

SOVEREIGN MILITARY HOSPITALLER ORDER
OF SAINT JOHN OF JERUSALEM
OF RHODES AND OF MALTA

Journal of Spirituality

**“Tuitio Fidei”
and
“Obsequium Pauperum”
today**



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INTRODUCTION

“Defensio fidei” and “obsequium pauperum” are the two essential motives that govern the inspiration and the work of the Order of Malta since its very beginning. The members of the Order, dispersed throughout the world, live in a society that is marked today by accelerated transformations that bring about positive achievements but also cause a concealment of values.

The Apostolic Letter “Novo Millennio Ineunte” invites Christians, faced with new challenges, to set out into the deep waters of faith and of updated service of active charity.

Pope Paul VI, in his Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii Nuntiandi” (NN. 31-35), indicated the existence of a profound bond between evangelisation and human promotion. The proclamation and the service of charity give a joint witness to the faith that is active in Christian love.

The task of defending and extending the faith in Jesus Christ and in his Gospel (tuitio fidei) and the work of raising people from sickness, need and suffering (obsequium pauperum) have always been perceived in

our Order as ideals that stand in intimate conjunction. These two tasks were set out clearly by Blessed Gerard for the Order he founded, which has come through the centuries guided by the same inspiration.

In this Third Journal of Spirituality the members of the Order will find points for reference and comparison to guide them in the present times.

The first part is dedicated to the “tuitio fidei”, in which Cardinal Pio Laghi, Cardinalis Patronus of the Order and former Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, speaks about Education of faith (N. I); the Most Reverend Guy Thomazeau, Archbishop of Montpellier and Head Chaplain of the French Association, looks at the theme “tuitio fidei” in relation to the family (N. II); the Most Reverend Maurice Couve de Murville, Emeritus Archbishop of Birmingham and Head Chaplain of the British Association, speaks on how to give witness to the faith in today’s society (N. III).

In the second part, “obsequium pauperum”, the Prelate of the Order offers his contribution to a Christological and ecclesial vision of the charitable activities of the Order (N. IV). Baron Albrecht von Boeselager, Grand Hospitaller, illustrates the practical

activities of assistance given by the Order in the new frontiers of charity (N.V); and Marquis Gian Luca Chiavari, Receiver of the Common Treasury, outlines in concise way the evangelical requirements of "obsequium pauperum" (N. VI). Finally Baron Fra' Franz von Lobstein, Grand Prior of Rome, and Count Fra' Roggero Caccia Dominioni, Grand Prior of Lombardy and Venice, offer some of their practical experience of charity in action (N. VII and N. VIII).

The best introduction to this Journal could be the prayer which is to be found in the Maltese Missal: "Lord God, be with the Order of St. John the Baptist, which you founded; that in it there may always flourish the defence of the faith and the service of the poor, as a mark of its members on their journey and a pledge of reaching the heavenly city".

Archibishop Angelo Acerbi

PART ONE

“TUITIO FIDEI”

I

FAITH FORMATION

(Translated from Italian)

The obligation to defend the faith (*Defensio Fidei*) that each Knight and Dame assumed at the moment of being admitted to our Sovereign order requires, first of all, that we have not only a good understanding, but a profound and solid understanding of the truths of the faith in Christ which we profess. Obviously no one will defend or support an idea without being convinced that it is well founded. And to be convinced, we must have an understanding of what it means and what it involves.

Duty to educate oneself in the faith

Unfortunately, there are not only a few cases of people who were born and grew up in a Catholic

family and received an initial education in their faith from their parents, followed by preparation for First Communion and Confirmation, who then remained with the concepts acquired during childhood and adolescence, advancing in age, but with scarcely any development or growth in their understanding of the faith. Many people reach a high level of culture in the profane sciences while undertaking further study and maturing through the experiences of life, yet remain at an elementary school level in their faith. How can they then be public witnesses and defenders of the faith that they profess? St. Peter, in his First Letter, Ch. 3, verse 15, exhorts the faithful to "always be prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you."

Today, immersed in a very secularized society, we find ourselves confronted with many people who question this or that article of our Creed, this or that norm of our moral law. Wanting to be faithful to our obligation "*Tuitio Fidei*", we are called to give witness to the truth. We must therefore be well trained in battle, putting on, not military armour, but the arms of the spirit of which St. Paul speaks in his Letter to the Ephesians (6:14): gird your loins with truth, put on the breastplate of

righteousness, take up the shield of faith, put on the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

A duty which regards everyone

Every member of the Order, Knights or Dames, of whatever rank, beginning from those who occupy offices of guidance and of responsibility, has the duty to nourish the flame of the faith in him or herself. Otherwise, if the faith is not actively nourished, with the passage of time, it weakens, just like a fire to which no combustible material is added.

