

**Speech of H.M.E.H. the Prince and Grand Master Fra' Matthew Festing
to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Sovereign Order of Malta
Magistral Villa, 14 January 2014**

Mr. Doyen, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is my pleasure to receive you here today, at the Magistral Villa, for the traditional exchange of greetings at the beginning of this New Year which is also the occasion to reflect on the past year and discuss new roads of collaboration together. I wish to thank you for your kind words of appreciation transmitted by H.E. Amb. Nuncio Alfred D'Angieri for the first time in his new function as Doyen of the Diplomatic Corps. I would also like to recall his predecessor H.E. Ambassador Alejandro Valladares Lanza, who sadly passed away last October.

Let me convey my best wishes to all of you, the head of states and governments you represent, as well as your collaborators and families. A special welcome goes to the Ambassadors of Serbia, Costa Rica, Togo, Thailand, Portugal, the Russian Federation, Lithuania, Colombia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Jordan, Poland, Montenegro, Honduras and Brazil who presented their Letters of Credence last year.

It is one of our priorities to continuously strengthen the links of cooperation and friendship which exist between the Order and your countries, and we were pleased to receive last year the Presidents of Romania, Paraguay, Togo and Costa Rica; the Prime Minister of Lithuania and Saint-Vincent and the Grenadines, as well as other high-level visits from Liberia, the Czech Republic, San Marino, the Organisation of American States, the Russian Federation, and Palestine.

Also, cooperation agreements were concluded last year with El Salvador (19 June), Mauritius (14 October) and Serbia (11 December), as well as two agreements with WHO for Mozambique (January) and Guinea (November). I would like to express our appreciation to the Governments of the Principality of Monaco and of the Kingdom of Belgium for the successful implementation in 2013 of the agreements signed in 2012 that support the Order's action in Lebanon (Monaco) and the Holy Family Hospital in Bethlehem (Belgium). I would also like to acknowledge the cooperation of the Government of Taiwan related to our activities in El Salvador.

The Sovereign Order of Malta is also grateful for the official invitation received from the Italian Republic to participate with other states in the Expo 2015 which will take place in Milan from 1st May to 31st October 2015 on the topic "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life". We would like to use this opportunity to draw attention to the issues which drive our medical-social and humanitarian action connected to some of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals.

Holy See

The year 2013 was marked by the renunciation of Pope Benedict XVI on the 11th February. As a religious lay Order, the Sovereign Order of Malta was particularly moved by the announcement which came only two days after the Mass celebrating the 900th anniversary of the official recognition of our Order. As a member of our Order, the Pope wished to be present at the celebrations in the Basilica of St. Peter to pronounce words of recognition and encouragement to the members and volunteers of our Order. It will always be a precious memory of Pope Benedict XVI, who on so many occasions has demonstrated his closeness to our mission and our action.

I also would like to express the great emotion of the Order upon the election of Pope Francis on the 13th March, whose message to care for the most needy as a privileged axe of action finds resonance in our Motto “obsequium pauperum”. I had the honour to meet with the Pope in a special audience with the managers of our San Giovanni Battista Hospital in Rome and for the annual audience on the feast of Saint John in June. His direct approach and his constant call against the “globalisation of indifference” to the suffering of others and his appeal for peace through dialogue has touched so many people in such a short time. We wish him long life!

We also wish to congratulate Mgr Pietro Parolin for his new assignment as Secretary of State. He knows our activities in the world well and I am confident that he will continue to carry out his mission for the benefit of the Church and all people, by “collaborating for the search of peace and the respect of dignity of each human being.”

Celebration of the 900th anniversary of the Papal Privilege

2013 was also an important year for the Sovereign Order of Malta, as it marked the celebration of the ninth centenary of the proclamation of the Papal Bull “*Pie Postulatio Voluntatis*” by Pope Pascal II on February 15, 1113, a great privilege which represents the origin of our institutional identity and our independence.

The commemorative Mass celebrated by the then Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarciso Bertone at St. Peter’s on 9th February, to which over 5,000 members, volunteers, head of states and government representatives as well as a large number of the diplomatic corps honoured us with their presence, was a highlight for the **Sovereign Order of Malta**.

