

Mission of the Modern Knight: Challenges Facing Members of the Order of Malta

by Monsignor Mario Conti
Archbishop of Glasgow
Principal Chaplain of the British Association

(Given to members of the Scottish Delegation in Malta - September 2007. Published by permission.)

The challenges we face as Knights and Dames, are essentially the same as those faced by any serious Christian in today's society. Firstly then, who are we? Or better, what is the Order of Malta, and what is the Church, since we identify ourselves in this way?

Well, the Order of Malta is a group of Catholic Christians, united in faith, active in charity and moulded by the traditions we have experienced first hand. More generally then, what is the Church? The Church is a community of faith. It does not exist in isolation but within a context of people who at any one period demonstrate strong or weak community characteristics.

The Church necessarily has and manifests institutional characteristics but is not alone in so doing. It takes its place in society as an institution among others, whether these be political, legal, commercial, educational --whatever-- and must necessarily inter-relate with them; influence and be influenced by them in both philosophical and social terms.

Message Bearer

The Church exists as the bearer of a message, teacher of a way of life and the guardian of a whole corpus of inherited wisdom which inevitably impacts on the culture of its own adherents and upon those with whom it and they engage.

The Church has a missionary spirit since it recognises itself as sent-out with divine authority to teach all nations.

In the course of history it has been welcomed and resisted; the Church is sought after as the ally of the state and persecuted as its adversary; regarded as the leaven of society or execrated as a baneful influence. We have experienced it all.

These varied experiences of the ecclesial community (or communities since in the same age different experiences may characterise different parts of the Universal Church) these experiences arise from the prevailing cultures and are affected by the philosophies and ideologies of the day.



Monsignor Mario Conti

In each age and place they present the Church --and therefore each of us as individual Christians - with challenges challenges to the Church's identity, its integrity in terms of both faith and practice, and its fidelity to the Gospel.

Subtle Shift

I think it is fair to say that the Christian Church in the west today is facing greater challenges than at any point in its recent history. I say that because I sense a subtle shift has taken place in the society in which we are called to be the leaven.

Our culture is characteristically secular. It does not manifest a religious spirit --on the contrary it demonstrates a purely rational mindset, with the empirical sciences tending to dominate the academic agenda.

It is a culture which stresses the importance of the individual and his/her rights over against the concept of the common good to which all must contribute.

And in moral terms these rights are those which a democratically-elected parliament grants to individuals, against the notion that rights are the correspondents of natural duties which we all owe to one another by dint of our membership of the human family whether nuclear or societal which those elected are required to defend and serve.

False Idols

In the Order we have our own "family customs" --our practices of piety, our regular encounters, our well-plotted spiritual path. But the secular individual has none of this. Instead he or she will typically worship his or her own god made in his own image and likeness to reflect his own invented or borrowed values. If there is a religious dimension it is likely to be peculiar to that individual.

The fact is that religion is rarely absent in one manifestation or another from this model since most people demonstrate what Paul VI called in his memorable pastoral letter as archbishop of Milan "il senso religioso" a "religious sense" though it does not always have as an object a transcendent being to which one is accountable.

The secular individual may be compared to Pilate, not because he condemned Jesus but because he assumed an authority over his own actions, an autonomy which Jesus confronted with the words: "You would not have any authority over me unless it were given to you from above."

The secular individual is very conscious of his own autonomy, whereas the member of the Order sees himself or herself primarily as a member of a community civil and religious.

Disengagement

This prevailing culture is often spoken of as "post-modern" and in religious terms, "post Christian". This cultural shift is quiet, slow-moving, unobserved --but certainly

profound in its reshaping of our whole social context. I believe it has two significant characteristics which are related: disengagement and fragmentation.

Disengagement is manifest in almost any area of life you care to mention --with the possible exception of leisure and shopping, though I'm not so sure of that!

Take for example membership of Trades Unions. Thirty years ago more than twelve million Britons were union members. Today membership is about half that number. Of course social and employment conditions have changed, but something more subtle is also at work as Richard Hyman, professor of industrial relations at the London School of Economics points out: "Being a union member has ceased to be the social norm, and a new generation has grown up who not only are not trade unionists, but whose parents have never been in unions either."