Beyond thinking of our own formation in the faith and our growth in the theological virtue of faith, we are obliged to commit ourselves to those who accompany us in our volunteer work, especially young people, that they might also receive an appropriate faith formation. Otherwise the assistance they offer risks being only a showcase, lacking the motivation of true virtue. If our good works are not done with the intention of giving glory to God, they have no value in His eyes.

Naturally, a fundamental role in the duty to educate oneself in the faith belongs to the

Chaplains of our Order, who, by their example, their speech, by spiritual direction and administration of the Sacraments, confirm others in the faith and open them to the sources of divine grace.

What is the faith?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that faith is "an entirely free gift that God makes to man" (n. 162) and "a supernatural virtue infused by [God]" (n. 153). But, at the same time, it is "a personal act - the free response of the human person to the initiative of God who reveals himself" (n. 166). "As personal adherence to God and assent to his truth, Christian faith differs from our faith in any human person" (n. 150).

Our faith in God and in the truths revealed by Him have, as a fundamental characteristic, that it is certain, more certain than any human knowledge, because it is founded on the very Word of God, who cannot lie. In addition, faith "seeks understanding"; as believers, we desire to know better Him in whom we have placed our faith, and understand better that which He has revealed. Although faith is above reason, there can never be

a true divergence between faith and reason because the same God who revealed his mysteries and communicates the faith has also given our spirits the light of reason. The ultimate truth, to which man aspires by nature, is reached using "both wings", that is, with both Faith and Reason, as Pope John Paul II wrote in his 13th Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*.

There are various levels to which people grow in their faith. I will divide them into three general stages. The first group of people are those who identify their faith with religious feelings or emotions, with a vague and generic belief in the existence of God and in some relationship between God and our life. This is the level of faith of numerous people in the world of today: a faith of habit and convention, a faith barely understood and practiced little, disconnected from the rest of life. It is therefore often heavy and boring; it is stagnant, neither alive nor dead.

People in the second level of faith find meaning in a sincere response to the God who speaks to me and reveals himself to me. It is the "yes" which allows the thought of God to enter my thoughts, the love of God to nourish my love, and divine grace to support my actions.

Finally, a third level of faith could be called a permanent attitude of the soul. In this case, my faith has become a virtue through years of exercising it. It extends its roots into my conscience and derives its validity from the mysterious, supernatural action of the Holy Spirit, by means of the grace infused in me at the moment of Baptism which has grown within me, slowly, through the reception of the Sacraments and the exercise of the other two theological virtues of hope and charity.

How do we educate ourselves in the faith?

There are a number of ways in which we grow in our faith. Of these, I mention the three of the most essential: prayer, study, and the practice of the virtues. I will begin with prayer. The classical definition of prayer is "the elevation of our minds to God, and the asking of Him suitable goods." It must begin not from the heights of our self-sufficiency, but from deep within our hearts and from our humility and littleness. When we pray, we first of all bless the Lord for the many gifts and favors we have received from Him, we thank Him and we adore Him, and finally we turn towards Him to ask for help and for grace, always keeping

in mind that the first request to make is that of pardon for our sins.

Prayer has various forms. It can be expressed with the lips and the voice, or in silence. It can be made in public or in private. Meditation, one means of private prayer, is a reflection that brings to life our thoughts, our imagination, our emotions, our desires. This "mobilization" of our faculties is necessary to deepen our conviction of faith, bring about our conversion of heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ. There are many methods of meditation, many teachers of the spiritual life.

Another form of prayer, which can be either private or public, consists in devotional and pious practices such as the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, visits to shrines, etc. These devotions lead us in reflection and meditation on the life of Christ and serve to increase our love for Him.

The most valuable form of prayer is that of liturgical celebrations, especially the Holy Mass, confession, and the recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours. Participation in these public acts of worship has a higher value and significance than private prayer or pious works because it is a participation in the prayer of the Church. Obviously, however,

the value of any prayer depends greatly on how conscientiously attentive we are to what we are doing and with Whom we are speaking.

John Paul II tells us in the Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* that we cannot be content with "a shallow prayer that is unable to fill [our] whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which today's world subjects faith, [we] would be not only mediocre Christians but 'Christians at risk'. [We] would run the insidious risk of seeing [our] faith progressively undermined" (n. 34). Therefore, we must always seek to deepen our life of prayer.

The second means that I mentioned by which we can educate ourselves in the faith is through study. It must not be sporadic, but, if possible, planned out. Study of philosophy is necessary to understand the foundations of the faith and theology to understand its principal teachings about God, that is, God as One and God as Three, God the Creator and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, the Church and the Last Things. It would be helpful, if time and duties permit, to enrol in courses or lessons in religious studies, open to laity in many if not most dioceses. Each Knight and

Dame must have, among books to read, at least the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Finally, the third means which is necessary as well as being efficient in enkindling our faith is that of the practice of the virtues, that is, making an effort to put into harmony the truths of faith and morals which we profess with our behaviour and the way we live our lives. Here, in particular, the exercise of the virtue of charity is essential, for all Christians, but especially for us since we in the Order have made a commitment "*Obsequium Pauperum*".