The Order has always managed to adapt its action to different and changing environments and has been recognised for the high quality and standards of its service. As Pope Benedict said in his address to us on 9th February, “Your esteemed and beneficent activity, carried out in a variety of fields and in different parts of the world, and particularly focused on care of the sick through hospitals and health-care institutes, is not mere philanthropy, but an effective expression and a living testimony of evangelical love..”

This dynamism and the continuity of the Order’s mission to this very day could also be witnessed through some other anniversaries celebrated in various European countries during 2013, such as:

In Hungary, the Hungarian Association of the Order of Malta celebrated the 85th anniversary of its foundation (1928), as well as the 25th anniversary of the creation of the Order’s Hungarian Relief service. For this occasion, a Central and Eastern European Conference was organised from October 11 to October 13 in Budapest, which I had the privilege to attend. The inauguration was held at the seat of the Hungarian parliament, in presence of the Deputy Speaker of Parliament Sándor Lezsák and the Hungarian Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén. The over 200 participants from 12 countries used this occasion not only to celebrate these important anniversaries, but more particularly to reflect on the significance of the Order’s manifold activities carried out in this part of Europe.

In Germany, I had the privilege to be present at the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the German Auxiliary Service, “*Malteser Hilfsdienst*”, in September in Aachen, with the participation of over 1,700 volunteers, members and guests. During the celebrations a video-message from the Chancellor, Mrs Angela Merkel, was also broadcast, praising the “humanity and commitment” of the Order of Malta’s 48,000 volunteers throughout Germany.

In Ireland, the Order of Malta volunteer service celebrated its 75th anniversary and was recognised at the recent 'Better Together Awards' in Dublin Castle, highlighting the impact of the work in the community carried out by its Ambulance Corps of 4,000 volunteers who travelled over 300,000 kilometres, transporting over 12,000 patients with over 100,000 volunteer hours of duty last year.

In Lithuania, the Order's youth organisation celebrated the 20th anniversary of its activity in Vilnius, carrying out important assistance work, aiding the aged, the blind, the disabled, the disadvantaged children.

When looking back at 2013, we cannot fail to recall the tragic events that required prompt action and the provision of aid to communities in distress, in many parts of the world:

PHILIPPINES

We all have in mind the pictures of the devastating typhoon Haiyan, said to be the most violent in memory, which hit a number of islands in the **Philippines** last November, claiming the lives of 6,000 people. An estimated 4.1 million people are still living in temporary shelters.

The intervention of the Order's international relief agency, Malteser International, with the support of the Philippine Association, in the hardest hit islands was immediate, in spite of the tremendous logistical difficulties encountered in attempting to reach the target areas, particularly the islands of Samar and Bohol, where survival kits, as well as essential food and clothing have been distributed. Having received over €5 million in funding, the Order will be able to actively support works of rehabilitation in this area over the next two years.

Our Magistral Postal Service also issued a special stamp on this occasion of which the proceedings will further support our works in that area.

SYRIA

The past year was marked by the on-going tragedy of the civil war in **Syria**, and its effect on neighbouring countries, with refugees arriving in great numbers in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and also further afield in Bulgaria.

The Order of Malta has been, and still is, very strongly engaged in facing the huge humanitarian crisis caused by refugees fleeing their country. Officially, the Syrian refugees in just Lebanon number 800,000, but in all probability the total is close to twice that number, a huge burden on the Lebanese population which itself counts about 4 million.

To this day half of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon are concentrated in the north of the country in the area served by the Khaldieh assistance centre, which the Order has been operating with the Congregation of the "Antonine Sisters" since 1986, just a few kilometres from the Syrian border. Since August 2012, this centre has been at the forefront of Lebanon's effort to welcome and assist Syrian refugees and is recognised for its high standard in medical, social but also psychological assistance. Food, hygiene products and survival kits are also distributed in three other centres of the Order in Lebanon covering all the areas where Syrian refugees are located.

In **Turkey**, a strong collaboration has been established with local multi-confessional partners in the frontier district of Kilis, very close to the Syrian border, with the setting-up last September of a field

hospital run by the International relief agency of the Sovereign Order of Malta and the International Blue Crescent to provide a growing number of refugees with access to health-care.

We are glad to acknowledge that Malteser International has become the most important humanitarian partner regarding the Syrian conflict for the German Foreign Office and Ministry of Cooperation.

