justyne Caruana says that it was hard to accept that their fellow Gozitans were sud-
denly taunting them and hurling stones. “I was hit by a lady with a wooden stick and we

didn’t have stones thrown at us as well,” says Caruana who was 14 years old at the time. The church-bells tolled throughout the meet-
ing and “Ghawdex ma’ l-Isqof” was inscribed on a banner hung on the faade of the church of San Gakh.

Realising that it was useless to continue the meeting, Anton Buttigieg halted his speech about the party’s intentions for the Civic

Councils. He addressed the hollering mob around the square “suffra suffra issu l-iqpicin-
tar sjilja lejna l-Isqofja u imin tigghum suflux.”

The meeting was stopped halfway through because it was too chaotic and dangerous for the people attending the meeting. The police eventually closed off the square, preventing people from leaving or entering.

Anton F Attard was 18 at the time told MaltaToday that he couldn’t bear the noise and walked out, so he was not allowed back in. Caruana remembers being terrified by the banner screeching and the verbal and physi-
cal abuse that he encountered with his father at Ghajnsielem. They had taken a detour to get back home and so they climbed their way

through Mgarr ix-Xini to get back to Awwilja.

On the otherhand, Labour MP Evatour Bartolo candidly articulates the part he played in this saga as a ten-year-old boy on the oth-
er-side of the battlefield as a child coming from a Nationalist background. He says that the fear, self-righteousness and visceral hatred instigated by the local priest spurred children on to commit those heinous acts. Whenever the camarilla of children spotted Labourites commuting to and fro from Gozo meetings they paraded around with flags displaying the Pope’s emblem. And singing “Ghawdex l-ghadowwa irida jissra il-bism tal-bel bii tajjun tal-salt” at the which the labourites returned: “Ghawdex l-
ghadowwa irida fikar ikparit tat talhoo Labour Party, immessi mill-partit.”

Anton F Attard from Rabat, Gozo remem-

bers priests making insinuations and some-
times-blant declarations against the MLP and Mintoff during mass. “It was a constant crusade against the MLP,” he says. “I clearly remember that priests would refuse to give absolution to Labourites during confession and the often mentioned the mortal sin.”

Attard was 18 years old in May 1961 when the infamous “Tokk meeting” took place in the Gozitan capital of Rabat. At the time the MLP was fighting for the Sitt Pajni, Labourites who were present at the meeting and revealed their memories to this newspaper draw parallels to the persecution suffered by early Christians in the Roman Empire. But not all priests supported the interdiction at the time.

Dun Ang Seychell was against the “calum-
nious interdiction” but when “he had to choose loyalties” he ultimately chose the church. Seychell attended rallies organised by the Gaits but never took part in any of the “distinguisng episodes.” The father of Labour MP Justyne Caruana says that his family suf-
fereed repercussions in their personal live due to political bigotry.

Even nowadays Gozitans is more inse-
nular. The church has a tighter grip on peo-
ple than in Malta and is less secular. Back then it was extremely degrading for the parish priest to skip someone’s house during the fe-

trial Easter blessings. “I was denied Holy Communion and confession. I was sent away from the altar myself being told that I could not receive Holy Communion because I was a Mintoffian,” Caruana says.

FEATURE
“WE WERE lucky that no inci-
dents took place at our wedding
even though there was a huge
crowd outside the church,” for-
er Labour minister Lino Spiteri said of his wedding ceremony held during the inter-
diction. The bride and groom had been anxious that their ‘spe-
cial day’ would be marred by angry extremists who had made a habit of showering the par-
ticipants at Labour weddings with insults.

The 23-year-old Spiteri and his spouse-to-be had been warned the marriage was considered by the church to be a mixed marriage.

The parish priest had informed the couple all would be well, but to their surprise it was car-
died out in English – reinforcing the message that Spiteri was not considered a member of the Catholic Church, and that this was a ‘mixed marriage’.

The parish priest had informed the couple all would be well, but to their surprise it was carefully worded.

Disorientated intellectually and spiritually, he attempted to rationalise what was going on but socially, he did not suffer – his family soldiered on despite the moral pressure, and having been involved in politics from an early age, he nurtured friendships that didn’t bulk under the strain of the times.

He happily reminisces that the wedding party was “normal” and all of the invites attended, irrespective of their political beliefs.

The interdiction did not cast its shadow on the festivities and important political heavy-
weights: Anton Buttigieg, Mabel Strickland and Nationalist party leader Georg Borg Olivier were all present.