On the Door of Prayer through which one enters the Basilica of St. Peters, on the back left side behind the door to the Scavi, or excavations, is engraved the following "Prayer for Faith" dictated by the Servant of God Paul VI. It would be good for us to recite it every now and then.

O Lord, I believe; O Lord, I want to believe in You! Make my faith pure, make my faith free, make my faith certain, make my faith strong, make my faith joyful, make my faith fruitful. O Lord, make my faith humble. Amen.

Pio Cardinal Laghi

II

DEFENCE OF FAITH AND FAMILY

(Translated from French)

The secular spiritual tradition of the Order of Malta has inherited a vocabulary marked by its history. As I joined the service of the Order, I encountered a fundamental word which, in the culture of the Associations, reminds us that the Order is “hospitable and military”. It is the word “defence”. Defence of faith, of course.

This word is present in the vocabulary of both Old and New Testament. When Jesus prepares his disciples for their future persecutions, he instructs them in these terms: “So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict”(1). As for the Apostle Paul, in the letter he writes to the Philippians while he is in prison, he encourages those whom he lead to Christ with these words: “I have been put here for the defence of the Gospel”(2). A text from John’s Gospel mentioning the Holy Spirit – a text which is often read for Confirmations- can also be quoted as

another example: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate (Paraclet=defender)...”

At the beginning, however, I was slightly hesitant in front of this word. Why was I so? While ordained priest and later bishop, my deep conviction was that I was ordained to announce the Gospel, not to denounce things. In reality, our ministerial experience leads us to better understand that it is not possible to bear witness to the Good News without, at the same time, denouncing all that opposes the Gospel. The Saint Patron of the Order, John the Baptist, called people to conversion with a prophetic vehemence. John’s denunciation of the injustices of his time was a necessary preparation for the welcoming of the Messiah.

*

It is in this spirit that I wish to reflect upon a most current aspect of the defence of the faith in our society: the case and the defence of the family. A book that I published some years ago is entitled “The Good News of the Family”. This title reflects my constant pastoral concern not to remain

fearfully entrenched in a defensive attitude, especially in the broad field of family questions, while the Church carries the Good News. And was this not the very concern of Pope John Paul II when he wrote his Encyclical Letter “The Gospel of Life” in 1995? When confronted with discussions on family, Christians cannot content themselves with timid positions while facing controversial topics. There are initiatives to be taken.

The defence of the faith starts at home, in the family. This is why the Holy Father, in his teachings, always underlines the importance of questions related to the family. These questions are indeed fundamental for the happiness of men and women in our society, not only in Eastern Europe.

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The family is at the heart of a new missionary impulse aimed at witnessing, in the contemporary world, faith in God and in man, who was created in His image. The Church considers the family as the fundamental unit of life in society, and –even– of the Church itself.

But there is a widespread feeling of uncertainty today concerning the family. Without dwelling on minority ideological currents aimed at undermining it, one cannot but note that the family is becoming increasingly fragile. This could lead to a situation of social desegregation. Frequent divorces, young couples in loose relationships without real commitment, homosexual couples whose union is legally recognised by the State (in France), etc. etc. etc...

Complaining about this situation would be a loss of precious time. The very lives of parents and children are at stake here. The human cost for them is great indeed, beside the economic cost for society having to look after the children of broken families. But first and foremost one should be aware of the suffering of men, women and children whose lives have been disrupted. In such a context, what can we learn from Jesus? Jesus said after his Resurrection: "Reach out your hand and put it in my side". These words are incredibly powerful. I am convinced that the Lord calls us to announce the Good News of salvation right amidst the wounds and suffering of people. Just there and nowhere else. In this light, the defence of faith becomes a non-resignation, a refusal of fatality, a

commitment to the service of life. Love is announced by love, not by fear. Young people the world over are waiting for this good news. They want to hear that the joy of a long-lasting love is not a short-lived mirage, but a project of happiness blessed by God: “God saw that it was good”.

*

What can we do in order to implement these generous ideas into a concrete reality? The service to the family has spurred several initiatives among Christians. The Church has not gone “on the offensive” in a military sense. She has identified the objectives to be pursued and the means to be promoted. The main text of reference is still Pope John Paul II’s exhortation (November 1981) on the tasks of Christian family in today’s world.

