

**HMEH The Grand Master Fra' Matthew Festing**

*Charity: the basis of civilised human life.*

*How the Order of Malta should play its part*

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

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Before I start my talk, I wish to thank most sincerely Professor Franco Anelli, Pro-Rector of the Catholic University, Professor Carlo Beretta, Dean of Political Sciences faculty, the Faculty Committee and the Academic Senate of your prestigious university. I am deeply honoured by the award you have chosen to bestow upon me. Its name is linked to the revered memory of Fr. Matteo Ricci, a great missionary and a figure of extraordinary modernity. It also evokes a personal memory that moves me and of which I am proud: that of Fra' Andrew Bertie, my beloved predecessor, who received this same award in 2006. On 5th February next year, the procedure to beatify him will begin, five years after his death. It is therefore an award that recognises our mission, our history and our identity. That is why I would like to share it symbolically with all of the Order of Malta's members and volunteers throughout the world. Today I will be mainly talking about them, which brings me to the topic I have been asked to discuss. First, however, I would like to say a few words about our history and traditions.

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The Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta – this is its full name - was founded in the Holy Land in the eleventh century. It is the oldest religious/military order in the Catholic Church. It is still active after nine centuries, thanks to the enduring importance of its mission in serving mankind. Its ancient traditions are renewed every day with the medical and humanitarian activities of its operators: 13,500 members, 80,000 permanent volunteers and over 25,000 doctors and paramedics. They work here, in a big city like Milan, just as they do in the remotest regions of the Third World, through a global network which embraces 120 countries. We treat the elderly, the disabled, refugees, the homeless, the terminally ill, lepers, children, drug addicts. We care for them daily, as well as during emergencies such as natural disasters or armed conflicts, when we provide emergency frontline care, but also support them to rebuild their lives and their livelihoods.

It is clear that our efforts – like those of so many social and humanitarian operators – are increasingly strengthened by volunteers: a true, irreplaceable army of solidarity which was the object of a European Union special commemorative year in 2011.

I believe that it is particularly important to stress the importance of volunteer work here, in this academic institution, where the minds and consciences of thousands of young people are shaped every year.

Far from being vague sentimentality, the action of putting oneself at risk to help one's neighbour is an integral part of active citizenship today, of conscious participation in social development. Many of the Order of Malta's charitable projects are run by volunteers: men and women who are often young, who when faced with the suffering of this world and of our era want to make a difference through their own efforts. It is not a purely rhetorical exercise to define them as our 'family treasure'. They are a splendid resource and a reason for hope in the future, as are all those who practise Christ's most fundamental commandment 'Love thy neighbour as thyself', regardless of their nationality, what they believe in, or how wealthy, or poor, they are.

The twofold value that this service has for the civil growth of our society is manifestly clear: on the one hand, it protects the weakest among us, and on the other, the act of opening oneself up to others nourishes the spirit of new generations, encouraging their growth as people and as citizens. It is a phenomenon that we in the Order observe at first hand, through the many projects and schemes where young volunteers work alongside professionals: young men and women who, thanks to their efforts, will become better and more socially conscious adults in the future.

Here in Italy – where the Order's government offices have been based since 1834 – the work carried out on Lampedusa is particularly important. Thousands of boat people escaping from northern and western Africa continue to disembark there. Since 2008 – thanks to agreements made with the Coast Guard and Guardia di Finanza – the Order of Malta's volunteer doctors, nurses and paramedics have been providing direct assistance at sea to thousands of immigrants in dire need, including many women in labour. Regardless of political stances taken over this phenomenon, I think it is an unequivocal moral duty to help those who risk their lives in these voyages of desperation. News reports tell us how many attempts fail, leaving death in their wake.

And again in Italy, I would like to mention the rapid assistance we provided after the earthquake in Emilia last May. Over 700 volunteers from the Order took turns in running the refugee camp we set up in Bomporto, in the province of Modena. For over four months, they did their best to help a population in dire need, with the same dedication demonstrated during the other seismic emergencies that have hit Italy in recent times - in Abruzzo, Umbria, Irpinia, Belice.

Among the range of activities carried out in the region of Lombardy, a special one is the assistance provided to the homeless during the cold winter nights in Milan. I expect many of you here appreciate how very cold those nights can be! In partnership with the Italian civil defence force, every single winter night last year 60 women were admitted and treated in the reception centre in Via Barzaghi.

Looking beyond Italy's borders, the range of our projects really becomes too vast to illustrate in any detail, so I will limit myself to mentioning just a few examples. Let us look at Spain, where the economic crisis has exponentially increased the number of poor people today. Thanks again to the zeal of our volunteers, the Order's Spanish Association has opened a new soup kitchen in Seville, which serves 150 people every day, while another 500 are fed in two similar centres in Madrid. All these vital projects are run entirely by volunteers.

