

Malta wants to be rid of some of the Catholic Church's oppressive privileges

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In its account of the meeting the Vatican made little mention of the concordat, or other agreements, that grant special privileges to the Catholic Church including teaching of Catholic dogma in State schools, other than to say there would be further talks about the "agreement on the civil effects of religious marriages."

But according to Dr Muscat the central aim of the talks revolved around the revision of the 1992 treaty which allows the Catholic Church the final say in whether a marriage can be annulled or not, giving the Church supremacy over the civil courts.

Dr Muscat explained that the treaty is being used vindictively in the Maltese courts, with the purpose of delaying marital court proceedings.

He said that a prompt revision of the treaty is needed, particularly in light of the recent introduction of divorce in Malta.

"The Vatican is prepared for and willing to change. We asked for a revision of the treaty, and we found an abundance of understanding on their part," Dr Muscat said.

The Prime Minister explained that a bilateral commission will now be set up, with two representatives from each side in order to discuss the relevant changes to the treaty. Dr Muscat said that all discussions have to take place through the relevant diplomatic channels, ruling out any unilateral action on Malta's part.

He said that in the spirit of openness, he informed the Vatican of the government's intentions to introduce civil unions in Malta.

"It is important to maintain cordial relations with the Vatican. We were honest and open about our intentions, we did not approach the talks with the pretence of a holier than thou attitude."

The Prime Minister placed emphasis on the need for a speedy resolution to the talks, saying that they have to be concluded within "a matter of months, not years."

Dr Muscat hinted that the Vatican's position is that only the relevant clause of the treaty should be changed, but he said that the government wants a wider revision.

He added that the Pope has been invited to visit Malta.

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