First of all, defending faith in God the Creator is tantamount to committing oneself to the defence of life, recognising its sacred nature. The members of the Order join the efforts of the Church in promoting the respect of life from its origins. It is a very delicate field, which is not limited to the prevention of abortion through assistance to young pregnant mothers in distress.

Because of its “hospital” character, the Order of Malta has a duty to participate in the reflection on medical assistance for procreation, pre-natal diagnosis, as well as the research carried out by some biologists on human embryos. Christians should be familiar with and well prepared in these questions in order to participate actively in the debate taking place in society, bear witness and better understand the fundamentals of the teachings of the Church. The fact that the French Association decided to support the maternity of Bethlehem shows the interest of the Order in working concretely towards, and promoting respect for the gift of life.

The defence of the family is expressed also in the assistance offered to parents in their educational duties. Several initiatives have been taken to help them encouraging their offspring to love, in the context of an often provocative media environment to which young people are exposed. Many youth join the charitable activities of the Order of Malta. The chaplain and members have the important role of nourishing their reflection and contributing to the ripening of their emotional life.

Confronted with the dramatic reality of divorce, Christian communities invest their efforts in trying to help society to prevent this painful situation upstream. They do so by welcoming as best as they can the youth coming towards the Church at the moment of their marriage after not having actively participated in the Christian community for years. These young couples are coming towards the Church with a project of happiness which makes them particularly receptive. Priests are not alone in their task of accompanying them. This is indeed a domain in which, in conformity with the indications of the Second Vatican Council, the laity's apostolate can carry out its work. Married couples willingly help young people to prepare for their marital life, without overshadowing the specific role of the priest. I was glad to learn of a recent initiative aimed at preparing young families for the birth of their first child in the context of the "Catholic Maternities", with the qualified co-operation of the *Daughters of Charity*.

All these efforts towards the founding of new families are important, but need to be complemented by something else. One priest has left his deep and lasting contribution to the

expression and development of conjugal spirituality: Father Caffarel. Bestowed with a gift that I would describe as prophetic, here is a priest who was not on the offensive and never ceased accompanying families in the deepening of their marital life even in its mystical dimension. The spirituality of marriage nourishes and strengthens the happiness and faithfulness of the Christian couple thanks to a better understanding of the vocation received through the sacrament of marriage. It also suggests simple means to keep fidelity. Many have profited from the “duty to sit down” which was largely promoted and exported by the *Equipes Notre-Dame*.

Marital spirituality develops an open and trusting attitude. In this way families see to that the grace received bears fruit and becomes a source of evangelisation for their children. This happens in an associative life inspired by the conjugal spirituality. Such associations offer educational assistance to parents. Christian families, strengthened by their spiritual experience, do not hesitate in taking on the very delicate task of helping couples in distress or separated parents.

Finally, there is another field where the Order of Malta sees the duty to act. The defence of

the family requires vigilance in the political domain, since legislation on family matters always risks being distorted if the law-makers, because of their demagogical weakness, want the law to adapt to customs excessively. It is clear that civic law has a great influence on divorce, on the practise of abortion, on the definition of the limits of research by scientists in the respect of life. Committees on Ethics and groups of Christian doctors are dealing with these delicate topics. The members of the Sovereign Order are citizens whose civic vigilance should help Christians to be present and active in the field of politics, which is one of the highest forms of charity according to the teaching of the Church.

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I have already mentioned many aspects concerning the family; however, the list is not complete. It is important to remember that the family is the first place where the child not only discovers life with other people, but where his heart can also be awakened to faith. At the beginning of the third millennium, far from giving in to the fear of the future, the members of the Order foster a

missionary attitude in the name of their faith in God the Creator, in Jesus our Saviour. The defence of the faith, the presentation of faith, in all its strength, to our contemporaries, much depends on the success of marital life and family. We call this success “holiness”. The sacrament of marriage, as a conjugal covenant, is one of its paths. John Paul II keeps underlining that the Gospel is announced by the holiness of people and families alike. The same can be said of the defence of faith.

By writing these lines, I am answering the question asked by the Holy Father in his Apostolic Letter for the new millennium: “The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this *high standard*(3) *of ordinary Christian living*: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction.”(4)

Guy Thomaŕeau, Archbishop of Montpellier

1 Luke 21:15.

2 Ph 1:16.

3 The holiness.

4 *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, § 31.

III

WITNESSING TO THE FAITH TODAY

When we think about *tuitio fidei*, the Defence of the faith, our mind goes readily to the Hospitallers of the past, who defended Palestine against the Mamluks, or to Grand Master Jean de La Valette who held out against the Turks in the siege of Malta in 1565. These were battles that took place for all to see, and today we may compare to those warriors of old Catholic men and women who defend the Faith in the media, and in the debates of politicians, or who by their writing seek to commend the faith to non-believers.