Another important area where our efforts are concentrated is in Eastern Europe, where the Order has been able to return to its work in the region, following the fall of the Soviet regime. In Hungary, our social assistance centres are a benchmark for public institutions. The figures speak for themselves: 5,000 permanent volunteers and 15,000 temporary volunteers, 350 offices, 142 local volunteer groups, 210 institutes, and 840 employees who also work in civil defence with a team of emergency workers ready for active duty, even abroad. We have been committed to similar activities in Russia since 1992. In Moscow and St Petersburg we run soup kitchens, we distribute basic necessities and we care for disabled children both in their homes and in specialised centres. We do the same in Lithuania and in many other Eastern European countries.

A new and very specialised sector concerns prisons, where our Associations in America are on the front line. In the United States today, almost two and a half million men and women live behind bars: our personnel do all they can to bring these people words of comfort. They visit a total of 26 penitentiaries, and also support the inmates' social reintegration through educational programmes and training schemes. The programmes often include helping inmates' children.

In the Middle East, in Lebanon, a good motto for what we are doing with summer camps for disabled children could be 'From the young for the young'. The camps are run for hundreds of young Lebanese boys and girls. The camps are workshops for creativity, socialisation and often simply to take the time to listen to the young disabled. They are supported by an international team of enthusiastic young people from the Order who come during their holidays, from Germany, France, Great Britain,

Poland, Austria, Switzerland and Spain, and who work together with their Lebanese peers.

On a global level, volunteer resources are mainly deployed in social and relief services and are an important element in the Order's humanitarian approach. They have a well-consolidated tradition, with the first ambulance service having been created in Ireland over 70 years ago. On the African continent, the first groups were established in Nigeria and South Africa. In Europe, the Order of Malta in Germany has some 65,000 employees and volunteers in over 700 premises. Each year they provide assistance to twelve million people in Germany and abroad.

For humanitarian interventions, on the African continent alone we are present in some 30 countries with hospitals, medical centres and programmes. We focus on treating malaria and tuberculosis cases, HIV-positive mothers and babies, supplying drinking water systems, helping refugees and providing medical and psycho-sociological assistance to women victims of violence. Just one example: in the war-ravaged Democratic Republic of Congo we support 350 medical centres in the South Kivu province, in addition to a medical and psychological assistance programme for women and children caught up in the clashes between warring factions, which we have been running for a number of years.

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As I said at the beginning, this brief sample of activities does not do justice to the efforts made, day in, day out, to carry on the Order's struggle against hardship and disease, a struggle now a thousand years old. It is important to remember that many of our humanitarian activities are underpinned by our special institutional character. The Sovereign Order of Malta is a sovereign entity of international law, recognised as such by over 100 States and by the European Commission. It accredits and receives ambassadors and also has permanent observers missions to the United Nations and the main international organisations.

This close network of diplomatic relations considerably eases the fieldwork of the Order's organizations on the ground. It enables them to integrate with the local health systems, to obtain customs subsidies for importing health equipment and donations, and to guarantee a greater protection for our humanitarian personnel in danger zones. In addition to the Order's impartial and apolitical nature, its ambassadors are also invaluable for intervening in conflict or crisis areas, where synergy between humanitarian activities and mediation can facilitate and expedite international cooperation.

Naturally not everything goes as it should and we can experience problems too. One of them concerns how emergencies are treated. Some attract the limelight and thus economic support, whilst others, equally serious, remain in the shadows. The tsunami in Asia in December 2004 and the equally terrible earthquake in Pakistan of the next year exemplify this. The first was followed with concern and commitment by the entire world, while the second was more or less ignored. This is why the Order of Malta has recently set up a 'Global Fund for the Forgotten,' to raise funds for all whose anguish "doesn't make news" - such as the misery of the poor, of the lonely elderly, of deprived children and mothers, of the disabled and of those suffering from forgotten endemic diseases in developing countries.

We are also engaged in expressing to the international community of the Order's position on the very important current concern regarding the 'Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflicts'. Our recommendations are based on the extensive experiences of our members and humanitarian personnel in Africa and Asia. Aggressive actions against civilians violate the basic principles of humanitarian international law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention - principles that should be universally binding.

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In conclusion, I would like once again to say how very proud and grateful I am to receive this prize dedicated to Father Matteo Ricci. He was a true champion of evangelisation whose modus operandi was in many ways similar to ours. His work was based on a conscientious study and a profound respect for the culture, history and traditions of the Chinese society to which he had brought the word of God. This was the great strength of his apostolate, his being 'Chinese with the Chinese'. In the words of John Paul II, who proclaimed him Servant of God in 1984, Father Ricci "was rightly convinced that faith in Christ not only would not have brought any harm to Chinese culture, but would have enriched and perfected it."

We, too, work with this spirit and this conviction. The Sovereign Order of Malta communicates 'in the field' with the most varied cultures and religions. And we can do so because on every occasion in every region where we start a new assistance project, we do so without discrimination or prejudice, we are open to the different social and political systems, cultures and religions. Intervening with the people who live and work there, we respect the traditions, cultures and religions of the people. That is how we are able to bring our assistance to every part of the world.

I hope I have been able to give you some idea of the Order of Malta's nature and its work, which is inspired by and based on the values of Christian solidarity.

May I end by once again expressing my gratitude to the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart and to all of you who have kindly shared with me this truly special occasion.

Thank you.