“I am sorry it happened,” he remarks in an afterthought. “It was obviously not a nice thing having to baptise your child and seeing the priest write down that the baby’s father was interdicted. I ask myself, did we have to go through all this? And the answer is, no. I don’t think we should have experienced what we experienced.”

But time cures all things – Spiteri says he understands why people, especially the younger generation, don’t feel strongly about the issue anymore: “The River flows, times change – so it is not relevant for people any-
more.”

Across the divide

Guido de Marco during the interdiction

THE FLAMBOYANT, former President of the Republic is not one to hide his light under a bushel. And his friendship with political opponent and Labour MP, the Micallef Stafurce is no exception.

“We will always remain close friends,” Guido de Marco says about his friendship with the Labour politician, who in 1960 was a member of the MLP exec-

utive that received the interdict-

ation from the Maltese curia.

“It was too much,” de Marco says about the church’s decree. “Although the church was rightly reactive, it was too heavy.”

With a sense of escalation char-
acterising the heady days of the early sixties, de Marco says the language used by both parties had been far from diplomatic.

The strong convictions held by both Archbishop Michael Gonzi and Labour leader Dom Mintoff did not help to ease tension.

“They were alike – headstrong personalities who believed that they had to use extreme mea-
sures to get their point across,” de Marco and Micallef Stafurce were atypical boom buddies in turbulent political times. Their friendship stood strong in the face of adversity. As a real friend

De Marco, Mintoff and Gorzi were alike, headstrong personalities who believed that they had to use extreme measures to get their point across.

The strong sense of solidarity might seem peculiar in the cir-
cumstances. But as older politi-
cians are keen to point out, poli-
tics was conducted in a more gentlemanly manner. “A person

qualifies as a gentleman when he stands by you even when the going is not so good,” de Marco says.

Affectionately dubbed “staffy”, de Marco says Micallef Stafurce was moderate by convictions. They similarly acknowledged life was never a matter of “black or white – there is often a lot of grey in-

between.” Micallef Stafurce con-
curs that the ideological cleavage never prevented them from “sub-
stantially agreeing on various levels.”

Micallef Stafurce is evidently fond of de Marco, the man who was “simply a fair-weather friend.” Although numerous politicians were against the inter-
diction because they knew that it was not a theological matter, nobody opposed the decree pub-
licly. The two got to know each other at university and their friendship was tested as far back as 1959 when Micallef Stafurce was jailed after losing a libel case.

Governor Robert Laycock had taken offence for a tongue-in-

cheek cartoon published as a reaction to the temporary suspen-
sion of a ban on village feasts. The cartoon published by ‘Is-

Sceb’ when Micallef Stafurce was editor, portrayed the perspir-
ging governor holding a bottle of gin whilst riding piggyback on revellers at a festa.

De Marco had accompanied Micallef Stafurce to the law courts and had waited with him until he was carted off to jail for four days. The guilty verdict was delivered by Magistrate Giovanni Refalo and confirmed on appeal by Judge William Harding, for “violating the gov-

ernors” on 7 January, 1959.

Micallef Stafurce’s mother and fiancée Yvonne were anxiously waiting at home, when they received a phone call from de Marco who wanted to inform them of the verdict first hand.

He wanted to reassure them that “Staffy” was cheerful and coura-
gous. It was a political issue for which the negative verdict would not demean him in any way.

Soon after Micallef Stafurce would ask de Marco to allow him to spend his year of practice at his law firm. de Marco consented, and so Micallef Stafurce obtained his warrant. “Both Refalo and Harding attended my graduation reception, as obvi-
ously did Guido,” Micallef Stafurce recalls.

The River flows, and times change

Former Labour minister Lino Spiteri, interdicted during the sixties, tells MICHAELA MUSCAT how his marriage at the time was considered by the church to be a mixed marriage between a believer and a non-believer
Archbishop Gonzi’s condemnation of the Reds

Mons. Archbishop Gonzi believes that in today’s circumstances, one had to condemn with all force, the following actions:

(a) the grave offence by word of mouth or in writing or in actions against the Archbishop or the clergy. 
(b) Supporting the leaders of MLP until they insist of batting out with the church and they keep contact with socialists, communists and AAPSO. 

