

Grand Master's keynote address to the diplomatic corps

Rome, 8 January 2013

The Grand Master of the Order of Malta, Fra' Matthew Festing, received today at the Magistral Villa on the Aventine the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Sovereign Order of Malta for the annual audience at the start of each year. It is the occasion on which he updates the Ambassadors with a keynote speech on the worldwide activities carried out by the Order during the previous year, and its current concerns.

The Sovereign Order of Malta has bilateral diplomatic relations with 104 countries. It is a unique humanitarian diplomatic network to assist in furthering the Order's charitable works for those in need.

Text:

Mr. Doyen, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you today for the traditional exchange of greetings at the start of the year, which exceptionally takes place in this location due to the current restoration works in our Church. And I thank the Doyen of the Diplomatic Corps, H.E. Ambassador Valladares Lanza, for his kind words in conveying your greetings, and your appreciation for the Sovereign Order of Malta and its mission.

I would like to extend my best wishes to all of you, and especially to the Ambassadors of: the European Union, San Marino, Ivory Coast, Cyprus, Spain, Peru, and Uruguay, who presented their letters of Credence last year.

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2012 was marked by two significant events on the diplomatic side which I am particularly pleased to report:

1) A new agreement between the Italian Republic and the Sovereign Order of Malta, confirming the state of bilateral relations and the Order's presence in Italy since 1834, was signed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs on 17th May and ratified by the President of the Republic on the 25th of September.

This agreement, which confirms the development of the Order's activities in the fields of health care, social and humanitarian activities as well as for the civil protection and emergency aid, in cooperation with the Italian Republic, reaffirms our excellent relations. I would like to express to the highest authorities of the State our deep appreciation.

2) The establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations with the Republic of Cyprus in June, and the first State visit of H.E. the President Christofias to the Sovereign Order of Malta in October. We are glad to be back on the beautiful island of Cyprus, to jointly promote activities for the maintenance of the multi-cultural and multi-religious character of the region and the promotion of peace and stability in the Mediterranean region.

Regarding State and official visits, although I could not make as many visits abroad as I had wished due to my health conditions, I was particularly delighted about the following visits abroad:

In February, I paid a State Visit to the Federal Republic of Austria – a country which is specially close to our heart, where the Order of Malta has been present since the 12th century, and is closely cooperating with the government on national and international projects. On this occasion, I also paid a visit to the United Nations specialised bodies present in Vienna, such as UNIDO, UNDOC as well as the CTBTO and AIEA.

In July, I was most honoured to be received in Moscow by the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, His Holiness Kirill. We discussed areas of humanitarian and cultural cooperation, as well as our shared concern for the on-going secularisation and the discrimination based on religious belief.

I was also delighted to travel to the inauguration of several important exhibitions organised by our diplomatic missions on the history and the mission of the Order, which allowed me to meet with local political, religious and diplomatic representatives to further enhance our good relationships and cooperation, notably:

- at the European Parliament, in Brussels
- at the Kremlin, in Moscow;
- at the Royal Palace of Warsaw, in Poland;

In September, the Grand Chancellor, the Grand Hospitaller and the Diplomatic counsellor accepted the invitation of President Ma and his government to pay a visit to Taiwan in order to evaluate the possibility of joint humanitarian cooperation in Asia, Africa and South America.

Further to the State Visit of the President of the Republic of Cyprus, H.E. Demetris Christofias accompanied by the Minister of Foreign Affairs H.E. Erato Kozakou-Marcoullis, we were pleased to receive high authorities from Liberia, Tonga, the Czech Republic, Panama, Russia, Rumania, United Kingdom, Chile, Belarus and Slovenia, as well as the visit of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belgium, H.E. Didier Reynders to discuss the development of joint activities.

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To this end, the Order also signed a range of cooperation agreements with other States during the course of the last year, which are important instruments in facilitating humanitarian activities and in furthering health programmes and other initiatives.

In 2012, the Sovereign Order of Malta signed cooperation agreements with the following countries: France, East Timor, Belgium, Monaco, the Republic of Congo, Mozambique, and Guinea.

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Let me now turn to our humanitarian activities:

2012 saw a number of natural disasters in many regions, from drought in Africa, to typhoon Bopha in the Philippines, to a fierce storm hitting in Haiti, and back to Europe, where earthquakes in Italy and snow and floods in Eastern and Central Europe left their mark on landscapes and people.

In all these situations, the Order has been active to bring relief. To cite but four here:

- in Haiti, tropical storm Isaac caused severe flooding and destruction in August. More than 16,000 people had to be evacuated. In the region of Belle-Anse, one of the poorest regions of the country, and where the Order has been working for some years, 70,000 inhabitants were cut off. More than 4,000 houses were destroyed, damaged or flooded and families lost crops, harvests and cattle (about 30,000 livestock). After providing initial emergency aid, the Order is now concentrating on repairing the community, together with local villagers.