Over 10,000 Syrian refugees have found refuge in **Bulgaria**, where the Order's Embassy has had an important presence in assuring essential aid, particularly in the distribution of food, warm blankets and clothing, clinical equipment and specific medical supplies to three camps aimed at combating illnesses and conditions linked to the onset of cold weather.

It is encouraging to see that the impelling need to come to the assistance of the Syrian refugees has had the effect of further enhancing the Order's strong ties with Muslim and Orthodox organisations and foundations.

LAMPEDUSA

I would like to recall our action in Lampedusa, where we cannot remain indifferent to the tragic loss of life in the Mediterranean, where migrants attempt to reach the Island of Lampedusa or other points of Italy's southern shores in the hope of entering the "gates of Europe". Lampedusa has over the years become one of the symbols of such dramatic flight from war, famine and persecution, for a safer future too often transformed into tragedy, ending up at the mercy of human traffickers.

Compared with the previous year, 2013 saw a marked increase in the numbers of migrants attempting sea crossings to Italy and Malta. While some 15,000 migrants and asylum seekers reached the two southern Mediterranean countries in 2012, according to the UN Refugee Agency, over 32,000 arrived in 2013.

Since 2008, the Italian Relief Service of the Order of Malta, CISOM, has been working in close collaboration with the Italian authorities, engaged in rescue and assistance operations aiding migrants attempting the perilous crossing of the Sicilian Channel. Thanks to the cooperation agreement with the Italian Coast Guard and the "Guardia di Finanza", over the past six years our specialised volunteers onboard Coast-Guard vessels have assured medical, material but also psychological aid to over 4,000 children, men and women, many of whom were pregnant.

A total of 97 of our volunteer workers were engaged, with particular intensity, in the wake of the shipwreck of October 3, in which over 350 migrants, mostly Eritrean, lost their lives.

An essential role is also performed by the psychologists of the Order's Relief's Corps, called upon to give support not only to the traumatised survivors, but often to aid workers themselves, who first bear the weight of the psychological and emotional trauma of rescuing bodies from the sea.

(Africa/conflict zones/migrants)

In the **Central-African Republic**, according to UN estimates more than 800,000 people have been obliged to leave their homes since the start of the violence in December 2012. Ordre de Malte France, which has been present in the country for more than 30 years supporting 14 medical centres nationwide, has intensified its support with additional sanitary and medical equipment for the local hospitals and paediatric clinics via our Embassy.

In **South- Sudan**, more than 189,000 people – according to UN data - are believed to have fled their homes since violence broke out in the capital Juba in December 2013. The Order of Malta's International relief agency has been active in the country for over twenty years and continues to run the projects in place, thanks to local staff members. The projects are aimed at strengthening the local health care structures in Lakes and Western Equatorial States of South Sudan by building 35 new health care centres. As a consequence of the escalating violence in the country, Malteser International is assessing to set up an emergency relief project for the displaced within South Sudan as well as on the Ugandan border.

Following the political crisis in **Mali** in 2012, around 475,000 people have had to leave their homes, many crossing the border with neighbouring countries, Mauritania, Niger and Burkina Faso. In the latter country, the Order's 150 first-aid and ambulance personnel have played an active part in the aid operations of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to assist Malian refugees, managing eight centres with ambulances all over the country. Ordre de Malte France also assists internally displaced people in Mali by sending medicines, food, hygiene articles and clothing.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

The DR Congo has also recently been gripped by violent clashes that broke out between rebels and the Congolese Army, which drove tens of thousands of people over the border to Uganda, and in large number into the poor and isolated district of Bundibugyo. In reaction to this humanitarian crisis, Malteser International rehabilitated four health posts on the Uganda-Congo border with maternity beds, tents, refrigerators for vaccines, medicines, and mobile medical teams for 22,000 refugees and the inhabitants of the surrounding area.

By reflecting on the terrible human suffering caused by civil conflicts, I cannot ignore the extremely painful subject of sexual violence against women and children in the Democratic Republic of Congo. With the world's highest incidence of such cases, numbering about 1,100 per month, it is evident that this is quite regularly employed as an instrument of warfare with intent to humiliate and terrorise the population.