Apart from that, today, it appears that the MLP executives, through the ‘Helsien’ has publicly INVITED THE ARCHBISHOPS. This invite is the greatest insult that one can make to the ecclesiastical ranks and after the warning issued by the curia about the dangers of supporting “the socialist enemies of the church,” the die was cast. The Malta Labour Party did not win an election during the interdiction. During the 1962 elections the MLP gained 30,974 votes. These votes increased to 61,774 votes in 1966. Eventually the MLP managed 85,448 votes in 1971 to claim its first victory since the interdiction.

Former Nationalist Party secretary general Victor Ragonesi, told this newspaper that it would be unfair to assume that the Nationalist Party’s victories were the result of the interdiction. “After the fight against the integration which we as a party were resolutely against, the people had the opportunity to vote in the Independence referendum and they did with 65,714 voting in favour,” he says. The MLP had won a relative victory in the integration referendum of 1956 as 44.25 per cent of all voters voted in favour. The British and the PN did not accept the integration because the people had the opportunity to vote in the Independence referendum and they did with 65,714 voting in favour, “he says.

Ragonesi elaborates: “one must analyse the initial concept and traditions of past times. Back then it was different, catholic principles used to be more rigid, there wasn’t a liberal or laissez faire attitude that there is today. The Maltese did fear the wrath of Archbishop Michael Gonzi and his God. In the letters circulated by hand amongst the priests there were blunt instructions on how to ostracise or change the opinions of Labour members and sympathisers. “If the person who is confessing did not vote because he did not have faith in the politicians (except those who were members of the party contrary to the church) the confessors has the obligation to change the person’s view with arguments that explain how grave it was not to vote for these parties,” said the letter worded in Latin and issued on the 7 of March 1962. Priests were only allowed to forgive people’s sins “if they were deemed to be truly and sincerely sorry for having voted for the party which was hostile to the church.” Had anyone had the misfortune to canvass for the MLP politicians or publicly state that they were MLP voters they could only be forgiven for their sins “if they publicly stated that they were sorry for having done so.”

Ragonesi never expressed his feelings about the interdiction openly at the time and his party cannot be blamed for making hay while the sun shines by neither contesting nor condemning the interdiction. Even in his advanced age Ragonesi still has the tact of a lawyer as he diplomatically says that “people are not forced to be Catholics.”

“After all the church is like a club and you have to obey the rules,” he says. Ragonesi does give the labourite voters during the interdiction the benefit of the doubt, but from the historical documents and accounts being uncovered, he is definitely in denial about Archbishop Gonzi when he says that “Gonzi’s curia never interfered in politics and only spoke about religious matters.”

The Maltese church had probably not administered such an extensive manipulation of society since the times of the Inquisition. The Archbishop wrote at the time that “the church’s divine will to endeavour for a perfect society banking on God’s grace meant that it could never err.”

From the pulpit of the local church, preachers stressed the consequences of not obeying the church’s will. These ranged from the mortal sin to burning in hell for all eternity, the penal-timate sanction for devout Catholics. But as the old adage goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions and even Labour politicians like Lino Spiteri grant that Gonzi truly believed that “the enemies of the Church who engaged themselves in socialist teachings did their utmost to trick believers and send them to hell.”
Divide et Impera: Ragonesi recalls PN during the interdiction

Victor Ragonesi reminisces about the Nationalist Party's role during the interdict and talks to MICHAELA MUSCAT about the relationship between church and politics.

THE Iternal bond between the Maltese Democratic Party (MDP) and Papal Nuncio to Malta is implied. But the Vatican was not the only one interested in the Maltese Church's independence: when it wanted to force the Maltese Catholics and church's power in the 1962 independence constitution.

"The English minister in charge of commonwealth affairs asked us: 'Why do you want to include this bloody clause about the church?' Even the Vatican thinks that you want to be more catholic than the pope," recalls Victor Ragonesi at the time secretary general of the PN. The Nationalist Party was in government and it was obsessed with ousting the religious role of Malta as the 'Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion.'

PN MPs would give free reign to the Church over "the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong." So it does come as a surprise that Ragonesi says "as a principle the PN never wanted for religion and politics to mix." He does however concede the PN used to have members who mentioned religion during their meetings.

Ragonesi continues that Borg Olivier was an expert on politics and always took part in "principal meetings discussing temporarily the integration transition, not to take advantage of the interdict."