There is also a defence of the Faith at the level of individuals, and it is to this that I want to draw attention, because members of the Order of Malta have a particular duty to fulfil in this area also.

The assurance of things unseen

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”. (Hebrews: 11,1). We must be prepared to witness to things unseen as

an important part of life but of course it is difficult to be such a witness, precisely because they are things unseen, and yet St Paul is insistent on the need for proclaiming the truths of faith. *"How are men to call on him [Jesus] if they have not come to believe him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard of him? And how will they hear of him unless there is a preacher for them? And how will there be preachers if they be not sent? ...So faith comes from hearing, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ."* (Romans: 10,14-15,17).

Our duty as Christians in today's world is to be like the preachers mentioned in that text. But what does this mean in practice? In the 1930s there was an association in England called the Catholic Evidence Guild. Its members were well trained in apologetics and public speaking, but the difficulty was to find them an audience. I treasure a photograph of Fr. Alfred Gilbey, who was then Chaplain to Catholic students at Cambridge. The local group of the Catholic Evidence Guild decided to take Scripture literally and to send a preacher to the nearby town of Bury St Edmunds. On market day, a kitchen table was placed in the square; Fr Gilbey stood on it and spoke eloquently, but no one stopped to listen to him. People just looked at

him in an embarrassed way and went past to buy their meat and vegetables as usual. The preacher was speaking to nobody. Perhaps in certain cultures and at certain periods, such a method would have been successful but I do not think it is for us.

A ready answer

A better starting point for proclaiming the faith is in the comment in St Peter's first letter: *"Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that is in you, but give it with courtesy and respect."* (I Peter: 3, 15). "Have your answer ready" is good starting point because it means that someone is sufficiently interested to ask a question, and this is an opportunity that must not be missed. But perhaps we feel inadequate about producing an answer. We should therefore realize that *tuitio fidei* requires from members of the Order and adequate knowledge of the faith; this should be part of the training of a Knight and Dame of the Order. If we think that this is asking too much, we should take to heart a remark made by the Pope on this very subject. He said: *"Today the defence of the faith means above all the witness to the truth of Christianity by what one says and what one does ... I am glad therefore to recommend*

to all members of the Order of Malta the Catechism of the Catholic Church ... To defend the faith often means, especially in our time, to defend basic values which human reason, without the light of revelation, is in danger of not being able to grasp radically or completely enough. Such are, for example, the dignity of man, the nature of the family, and the fundamental right to life.” (John Paul II: Speech to the new Ambassador of the Order of Malta to the Holy See; 13 October 1997).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

The Catechism of the Catholic Church of 1994 gives us an ideal starting point for a deeper understanding of the faith: It is not a “Question and Answer Catechism” but a succinct summary of doctrine, laid out in short sentences, clearly numbered and indexed, and summarized at the end of each section. It is a great teaching instrument. It is also, through the quotations from the great writers of the Catholic tradition, the Fathers of the Church and the Saints, an enrichment to spiritual life. It would be of great benefit to Knights and Dames of Malta to read a passage from it every day.

In the English language, confusion sometimes arises because faith is often interpreted as meaning confidence or trust. When we say “Have faith in God” we often mean “Trust in God”. The distinction is clearer in French where “*Ayez confiance en Dieu*” clearly means “Have trust in God”, whereas “*Croyez en Dieu*” means “Believe in God”. Believing in God means accepting that God exists, that he created us and loves us, that he has taken away our sins through the death of Jesus on the cross, and that the resurrection of Jesus is the sign of the eternal life, which he destines for us. Of course, such a message leads to trust and confidence, but trust is the result of faith; it is not the same thing as faith.

A reasonable faith

These comments can serve as an introduction to the complexity of faith: If we reflect on it, *tuitio fidei* involves a great deal because faith involves a great deal. First of all, it does involve the use of our reason. Faith is not a blind leap in the dark. It is the acceptance of truths which are not obvious in this present life, but which are brought to us by a witness that is reliable, the Catholic

Church. This is an important aspect of faith, because witnesses who are not reliable abound in this world. One reads about self-appointed evangelists, like the prophet from California who proclaimed that the end of the world was near and led his followers to Guyana to be ready for the event. When the world refused to end, he persuaded most of them to take poison. His followers had believed what he said, but it was not a reasonable thing to do. More recently, another prophet from Texas took a group of young people to a remote building in the desert. When the police came looking for them, the building was set on fire and several people died. This shows the shortcomings of blind faith. It reminds us that religion can be a dangerous force if it disregards reason and common sense. One of the problems of today's world is the growth of bigoted and fanatical religious groups. Our faith accepts a message from very different witnesses – the apostles and their successors. It is the Catholic Church which transmits that message from age to age, and the quality of these witnesses too must be assessed.