Does that not have a familiar ring to it? Change just a couple of words "a new generation has grown up who not only are not church-goers, but whose parents have never been in church either." And does that not extend to work also: a whole generation has grown up of which many are not at work but whose parents were not working either.

Whether as a result of circumstance or choice we could map a similar decline in membership of the political parties, cultural societies, clubs, community councils, youth groups whatever.

Fragmentation

All of this involves a loss of the sense of community --of togetherness, of belonging.

As members of the Order we are especially privileged to be able to count on a strong bond of fraternity which binds us together. We feel comfortable in the path of tradition which our statutes and customs have prepared for us over the centuries. In this we are completely counter-cultural.

Largely as a consequence, but itself contributing to this new social culture of secular individualism is the fragmentation of society. The family is fragmented; local communities are; there are perhaps ever-increasing differences in the social classes in respect of their lifestyle and expectations across the city. Life expectancy and health patterns differ greatly, district by district, as statistics illustrate. Drug and alcohol dependency mask a poverty of spirit which is truly disturbing. While we must not exaggerate these cultural phenomena we cannot at the same time ignore them. They describe the social context within which the Church --and other institutions-- must operate; therein arise our challenges.

Our Challenge

One of the prime challenges which the Church, and in a special way, members of the Order have to face today lies in the communication of the Christian message to people both outside and within the Church who are immersed in a culture that is both post-modern and post-Christian.

It is here that I should like to mention to you one particular aspect of the task of "tuitio fidei" --and that is the apostolate of letter-writing. So often in our culture the Church's position, built on centuries of wisdom, illumined by sacred scripture, is caricatured as being obscurantist, medieval, even wicked.

It is then a challenge, even an obligation for us as members of the Order, to take up pen (or open up the computer) and defend the Church in the letters pages of our great dailies, periodicals and journals, against those who would seek to destroy her, not with weapons of steel or armour, but with well-aimed phrases and articles.

We may not be called to risk life or limb for Holy Mother Church but we are asked to stand up for what we know to be right, even at the cost of awkwardness among our friends or work colleagues the martyrdom of the raised eyebrow perhaps.

A Hostile Media

With the vast majority of Western Europeans uncommitted to Church attendance the Church has to rely in the main on secular means of communication, and the media, generally speaking, are unsympathetic to organized religion, as they are unsympathetic in the main to all institutions, defensive only of their own, largely commercial, interests.

The media then form a contemporary arena in which the duty of tuitio fidei needs to be lived out heroically.

We are challenged daily in areas such as medical ethics; respect for human life; bioethical limits; education; the status of marriage; the appropriate response to homosexuality; the just war theory; the morality of nuclear weaponry; globalization; third world debt; relations with Islam; immigration and a variety of other topics.

And so, where do we turn for help? As Christians, the answer is instinctive. Whatever our failings, whatever our challenges, whatever our questions, we turn to Christ.

Witnessing to the Truth

Ultimately, therefore, the challenge facing Christians and in a special way, members of the Order, today is one of witnessing to the truth. Truth however is not a mere set of rules, or a sacred text. It is not simply faith in the Gospel but rather in the content of that faith and that Gospel --namely the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ himself.

It is expressed by Jesus in his question: "Who do you say that I am?" (we might call that the "theological question") and in the injunction "Love one another as I have loved you" --the moral imperative.

For while we need to be generous in recognizing the many achievements of our society in the fields of medicine, education, commerce, we need to point out the growing loss of respect for human life and the family, the dependency of so many on addictive substances, the damage done to the human and natural environment and

the ill-effect of globalization on the poorest of the poor. Truly creation, in Saint Paul's words, groans in a common travail until the sons of God are revealed.

Or in the words of Pope John Paul in his first encyclical letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, "the visible world which God created for man and woman --the world that, when sin entered the world, 'was subjected to futility'-- recovers again its original link with the divine source of Wisdom and Love," in Christ Jesus our Lord. *Redemptor Hominis*.

Restoring that link, is the first and most imperative challenge facing the Church today. It is one from which none of us, as loyal sons and daughters of the Church may shrink.