"But seeing that the MLP leader Dom Mintoff was Archbishop Gunta - this I do not accept," Ragonesi adds. His justification being that Gunta was always sympathetic towards Malta's independence. According to his faithful secretary, George Borg Olivier never uttered a word in favour or against the interdict: "We always said that it was the church's business, who always would not interfere."

One was wrongly accused for suspecting that the deafening silence from the PN executive and leader only helped pave the way to subsequent electoral victories. It would have logically been against the PN's interests for the interdict to come to an end.

Victor Ragonesi: That Gonzi considered Borg Olivier the designee leader of the Gunta – this I do not accept

Ragonesi is frank about politics and yet seemingly reluctant to delve into the merits of the interdict. "When pressed on the subject his pronouncements betray where his sympathies lay," says Ragonesi.

"The MLP did not want the church to have the last say over the basic fundamental moral issues which have to do with the church or any religion," Ragonesi says.

The former PN secretary general does believe that "the church should not interfere in strictly political affairs" but when there are moral issues at stake "the church has every right to intervene."

Ragonesi justifies the inclusion of Roman Catholicism as Malta's official religion in the Constitution since 97 per cent of the people at the time went to church.

As Borg Olivier's right-hand man, Ragonesi was present at every single discussion involving the drafting of the Maltese independence constitution. "I was always there, never missed a single one of them," he says.

When the Maltese government was discussing the clause of the constitution which deals with the Catholic Church and her functions, Ragonesi remembers that "the English Minister let slip that not even the Vatican approved of their insistence to include the clause about the Catholic Church."

The draft of the independence constitution involved long meetings in London, especially since the Maltese delegation had proposed a lot of changes based on the peace pact made between the Vatican and Italy in 1929.

The fact that the British government and the Opposition in Malta objected to the inclusion of the clause related to the Catholic Church did not deter Borg Olivier who always insisted that when Malta became independent it would be able to include whatever it wanted in the constitution.

The British insisted that this clause was highly unwise. "In none of the independent commonwealth would you find a clause related to religion," Ragonesi says.

And so the Vatican's stance on this matter was truly bewildering news to Borg Olivier and his delegation.

"The Italo-American Vatican envoy had always told us that he approved of this clause," says Ragonesi.

The Vatican's rebuke bothered the Maltese Prime Minister to the extent that he sent Ragonesi out on the first morning flight to Rome to deliver a message to the Holy See. The message was clear: "Do not interfere in our constitution, not even in the clause regarding religion unless you can prove that I am harming religion or the church."

Ragonesi, Malta's Hemmes with the Vatican proudly says that the Vatican was his niche since he could always speak Italian fluently. Indeed, the lawyer, whom I met a couple of days after his 85th birthday peppers his conversation with Italian phrases. He refers to Seneca and also quotes well-known Latin sayings. It is hard to believe that he is not a product of the Liceo Classico, until he tells me that he was Nerik Mizzi's apprentice. Mizzi, a 'Belf' like Ragonesi was Prime Minister for three months and was renowned for his Italian sympathies - even during World War II. Mizzi was also interested and departed to Uganda with another 47 Maltese for their close connection to the Italian authorities at the time. Consequently it makes sense that a party with such close historical ties to Italy would see red when they heard the word integration.

Ragonesi was always of the opinion that Mintoff was never sincere about integration. "He made so many reservations and exceptions as regards to integration that I believe he used to say he wanted integration with Britain so that they would give him more money that would enable him to remain in government."

If that was the case then Mintoff's plan backfired. The result of the referendum, the British had come to the realisation that their Empire was no more. Malta would no longer be of any military strategic importance making the British want to keep the expense of collecting colonies. Yet Ragonesi says that Sir Anthony Eden's memoirs, who was Prime Minister during the integration, include a chapter on Malta which starts: "It is refreshing to know that our victory over Malta - wanted to integrate with Britain."

To Eden's knowledge we were the exception because the entire commonwealth wanted independence, Ragonesi muses. The only country that was integrated, Northern Ireland wanted out as well. "That is why I thought Mintoff.Worked to his advantage and managed to send a friend even though we did not see eye to eye, could not have been sincere about integration," Ragonesi says.

The seasoned politician chuckles: "Well, Seneca once wrote about politics: your mother must have been a prostitute, so it was always like that."
“THE IMPOSITION of the interdett and the mortal sin in the sixties left a traumatic effect on the life of all of those who experienced it. A great pain that is still felt today,” says Wenzu Mintoff, the Labour politician and Dom Mintoff’s nephew. He believes that at least another two generations have to pass before the great hurts are not felt anymore.

