



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS  
TO THE AMBASSADORS OF THE SOVEREIGN MILITARY HOSPITALLER ORDER  
OF SAINT JOHN OF JERUSALEM, OF RHODES AND OF MALTA**

*Consistory Hall  
Saturday, 27 January 2024*

**[Multimedia]**

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*Grand Master,  
Your Eminences, Your Excellencies,  
Dear Members of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order  
of Saint John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta,*

I offer all of you a cordial greeting and welcome! For centuries your Order has served God and the Church by fulfilling the aims for which you were founded by Blessed Gerard: “the promotion of the glory of God and the sanctification of its members through the *tuitio fidei* and *obsequium pauperum*”, in the words of your Constitutional Charter (art. 2 § 1). The defense of the faith and service to the poor: both together.

In your reverence for the poor, you have the very meaningful custom of referring to the sick as: “Our Lords the Sick”. It is beautiful that you refer to them as “Lords”. In serving them, you serve Jesus. Just before his passion, he too, as the Gospels tell us (cf. *Mt* 26:6-13; *Jn* 12:1-8), received from Mary of Bethany an act of “homage”: an anointing of his feet with a costly perfumed oil made of pure nard. Christ was pleased by this gesture and responded to the indignant protests of those who considered it an extravagance by revealing its true meaning: an act of love performed in view of his burial. Just as Mary in Bethany showed her *obsequium* towards the Lord who, though he was rich became poor for our sake (cf. *2 Cor* 8:9), so we, his disciples, are called to continue to pay him homage by serving the poor, who – as the Master said on that occasion – we will always have with us (cf. *Jn* 12:8). And we are bound to do so with love and humility, without rhetoric or

great display.

After Mary's gesture, Jesus adds: "Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (*Mt 26:13*). Christ thus joined together the preaching of the Gospel and the praise of service to the poor. *Tuitio fidei* and *obsequium pauperum* are thus inseparable. When we draw near to the least among us, the sick and the afflicted, may we remember that what we do is a sign of the compassion and tender love of Jesus. In this sense, your work is not simply humanitarian, like the meritorious service provided by so many other institutions. It is a religious act that gives glory to God by serving the weakest among us and it testifies to the Lord's preferential love for them.

This is the perspective in which we should also consider the diplomatic activity that you carry out in so many parts of the world, encompassing 113 countries and 37 missions to international organizations. It is always the activity proper to a religious Order: if it did not have the aim of testifying to God's love for those in need, there would be no reason for it to be carried out by a religious Order. Indeed, there are not two different realities: the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, a subject of international law devoted to works of charity and assistance, and the religious Institute. The Grand Master as the Sovereign of the Order, from whom derive its sovereign prerogatives and titles, cannot be sharply distinguished from the Grand Master as the religious Superior (cf. *Constitutional Charter*, art. 12).

Your Order, led by its own Supreme Moderator, due to particular historical circumstances also acquired international standing, which led to the first "embassies". As a result, to the Grand Master's office of Supreme Moderator, with its usual duties and rights, other duties and rights were added in the international context. Still, as the Constitutional Charter (cf. art. 4) again notes, the sovereignty serves the *tuitio fidei* and the *obsequium pauperum*. It comes from them. This was made clear in the Sentence of the special Tribunal of Cardinals established by [Pope Pius XII](#), which stated that yours is "a religious Order, approved by the Holy See" and that "the institution's nature as a sovereign Order is functional, that is, directed to ensuring the achievement of the purposes of the Order and its development in the world", for which reason "it is dependent on the Holy See" (AAS 45, 1953, 766-767).

This makes clear the importance of the Order within the international community, as an instrument of apostolic activity, with its subordination, as a religious Order, to the Holy See and its obedience to the Pope, as the supreme Superior of all religious Institutes (cf. *CIC*, 590). Consequently, it is important that a relationship of fruitful collaboration and joint action for the good of the Church and society exist between the diplomatic Representative of the Order and the Papal Legate of each place. In this way too, the connection of the Order with the Pope is not a limitation of its freedom, but a safeguard, that finds expression in the solicitude of Peter for ensuring its greater good, as has happened more than once, also by direct interventions in moments of difficulty.

The dependence of the Order of Malta on the Holy See does not therefore diminish the importance of its diplomatic representations, but rather allows their meaning to be even better understood, as channels of the Order's apostolic and charitable activity, open and generous especially wherever the greatest need exists. I very much like the term that some of you use in saying that yours is a "humanitarian diplomacy". The diplomatic Representative is the bearer of the charism of the Order, and for this reason feels called to carry out his duties as an ecclesial mission. This particular nature of your diplomatic activity, far from diminishing its importance, offers a precious witness and an eloquent sign, also for the other embassies, so that their activity too may be directed to the concrete good of peoples and hold in high consideration the most vulnerable.

Dear friends, I am very grateful for the mission that you carry out, and I invoke upon you the protection of Our Lady of Philermos, to whom the Order is devoted. I bless you and I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you!