

From Times Online

April 9, 2010

New Grand Master's crusade to explain his ancient Catholic order

The Sovereign Military Order of Malta is now a global aid charity

Richard Owen

Fra Matthew Festing, 60, is the third British Catholic since 1258 to serve as Grand Master of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta.

When I spoke to him in his residence, a frescoed Renaissance palace near the Spanish Steps in Rome, I asked him why some people have the impression that his order is a secretive, even sinister, global power.

“A complete mystery,” he replies. “I think it comes from 19th-century Romanticism about the Middle Ages, fascination with things Gothic.”

In reality the order traces its origins before the First Crusade in the 11th century, when it protected and cared for pilgrims in Jerusalem and grew into a formidable fighting force. Driven out of the Holy Land by Muslim forces to Rhodes, and then in 1530 to Malta, the order has had its headquarters in Rome since 1834.

Festing is irked by “fraudulent” orders also claiming descent from the Knights of Malta. “It is based on ignorance, a misappreciation of history, reading too much Dan Brown,” he says. “The Knights Templar do not exist. They were suppressed by the papacy in the 14th century.

“There is this crazy desire for dressing up in funny clothes — plus some people think that by aping us they can get their hands on our diplomatic passports. After the loss of Malta our order became very small and was thought to be exclusive because you had to have noble qualifications. I think that is what has given rise to all this nonsense.”

Now a global aid charity, the order remains one of the most powerful Catholic orders: as its head Festing has the rank of cardinal (although not the right to vote for the next Pope).

A former officer in the Grenadier Guards and art expert at Sotheby's, Festing became a member of the order in 1977 and Grand Prior of England in 1993, leading various humanitarian aid missions to Kosovo, Serbia and Croatia.

The Latin motto of the order translates as “Defence of the faith and assistance to the poor”.

“When they were hoofed out of Malta by Napoleon, the Knights were absolutely devastated, thought it was the end of everything. Actually it was a blessing in disguise, the order could get back to what it was meant to be doing, looking after the poor and the sick.”



Fra Matthew Festing, Grand Master of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta

The order's emergency arm, Malteser International, played a major role in Haiti after the recent earthquake, and is active in Africa, the Middle East, the Americas and the Far East. The order is in effect a Christian NGO, "though we are frightfully careful not to be in any way politically aligned."

The order's sovereign status, he says, is about more than the right to issue its own stamps and car licence plates. "Uniquely among aid organisations we have diplomatic relations with other states. It means Albrecht von Boeselager, the Hospitaller of the Order, in effect our Health Minister, can immediately talk to his opposite number."

The order has "70 international inter-government co-operation agreements, with more on the way, and 104 ambassadors around the world, including the United Nations, and the European Commission," says Festing, who was elected Grand Master in 2008 after the death of Fra Andrew Bertie.

A bluff, genial figure, he is modest about his rise to high rank. "I think probably they thought well, this chap Festing is involved in something which seems to have been working, why don't we give him a go as Grand Master?"

These are not, he concedes, easy times for the Church. "The papacy and the Church are under terrible attack," he says, in reference to the "dreadful scandal" of clerical sex abuse now shaking the Church. "It is partly stoked up by the media, and there is clearly a major secular agenda. But there were people who behaved extremely badly, and that has to be faced. If you sweep something under the carpet, inevitably somebody will pull the carpet back. It might be tomorrow, it might not be for a hundred years, but it will be discovered." He blames "quite considerable lack of local leadership. You have got to tell the truth, and I think people have been exceptionally stupid in not doing so."

He does not, however, blame Pope Benedict XVI, who has come under fire for his role both as Archbishop of Munich from 1977 to 1982 and subsequently as head of Vatican doctrine, before his election as Pope five years ago.

"I feel terribly sorry for the Holy Father, because he is damned if he says one thing and damned if he says another," he says. "Poor man."

Had Festing suffered abuse himself at Ampleforth, before going up to Cambridge to read modern history?

"I don't ever remember being interfered with by anybody." He pauses, adding with a jovial laugh: "But then I was a rather fat, ugly boy. To me it is all grossly exaggerated. But there will be many people who say, no, it jolly well is not, we remember it all very clearly."

His father, Field Marshal Sir Francis Festing, was a Catholic convert, "but I come from a recusant family on my mother's side, so via her I have the blood of martyrs in me, as it were. That gives you a pretty powerful connection to your faith."

The persecutions of the Reformation "have given English Catholicism a certain edge. There is still quite a lot of anti-Catholic religious prejudice in Britain. I am not a great one for saying, you're all wrong and we the Catholics are right. But Christianity supports many of the building blocks of society, in particular the family."

Earlier crises in the Church such as the Great Schism in the 11th century, the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Reformation and the French Revolution "must have seemed the end of the world, moments when they said, my God, this is the end. But it wasn't. The ship of the Church mysteriously sails on."