“To show how a hurt like this lasts for long only has to read the biography of Mabel Strickland who until her death could not find reassurance on whether her father Lord Gerald Strickland who until her death was affected by the imposition of the mortal sin in the 30s with Boffa’s hypocrisies, libertinism and a lot of hypocrisy and double standards.”

Hendry says that even after the practice was declared over, “politics seemed to infiltrate everything, even where you chose to buy your loaf of bread. The dark side of this was that the increasing social stratification intensified both political divisions and inter and sometimes intra-family rivalries. The role of the interdett was complex, but very present.”

Wenzu Mintoff is dismayed that the aftermath of the interdett led to a lacunae of values. “The traditional values imposed by the church were not replaced by ethical and civic lay values because in other countries the transition took hundreds of years. This is one of the reasons why in this country there is a vacuum of values, libertinism and a lot of hypocrisy and double standards.”

Hendry says that back in the 70s, she felt that the frequent collective reminiscing over past struggles for those defending the government acted as a kind of group myth to amplify and justify the power of the weak (the Labour Party) and its forces of progress over the powers of reaction which had been ranged against them. Attempts to defend the pastoral role of the Church in the past would be dismissed, with the lack of effective schooling in the village until after World War II cited as an example of the Church’s role in “keeping us ignorant, so we would not know how to fight back.” There was great and profound bitterness still there.

She remembers that life was fun in the 70s as Malta was undergoing change by the minute – tourism was taking off and the community beginning to open up and see new possibilities, although there was still a whiff of Salome floating on the air in Mellieha 1975.

“Rumours were circulating that it was a protest and most probably a socialist prostitute to boot,” says anthropologist Annabel Bains, Dom’s nephew, remembering when as a doctorate student conducting her fieldwork in Malta she aroused the police’s suspicions to the extent that they occasionally called round to check how she was settling in.

In fact many young children and people ignored the instructions of a very fervent and active priest to stay away from the “dangerous English woman.” It is probable that her presumed political leanings and the fraternising of a single woman with men led the priest to decry her imputed lack of morals.

Labour was in power as MLP politicians were accepted and elected as soon as the interdett was declared over. It was around the time that a Labour government had already started implementing every single one of the “six points” which triggered off the interdett except for divorce which even in present times is not recognised by civil law as a right for Maltese people.

Wenzu Mintoff says “the intervention of Archbishop Gerada who had a direct line with the Vatican led to a meeting between Dom Mintoff and Archbishop Michael Gonzi.” Mintoff believes that even the interdett was lifted and there was a dramatic decrease of the Church’s influence, Malta started becoming more secularised.

But anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain believes that the reverberation of the interdett can still be observed today as “the anti-MLP press of the 1960s is still anti-MLP.”

When asked whether the Labourites in the 70s had let bygones be bygones, Hendry believes not. “I was impressed by how vivid the period remained in people’s memory, certainly amongst Labour supporters. Many recalled the atmosphere of fear and panic over the fate of the dockyard at the time of the interdett and it was common to remember the local and national heroes of the time, such as those who had been placed in prison for supporting the dockyard strikes. The two themes, which always occurred, were how barbaric the Church was to withhold the Easter blessing from certain households and the fate of those who ended up being buried at the Michele.”

She says that many such conversations, often in the Labour Club, ended up in hilarity as those present joined in with even more gruesome memories of their own experiences and with examples of the avarice and wickedness of the chaplain at that time. “But these tales communicated a fundamental and serious message, that of the unity and definition of the participants as past victims, essentially opposed to the corrupt and vicious tactics which could be used by the Church and of their collectively standing against the power it represented.”

She explains that unlike in the villages where her tutor, Boissevain, worked, Labour support was very much a minori group in Mellieha at the time of the interdett: “so people had to be extremely brave to defend their allegiance and were literally forced underground and subject to severe stigma.”

Boissevain says that “workers in the harbour had more contact with the outside world and new ideas. Unionisation was strong there and the people supported the party. Dom Mintoff’s own background was there. But support was also very strong in the so-called ‘rural’ southern villages, where many residents worked in the harbour area and in the quarries.”

“Perhaps the church should have been advised to accept the MLP’s slogan “with Mintoff always, against the Church never” on its face value,” Hendry says. To force a whole community of believers into such terrible choices of conscience was no way to gain fans so the questioning, mistrust and bitterness did generate secularisation.

