

Mass with British Association of the Sovereign Order of Malta.

Westminster Cathedral

28 April 2013

Since his election to the See of Peter, Pope Francis has caught the imagination of the world. This he has done through word and deed. His call to love and respect those in our midst who are most poor and needy has been powerfully expressed in hundreds of images, flashed around the world, appearing in our newspapers. In doing this he is achieving two things.

First he is showing yet again that there are wellsprings of charity and care within every person. The fact that Pope Francis wins such widespread acclaim points to the truth that what he does is what so many aspire to do themselves: enrich their lives with practical charity towards those in need. This is a crucial truth of our human nature: when we give we are enriched.

The second thing being achieved by Pope Francis is that he is expressing in images the messages that Pope Benedict expressed in words. Often Pope Benedict told us that our proclamation of the Gospel is given credibility by our practice of charity. He told us that 'the love of neighbour is a path that leads to the encounter with God' and that 'closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God' (Deus Caritas Est para 16).

The message of the Church is clear: the practice of charity springs from the love of God; it is nurtured and strengthened by the love of God, and it expresses the love of God in our world today. St Augustine said 'If you see charity, you see the Trinity' (DCE para 19) for the rivers of practical love which flow from the hearts of believers come from the river of living water flowing from the side of Christ our Lord and are the work of the Holy Spirit, according to the will of the Father.

Pope Benedict also said that the entire activity of the Church is an expression of love that seeks the integral good of every person, that attends to suffering and need, both material and spiritual (DCE 19). Charity is therefore part of the nature of the Church, an indispensable expression of her very being! (DCE para 25). The Church, then, cannot neglect the service of charity anymore that she can neglect the celebration of the Sacraments or the very Word of God (DCE para 22). Charity arises from the fundamental and liberating words of the Lord which we hear today: 'I give you a new commandment: love one another; just as I have loved you, you also must love one another (Jn13.33).'

This is the context in which we come together in our Mass today, celebrating a special moment in the life of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta, to give it its full name. It is now nine hundred years since Pope Paschal II, in his Bull 'Pie Postulatio Voluntatis' recognised the Knights of St John as a religious

order with institutional independence and a vocation to care for the most vulnerable in society. The Order's celebrations this year are, therefore, for one of the few institutions able to mark an anniversary that is 900 years old.

The Order of Malta has a long history of service to the poor, the sick and to pilgrims welcoming all those in need in its hospitals. Its work began in Jerusalem, then in Acre and Cyprus, then in Rhodes (1310-1522) and in Malta (1530-1798). From those beginnings in Jerusalem the Order has expanded across the centuries and across the world. It has faced many challenges, setbacks, vicissitudes, yet it has survived, and is now present in over a hundred countries.

The Sovereign Order of Malta is today a global institution offering professional medical, social and humanitarian aid. 13,500 members, 80,000 permanent volunteers and qualified staff of 25,000 professionals – most of whom are medical personnel and paramedics – form an efficient network that includes everything from hospital work, health care and emergency relief for the victims of war or famine, to intervention in areas hit by natural disasters, general medical care and social services. Your programmes are now active in 120 countries across the globe. The Order of Malta both supports and directly manages hundreds of medical centres, 20 hospitals, 30 ambulance teams, 110 homes for the elderly and groups of volunteers in 15 countries.

Today, in a special way, we focus on the presence of the Order here in Britain. Here there is a wide range of projects, from 79 care homes and sheltered housing projects for the elderly, to Dial-a-Journey in Scotland, to summer weekends for those with special needs, and national and international pilgrimages which are organised every year. You have recently established soup kitchens in a number of cities. That project in particular reflects the difficult age in which we are living, with its many social and economic problems. It underlines ever more clearly the imperative of faith, this essential element in the life of the Church, that we must care for those in need among us and respond intelligently to the challenges of today. In this, you have not only a fine tradition from your historic past, but continue to give practical help today.

A new initiative, the Companions of the Order of Malta, illustrate this. They are a thriving group of friends and volunteers who assist the Order in your works in this country, particularly visiting the elderly in the Order's Care Homes, and providing food for the homeless. The Companions have now also spread their wings, supporting projects in Kenya. The Companions work around the country in eight regional groups that are growing in size and activity.

Their energy is matched by a special group of young people – the Order of Malta Volunteers (OMV). These vibrant young people, with ages ranging from 17 to 29, fundraise for Order causes, organise pilgrimages, work with Order projects with the disabled young people, including in the Lebanon, join the international Order summer camp for those young people every year, and visit the terminally ill. They are also strong in their Catholic faith and in the spirituality that permeates all the works of the Order of Malta. They are a powerhouse for the

future of Order activities in this country. Their dedication and enthusiasm are infectious. As one pilgrim explained: “They do it because they genuinely love people. And they love people because they genuinely love God.”

That simple expression is, in fact, drawn from the mission of the Order : ‘ tuitio fidei, obsequium pauperum’. ‘Tuitio fidei’ : tutored, taught, fashioned by faith; obsequium pauperum: reverence, respect for the poor, expressed in action. This is the motivating force, the spiritual foundation, which inspires and guides your work. The tutoring of faith must give rise to this practical action. If it does not, then there is something amiss in the faith that is being celebrated.

To return, for a moment, to the teachings of Pope Benedict, we see that he insisted that the charitable work of the Church needs to be organised well if it is to be an ordered service to the community (DCE 20). Here the cohesiveness of the Sovereign Order is so important.

As Pope Benedict noted in his address to your members who gathered in Rome in February for a solemn celebratory Mass in St Peter’s Basilica, your Order, as a subject of international law, “aims not to exercise power and influence of a worldly character, but in complete freedom to accomplish its own mission for the integral good of man, spirit and body, both individually and collectively, with special regard to those whose need of hope and love is greater.” These are worthy aims indeed and your history is witness to their application. And they are lived and expressed within the wider body of the Church, in which unity and order in the work of charity is a particular responsibility of the bishop (cf *Intima Ecclesiae Natura* Art 6) while always respecting the autonomy proper to each institution and service. By working together we can strive to show just a little of the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem in which, through the loving presence of God, every tear is wiped away and where mourning and sadness are vanquished (Rev 21.5).

For this reason I am particularly glad to be celebrating this Mass with you today. I trust it will ‘put fresh heart’ into us all, to use the words from our First Reading (Acts 14.21). Indeed, I see in all of you special and generous co- workers in the Lord’s vineyard. As members of the Order, Companions of the Order, Order of Malta Volunteers and your friends, out of love for the Lord and his Church, you have a marvellous dedication to attend to the needs of so many today and a deep desire to thank God for all you have been given, expressing that thanks in your generous work. Yours is a noble ideal and the Church is enriched by your presence and by your unfailing loyalty, as hospitallers of the Order of Malta.

+Vincent Nichols

Archbishop of Westminster