- in the Philippines, typhoon Bopha brought death and destruction in December, with more than 400 people dead and nearly 400 missing. Almost 50,000 are still in evacuation centres; five million in total have been affected by the storm. The Order's Philippine Association, together with Malteser International, responded promptly, delivering 1,200 food packages and household kits to families in three of the most affected areas – Dumaguete City, Cagayan de Oro and Compostela Valley. Reconstruction is now a major concern and the Order is helping with support for materials and basic necessities.

- in Italy, two strong quakes struck the region of Emilia Romagna in May, causing deaths, hundreds of injured and leaving over 15,000 people homeless. The Order of Malta's Italian Rescue Corps – the CISOM-, in cooperation with the Military Corps of the Italian Association of the Order of Malta, ran a camp for the homeless uninterruptedly for four months, with over 700 volunteers assisting the population.

- in northern Kenya, a year after responding to a devastating drought followed by a major food crisis in the Horn of Africa, the Order of Malta's worldwide humanitarian relief agency is working to prevent future water and food crises by helping residents prepare for future drought.

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The Order's mission to help the most disadvantaged of society is manifold and spans over lot of different activities all over the world, from assistance to elderly people to running hospitals in many countries in Europe and Africa, to emergency relief interventions and rehabilitation.

Allow me therefore to focus today on two areas of our activities, which have become more relevant again in 2012 due to the economic crisis: the homeless problem and the plight of refugees have impacted on all of society; the need to help hungry and homeless people has grown significantly.

The Order of Malta is playing its part in helping to alleviate the sufferings of many of these homeless and refugees, supporting thousands who are without shelter, without a home, or without a country. Let us look at just a few examples:

- All over Germany, we ran 13 so called 'wellness mornings' where we provide blankets to the homeless, as well as meals, a medical check-up, sleeping bags, clothing, haircuts and showers, seeing to the needs of around 3000 homeless people in Berlin, Hildesheim, Hamburg, Cologne, Paderborn and Freiburg; in addition, social stores and clothing 'pop-up shops' have been created for the homeless and the very poor, which were able to help almost 28,000 people in 2012;

- In France, work for the homeless continues all the year –The Order runs two barges on the Seine for homeless men – the Fleuron Saint Jean, which reached a record occupancy of 98% in 2012 with 13,470 overnighters; and the Fleuron Saint Michel which recorded 6,600 overnight stays. During the winter, mobile teams seek out the homeless in Paris and around, where they are on duty every night; the same assistance is provided in Versailles, Bourges, Annecy, Toulon, Nantes and Toulouse.
- In Belgium, our hospices in Brussels and Liege cared for over 17,000 homeless in 2012 providing each guest with free dental and medical checks, a clean set of clothes, a haircut and a hot meal.
- In Italy, we organised evenings of assistance for the homeless in Milan, Rome and Naples, providing hot food and blankets. In the two stations which operate in Rome, over 17,000 hot meals were served to homeless people in 2012. Furthermore, there are 8 social centres in Rome for the needy, where food and basic necessities are distributed to people in difficult economic situations;

Many similar initiatives are being organised in Spain, Hungary, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Russia, Moldova, Ukraine, but also outside of Europe.

In Cuba, for instance, in 2011 and 2012 over 800,000 meals were provided for the homeless at 60 soup kitchens, financed by the Cuban Association of the Order of Malta whose headquarters are in Miami, and run through local volunteers in the parishes. And the major cities in Australia in 2012, the Order of Malta distributed 2,000 coats to the homeless.

This care for homeless people also includes the plight of the world’s refugees, who in this recent period in the Middle East, Africa and Asia have suffered very much.

- Refugees from Syria have arrived in our medical centre in the north of Lebanon; at the center in Khaldieh, 40 km from Tripoli, we are caring for over 500 families; in Turkey, the humanitarian relief service of the Order of Malta is providing winter relief to nearly 8,000 Syrian refugees in two provinces. In Damascus, our ongoing relief activities have provided aid packages to more than 15,000 displaced people.
- in north Burkina Faso, the Order, through its French Associations, together with Malteser International, assisted 55,000 refugees, fleeing from the civil war in Mali, by providing ambulance services to transport the sick people from refugee camps to local hospitals or to hospitals in Ouagadougou;
- on the Burma/Thai border the Order provides medical services for almost 35,000 people who have fled from war lords and local conflicts and are surviving in two refugee camps.

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These were just a few examples of situations which are consequences of unemployment, poverty, and civil conflict and which not only cause unacceptable suffering to their victims but also cause a great impoverishment of human potential. Only effective solidarity can act as an antidote. The Pope’s message for the World Peace Day “Blessed be the peacemakers”, inspired by the words of Jesus, resonate strongly with the members of the Order of Malta, who are living their commitment according to the 8 beatitudes, which are also symbolised in the 8 points of the Maltese Cross.