But she also says that secularisation is a relative term. “Two weeks ago people were queuing up at 5.45am outside the church in Mellieha, anxious for their early festa mass... now that wouldn’t happen in England.”

Asked to comment on how Malta nowadays compares to back then, she says: “Oddly, increasing wealth and apparent prosperity meant Malta is not so very different from the 1970s. Politics apart, there is still no space better in the world to take that first slice into a loaf of bread. And those subversive friends of mine? They are pillars of the community now! So things do change.”
The interdett through a foreigner’s eyes

MICHAELA MUSCAT speaks to Dutch anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain on his personal observations on the events of the 1960s Church interdiction.

“The Interdett left a lasting scar. The young and older adults who lived through the period have never forgotten it,” Dutch anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain says. Indeed Labour leader Alfred Sant recounts an anecdote regarding an aged woman who “never set foot in church again after being denied absolution by her priest when she was heavily pregnant and had just been told by her doctor that due to serious complications - she and her infant were on the possible brink of death.” This woman, whom Sant met during his routine house visits in “Luzier Corner” Siemas, was still evidently bitter for “having to choose between God and her party,” in such a precarious moment in her life.

Proficient in several languages, the 76-year-old anthropologist who first came to Malta as a chief of mission for the American Care relief organisation CARE, still has close ties with the islands. Two of his children were born in Malta and one of them also lives here. He has been conducting research and studying Malta’s social life for over 40 years. He also published “Saints and Fireworks,” which studied the relationship between religion and politics in Maltese village feasts back in the sixties. Irrespective of having spent the whole morning travelling, he is raring to go, having spent the whole morning back in the sixties. Irrespective of politics in Maltese village feasts he began to read it. They learned defiance. Once they bought it, they began to read it. They learned such a precarious moment in their life.

Boissevain thinks that strangely enough, it also helped promote literacy among the less educated Labour rank and file: “For the first time, they started buying Il-Helsien as a badge of loyalty and defiance. Once they started to read, they started to read it. They learned more about the party, and its ideology followed.” An ideology consisting of anathematising Mintoff, by equating him with the devil in such a simple minded black and white dichotomy – “Helsien, jew mus- fattol; jew mus-atian (with the Bishop, or with the devil) – the church insulted the idealised leader of the party and the intelligence of his followers,” Boissevain says.

Ironically, part of Mintoff’s rhetorical techniques included peppering his speeches with religious undertones that according to Boissevain served “to warm the audience up and to show his defiance.” Mintoff’s brazen comments also showed the way for others to voice their experiences and share them with each other – he “legitimized speaking out” by giving a voice to the people. Shortly after the start of the interdett, Boissevain says he had overheard his neighbour, a devout Catholic and a teacher, but also an ardent Labour supporter, “recounting to a number of men in a blacksmiths shop, his grim, painless experiences as a long time museum member. Before the interdict such behaviour would have been unthinkable.” Boissevain says the extreme measure of the interdict alienated so many people that much of the clergy were openly in extreme difficulty “that it boomeranged. Resulting in the church losing many followers and became willing to reach an agreement with the MLP. Although one should add that throughout this saga the MLP also lost followers.”

Not all the MLP supporters were prepared to risk raising the ire of God and suffer the eternal damnation of hell. So the cleavage between the Church and the MLP grew deeper by first interdicting the leadership and especially then after forbidding people to read the papers. “The church shot itself in the foot. It deprived thousands of devout church attendees from receiving the sacraments, insulting them and of course alienating them.”

Boissevain once again illustrates his argument from his notes: “The new Kapellun of Kirkop, Dr. Giuseppe Tchana, had invested an enormous amount and devotion in building up the boys’ Catholic Action. In less than a year he increased membership from virtually nothing to over 50. Then, after the pledge of allegiance the Church demanded of all Church organisations, all but 12 members of the village’s Catholic Action dropped out. This upset Dr. Tchana greatly.”

The story of the interdict certainly upped secularisation, leading to a very steady decline in church attendance. “It did not start with the interdict. But the interdict certainly contributed to it” It also led to a more open and much more independent frame of mind regarding the pronouncements of the church on divorce, church attendance, contraception and premarital sex. “But this is part of the general trend of secularisation, and in this respect it is not much different, though much slower, than the secularisation among Catholics that has taken place in the Netherlands since the 1950s.”