Super Natural

Another element which makes for the complexity of faith is that we cannot make the commitment involved in the act of faith without the help of God's grace. What we believe is not something we have touched or seen, as the Apostle Thomas did. Many of the statements in the Creed – that Jesus is the Son of God, the Virgin Birth, the resurrection of the dead – seem incomprehensible to non-believers. It is only God himself who can enlighten our minds so that we can accept his message and say: “believe”. Once we have made that commitment, we can make sense of so many things which are incomprehensible without faith. This present life can be seen as a long process of education which is shaping us for eternal life. The love that we experience for human beings (some human beings!) can be seen to have a quality which is an end in itself, so that St Augustine can say that we love for no other purpose than love itself. How mysterious that would be if faith did not teach us that human love is a reflection of God's love in the Blessed Trinity, so that the eternal character of human love reflects the eternity of God. Of course, one can hardly talk of things like that to non-

believers, because they have not entered the world to which faith gives access. This aspect of faith is supernatural; not in the sense of being “spooky”, but in the sense of being above our own unaided powers (*supra naturam* meaning “above nature”). Faith is a gift therefore, a gift from God which makes it possible to accept without doubting what he has revealed. What remains mysterious is that some people believe and some do not, although sometimes their education and circumstances have been the same. Even when we have the faith, we cannot argue other people into it. Faith is not just the conclusion of an intellectual demonstration: It is always a response in the depth of our heart to a personal action of the God we seek and love.

There is also a freedom about faith, which makes it an act of our own. God values our freedom so much that he invites us and attracts us, but he never takes away our freedom. God does not want to be served and loved by zombies. He wants to be served and loved in freedom, and, in this life, freedom means the ability to choose between different course of action. Pressure must never be brought on people to make them believe. Faith, like friendship, must be freely chosen.

The Power of Example

There is something else that needs to be said about the *tuitio fidei*. The defence of the faith includes its promotion. We must never forget, therefore, that the best recommendation of the Christian faith is the quality of the lives that Christians lead.

St Peter wrote: "*Always behave honourably among gentiles so that they can see for themselves what moral lives you lead*". (1 Peter: 2, 11). This is a big responsibility. The sins of Christians cause much scandal to non-believers, making it harder for them to believe, and then, instead of *tuitio fidei*, a terrible *direptio fidei* takes place, a "laying waste of the faith". It should be a constant prayer of ours always to behave honourably, as St. Peter says.

There is a story about a Catholic Scottish lady who had a Protestant husband. He never gave the slightest indication of wanting to become a Catholic, and she never made any attempt to lead him in that direction, though it was often the object of her prayer. Her husband was a good man who "pursued righteousness"; a rather silent man who did not often say what he was thinking. One day, after twenty years of marriage, he said to his wife:

"I am going to be received into the Catholic Church on Saturday." She was so surprised that she nearly fell through the floor. When she had recovered, she asked him why he had decided to do this. He said: "Well, for the twenty years that we have been married, you have never ceased to criticize the various parish priests that we have had at D. (the local parish], but you have never missed Mass on Sunday, I came to the conclusion that a religion that could have such an effect on you needed further investigation, and so I started instruction with Fr X. six months ago".

I particularly like that story because it seems to correspond exactly to something else that St Peter says in the letter already quoted: "*... if there are some husbands who do not believe the Word, they may find themselves won over, without a word spoken, by the way their wives behave, when they see the reverence and purity of your way of life.* " (1 Peter: 3, 1-2).

The Journey of Faith

I hope that it is apparent from what I have written that *tuitio fidei* is something very personal. It implies a journey in faith, which starts often with the faith of our parents but which has to become

our own faith. It also has to go through crises. Often there is a crisis at the time of adolescence, because what seemed so obvious in childhood as part of everyday life is suddenly called into questions. I remember a first-year student at an English university who came from a convent school and had always accepted the Church as something obvious and universal. (English students usually go to a university a long way from where they live, unlike students in Latin countries who often live at home during their "Third Cycle" studies, and go to the university at the bottom of the boulevard). Suddenly this English student was plunged into a milieu where she was the only believer. Suddenly she experienced the freedom of choice required by the act of faith. She felt its supernatural character and knew that it was above her own, unaided powers. She realized that one has to pray for faith. It was all too much for her, and, whenever she thought about the problem, she burst into floods of tears. She would be in the middle of a tutorial or having her lunch in the university refectory, when suddenly she would dissolve into helpless sobs, so that people would rush up, asking anxiously whether she was unwell. The only way she could get through the day was not to think

about religion at all. It was a painful time of growth for her.