While the Order has been active in the DR Congo since 1996, operating several projects aimed at improving the living conditions of the local population, our International relief agency has over the last ten years given much needed specialised medical and psychological assistance to about 50,000 victims. To this end, a bond of strong cooperation has been established with over 50 local organisations, and progress has been achieved in the formation of local support teams, which often include women who have themselves been victims of violence.

ONGOING RELIEF ACTIVITIES

Despite the urgency of many of these interventions, the Order does not neglect its ongoing activities in many countries around the globe, starting from **Haiti** where Order of Malta staff is still present with relief programmes to help the local population – such as supporting schools and building infrastructures - four years after the devastating earthquake.

In **Asia** Malteser International continues to be active in **Pakistan, India, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam**. Being an area heavily affected by natural disasters, much focus is placed upon the prevention of catastrophes. Projects range from the development of alert systems, to the reforestation of mangroves along the coasts and the construction of drinking water stations floating

on water in the event of floods. An important commitment is the training of the local population to deal with cataclysms, with special attention to the needs of the disabled who are inevitably the first victims when an unexpected disaster occurs.

In November, the Sovereign Order of Malta opened a second office of its International relief agency, in Miami, Florida, to improve the responsiveness and effectiveness of its interventions in case of natural catastrophes on the **American continent** and to serve needy communities by creating specific development programmes in close collaboration with our diplomatic missions and National Associations present in almost all American countries.

THE ROMA

Our efforts also extend to marginalised communities such as the Roma people - the largest minority in Europe with circa 12 million Roma people living here.

While helping the Roma people is not a new initiative for the Order, which already undertakes numerous projects in housing and education in various European countries including Hungary, Romania and Albania, the Order nominated last year an Ambassador-at-large for the **Roma** people. He is in charge of the coordination and cooperation with international organisations in reference to the "Framework of the European Council for National Roma Integration strategies up to 2020", which focuses on the areas of education, employment, healthcare and housing.

UNESCO

The Sovereign Order of Malta is not only concerned by providing support to suffering populations, but has always put a focus on the importance of the preservation of religious heritage to protect human dignity through the respect of a population's identity.

On November 7, I was invited to address the UNESCO General Conference in Paris where I illustrated the Order's principal activities in this respect, which constitutes one of our constant priorities in the cooperation with **European Commission and UNESCO**, as shown by a number of important joint initiatives undertaken in the recent past in Paris, Brussels and Cyprus.

As I recalled on that occasion, the protection of religious heritage should be seen as a vital element in promoting social stability, peace building and the recovery from crisis situations as well as a guarantee for sustainable social, environmental and economic development. The "Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief" approved by the Council of the European Union June 24 last, with reference to international norms, is an encouraging example and a great step forward to foster the diversity, respect, and tolerance among people with different beliefs, and the recognition of the universality of human rights.

Excellences,

Let me conclude with the following: we realise, like many others, that the question of identity is increasingly at the heart of major confrontations that we experience in many areas where we work

on the ground, no matter if the country is rich or poor. This issue re-emerges as a result of the collapse of the great mass ideologies that marked the international life in the twentieth century. Most people are in search of cultural references, territorial identity, religious reference points, spiritual values, good governance on the part of national and international institutions. Simultaneously, as globalisation has its limits, we witness a return of states. There is evidence of a new geopolitics in regions around the world while the interstate and interregional conflicts have replaced the old political and economic divisions East-West and North-South. But the return of states also calls for a return of diplomats because diplomacy is the preferred instrument of states. Diplomacy today expresses itself in various ways: besides traditional diplomacy, there is cultural diplomacy, economic diplomacy, and also humanitarian diplomacy. And there is of course the diplomacy of the Holy See, the oldest and most sought after.

The Order of Malta will continue to play its role, as a virtue of its independent, apolitical and neutral nature, to build bridges of understanding and conduct missions of facilitation and mediation, which it puts at the disposal of the international community and in particular, of the states with which it maintains diplomatic relations. A joyful event in this matter was the opening of the diplomatic relations between **Honduras** and **San Marino** at the Magistral Palace last December.

The world of today and – may I add also the Sovereign Order of Malta - needs diplomats like you, dear friends.

Dear Ambassadors and other distinguished members of the diplomatic corps, please let me thank you for your continuing support and cooperation in carrying out the high mission of which you are in charge. I send my personal sincere wishes for the Country you represent, to you, your collaborators and to your families for a peaceful and fulfilling 2014.