And solidarity can be fostered by dialogue, which – as the Pope underlined in his message to You yesterday – is “no longer a choice but a necessity” to build a stable and peaceful environment for society to prosper. Therefore, I would like to recall two initiatives of 2012, which contribute to the importance of promoting intercultural dialogue:

First, I would like to mention the very notable initiative taken by the U N High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio GUTERRES last December: For the first time ever, religious leaders and faith experts, diplomats, HCR staff and humanitarian aid workers as well as people working for faith-based organizations gathered at the United Nations in Geneva to discuss how the values of different world religions underpin refugee protection and humanitarian action for millions of forcibly displaced and stateless people. Our Permanent Mission to the U.N. in Geneva took part in this meeting which gathered some 400 delegates, and confirmed the full support of the Order of Malta to this new Dialogue on Protection Challenges.

The second initiative worth mentioning is the inauguration of “ the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue”, last November in Vienna. This centre, which was created by Saudi Arabia, Austria and Spain – at which the Holy See participates as founding observer – has the objective to promote a better mutual knowledge amongst believers of different religions, but will also serve as an adequate platform to point out situations in which freedom of religion and conscience is not respected or protected appropriately. I welcome wholeheartedly this initiative destined to favour dialogue between Muslims, Jews and Christians.

Undoubtedly, the most remarkable message of peace was the Pope’s trip to Lebanon last September.

The Order of Malta is very present in Lebanon with its 12 social medical centres, including the centre in Khaldieh – already mentioned, which is currently providing free care to Syrian families. We were particularly moved by impressive testimony of the solicitude and courage of the Holy Father when travelling once more to the Middle East, at that crucial moment, following his previous visits to Turkey, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, and Cyprus, to support the Christians et affirm the necessity of coexistence of religions.

In his address to the members of the Government and the Diplomatic Corps, the Pope pleaded strongly for religious freedom with the following words that I would like to recall here :“It cannot be forgotten that religious freedom is the basic right on which many other rights depend. The freedom to profess and practise one’s religion without danger to life and liberty must be possible to everyone. [..]. Religious freedom has a social and political dimension which is indispensable for peace!”

Because the defence – understood in the sense of protection – of freedom of religion is also part of the mission of the Order of Malta, as a religious lay Order of the Roman Catholic Church, our Chancery has undertaken an ambitious project since 2007 on the protection and conservation of cultural and religious heritage, particularly in the Mediterranean, a concern which has led us to initiate, together with other international organisations, a series of conferences to mark our commitment to seek a way forward.

In March, we ran a seminar on “Protecting the Sacred Places of the Mediterranean, a contribution to intercultural dialogue”, jointly promoted by the European Commission and us. It took place in Brussels at the Berlaymont, under the chairmanship of President BARROSO, and considered ways of strengthening intercultural dialogue through the preservation of cultural and religious heritage, with a view to contributing to the stability and peaceful development of the Mediterranean region.

The discussions were very lively and interesting. Let me give you some insights: The importance of intercultural dialogue for protecting sacred sites was highlighted by Charles TANNOCK, Member of the European Parliament, who called for a larger political commitment on the part of the European Union to engineer sustainable political solutions to religious conflicts around sacred sites in Europe.

The Grand Mufti of Bosnia Herzegovina, referring to the drama of Sarajevo, cautioned that we may draft perfect laws, but there are two situations in which laws do not work: love and war. This is why, according to him, the principle should be established that the destruction of the cultural and spiritual heritage is a crime against humanity. Professor Abou MOUSSA RAMADAN insisted on the fact that the link between sacred places and human dignity is as important as the link between sacred places and religious freedom.

Because these are fundamental rights. And Rabbi BEMPORAD made an appeal to find a way of enabling sacred places to become places of reconciliation.

As the European Commissioner for Education and Culture, H.E. Androulla VASSILIOU rightly stated during the seminar, “as a process, intercultural dialogue is not easy to launch. It cannot be built on declarations and speeches alone. But bringing people together to cooperate on specific projects or activities can be a real stimulus from which it can grow.”

This is why in November, together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cyprus, UNESCO and the European Commission, the Order of Malta hosted a follow-on conference in Limassol, in Cyprus, on the “Protection and Conservation of Cultural Heritage in the Mediterranean”. Throughout the discussions, we sought to define principles for a common declaration on the protection and promotion of sacred places.

I can only agree with one of the speakers to this Forum, Monseigneur SANCHEZ SORONDO, the Chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Science, who said: “If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation and Cultural Heritage !”

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I would like to conclude my address, thanking you for your continuing support and cooperation. I send my warmest wishes to you and to your families for 2013 and I look forward to seeing many of you on the 9th of February, when we will be celebrating the 900th anniversary of the granting of the Bull of Pope Pascal II granted to the Order on 15 February 1113.

As of today, we expect some 3,500 members, volunteers and guests from all over the world to mark this solemn occasion. Dear Ambassadors, you have all been invited to join us for the celebration in St. Peter’s Basilica in the presence of Pope Benedict XVI and of the Cardinal Secretary of State, Tarcisio Bertone, which will be followed by a reception in the Paul VI Audience Hall.

Dear Ambassadors and other distinguished members of the diplomatic corps, please accept my personal sincere wishes for the Country you represent, as well as for your families and for the high mission of which you are in charge.

Fra' Matthew Festing