Mid-Life Crisis

There also seen to be a mid-life crisis for many. They feel as if they have lost the faith because all the enjoyable feelings that they associated with religion have disappeared. This is probably part of the Night of the Spirit that mystics write about. That great master of the spiritual life, Dom John Chapman, Abbot of Downside, once wrote to a nun who felt that she had lost the faith: "Try to serve God for his own sake, as he wishes you to, and not for his gifts. What does it matter whether you enjoy your prayer, or are unhappy in it? What does it matter if you have all these feelings of having no faith? You know quite well that you have faith; for if you had none, you would not mind having none: but the pain is caused by your "feeling as if" you had not any." *The Spiritual Letters of Dom John Chapman*, ed. Dom Roger Huddleston (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), p.164. Letter of 4 September, 1931 to a Benedictine nun.) "

As members of the Order of Malta, we have the privilege of being at the service of the Faith.

The *tuitio fidei* is an important part of our service of mankind, because faith helps to see human beings at their true value, to see them as God sees them. That is why faith leads to love, and love leads to holiness. The Order puts many means of holiness at our disposal. It is good to renew our intention of making the best use of them.

Maurice Couve de Murville, Archbishop emeritus
of Birmingham

PART TWO

“OBSEQUIUM PAUPERUM”

IV

**“OBSEQUIUM PAUPERUM”..
CHRISTOLOGICAL AND ECCLESIAL
FOUNDATION.**

(Translated from Italian)

The “obsequium pauperum” presents to the Order challenges old and new. Before listening to some of the charitable activities of the Order, given by those directly involved, I would like to offer a few reflections on the basic references which motivate and qualify them.

A Christological Reference

A clear and continuous Christological reference is needed so as to keep the charitable works on the evangelical ground and to give to the various activities of the Order a clear Christian framework.

In a few weeks Teresa of Calcutta will be raised to the honour of the altars. Mother Teresa spread her tent of charity in many countries, in which poor people of all kinds found refuge. When one visits the chapels of the Missionary sisters of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa, one is impressed by a word, written in unadorned letters at the side of the Crucifix on the end-wall: “sitio”. To the invocation of extreme need formulated by the suffering Christ, Mother Teresa and her daughters respond by placing themselves at the service of the poorest in which they find his face.

In the letter to the Hebrews we read the exhortation to “look to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (*Heb* 12:2). Blessed Gerard and his companions gave life to the new institution at Jerusalem. There was no lack of illness or of poverty or of pilgrims in Europe at the time. If our Order is “of Jerusalem” it means that, historically and constitutionally, the service given to pilgrims, the sick and the needy began with a Christological motivation. Gerard and his companions had made their way to the Holy Sepulchre. Their eyes and their hearts were fixed on the life and Passion of Christ; they were captivated by his love. It was the encounter with Christ at the Holy Places that made

them capable of encountering the poor and those in need of relief.

Today too the care given to the poor by members of the Order, in activities geared to the vast variety of needy situations, must find its original inspiration from the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

The roots of Christian love

Beginning again from Christ, as recommended by the Holy Father in his “Novo Millennio Ineunte”, means above all going to the roots of Christian love. In his first letter, John indicates the source of charity: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” (1 Jn 3:16). From which the Apostle draws immediately a practical conclusion: “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” (1 Jn 3:17).

The Gospel is permeated by a current of charity. Jesus proclaims love as a “new commandment” and bestows it on his own during his farewell address: “A new commandment I give

to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you” (Jn 13,34).

The love of our neighbour is depicted graphically in the parable of the Good Samaritan who makes himself a neighbour to the traveller wounded and mistreated by robbers. It is also expressed as a supreme requirement in the Final Judgement: Christ the Judge identifies himself with the poor, the sick, those in prison. Seeing the face of Jesus in the needy and in those who suffer has been the powerful inner impulse of the saints of charity: St. Vincent De Paul, St. John of God, Saint Camillus, the Cottolengo, Blessed Damian, Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

In the school of the Gospel

No other school can surpass the Gospel for teaching charity. The reality and the characteristics of Jesus’ love are an inexhaustible lesson. *Transiit benefaciendo et sanando omnes* (Acts 10:38). Compassion towards those in need even brings Jesus to work miracles. With them he intends to reach the heart of the benefited persons, renewing a relationship of faith with God and bringing them to participate again in the normal life of the community. We may

think of the miracle of the paralytic whom Jesus raises from his pallet or of the cure of lepers who return to a normal life of the human society.

Christian charity, the active charity practiced by the members of the Order, is not satisfied with the simple gesture of offering some money; it knows how to place oneself at the service of one's neighbour to whom it wishes to give, with relief, moments of hope and freedom, as in the case of certain sick people, of vagrants, of drug addicts. The dying, picked up by Mother Teresa, died in peace because they felt for the first time that their dignity as human persons was recognised.

Active charity “propter Deum”

The most noble characteristic of Christ's love was the fact that the principle of divine love, proper to the Son of God, was operating through the fibers of his humanity. Christian charity is not exhausted in an impetus of altruism or human solidarity. To human compassion it adds a superior motivation and finality: *propter Deum*.

In St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, the hymn to charity begins with the negative lesson of those who attempt to do good without charity: “If

I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor 13:3). Charity in fact is above all love of God, whose grace is needed for a person to produce fruits: a branch, broken off from the vine, dries up. Obviously good works done to one’s neighbour in need can move towards conversion. Indeed, who can fathom the depth of divine mercy? April last, in Paris, while I was visiting the Order of Malta’s splendid health institution for severely handicapped people, I met a health worker who was assisting the sick with great patience and tenderness. I praised him for his charitable service, but he replied: I am not a believer; I do this out of a humanitarian spirit.

Certain heroic deeds of charity are proper to Christians. From my stay in Japan, many years ago now, I remember how the Catholic Sisters who dedicated their lives to assist mentally retarded children caused surprise and admiration. I was told that Buddhism, while not without compassion, did not know those forms of charity. For Christians they possess a reference to the suffering Christ. At the time of the first Christian communities, their way of life, based on fraternal sharing of goods, did not pass unnoticed to Pagans who were surprised.

“May charity make you a slave”

St. Augustine has a beautiful expression: “May charity make you a slave, now that truth has made you free” (Epist. on Psalm 99,7). The Maltese works of charity are contained in compendium in the expression “obsequium pauperum”. The very word “obsequium” indicates an attitude of service. One of the most bewildering Gospel episodes is the one of Jesus washing the feet of his Apostles. It speaks to us of the unheard-of Mystery of “God’s humility”. It is then that Jesus gives to his disciples his “new commandment” of love. He had just given the example of this kind of love by his humble gesture of service and charity which he illustrated with his words: “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” (Jn 13:14-15). Truth makes free. The Truth is Jesus: he teaches humility and frees from pride and from the search for power. These are the conditions for an authentic service of charity. “Exemplum dedi vobis ... you also ought to wash one another’s feet. The others are above all the

members of the Order, who must be included in the service of charity.

“May charity make you a slave”. The expression reflects the commandment of Jesus. Truth, humility, charity, service are combined in an evangelical harmony which is demanding and gratifying. May they be a cause for reflection and self-examination and may they be fulfilled in the behaviour of every member of the Order of Malta. Then will the “obsequium pauperum” professed by the Order find its correspondence in authentic slaves of charity.

The Church and the diakonia of charity

While in Hungary, just after the fall of communism, I was in a position to observe the mutilations that had been inflicted upon the church. The communist Regime had attempted to immobilize it by cutting off the two wings that sustain its action: education and works of charity. At that time the church was beginning slowly to re-establish Catholic schools and the different works of assistance so as to safeguard the integrity of the Church’s mission. I remember that a pioneer in this task of reconstructing organized charity, was the

“Malteser-Hilfsdienst” of the German Association, which had its base in a parish that I used to frequent.

Pope John XXIII said that the Church because it is Catholic is “the Church of everyone and particularly of the poor” (Radio-message previous to the Council). There is a structural link between the Church and poverty. The service of charity is something that the Church must do in order to be faithful to its own nature.

The Order of Malta by means of its works of charity is incorporated into this mission of the Church. It is important to note that the activities and the centres of the Order dedicated to assisting the poor and the sick, even the specialized institutions, are not separated from the ecclesial body.

The apostolic times themselves give witness to the fact that service to the poor was considered a part of the Church’s mission. The institution of the Deacons came about from the need to free the apostles from the “table service”, from the daily distribution of relief to those in need. Saint Paul on his journeys takes upon himself the task of promoting among the Churches collections in favour of the Jerusalem poor. The diakonia of charity, belonging as it does to the structure and

institution of the church, has nevertheless known historical ups and downs. Recently, thanks to the teachings of Vatican II, it has known a new revival and has become a basic programmatic decision: the preferential option for the poor. This means that the poor should find themselves in the Church as in their own home.

It is not our task to enumerate the many novelties in this area that have appeared in the world scene, from organised voluntary services to humanitarian interventions in cases of armed conflict and natural disasters. The presence of the Order of Malta is everywhere greatly appreciated. The Order is characteristically distinct from many other private associations or public entities dedicated to giving assistance on account of its own proper style, but above all on account of its Christological and ecclesial reference and foundation. Its institutions and charitable activities, by obeying the “new commandment” of Jesus, are inserted into the history of the Church’s diakonia of charity. This is the light in which the fundamental aims of the Order, as expressed in Article 2,2 of the Constitutional charter, should be read.

Archibishop Angelo Acerbi

V

THE NEW FORMS OF CHARITY

In his Apostolic Letter “Novo Millennio Ineunte” (No.50) the Holy Father calls on the Church for a “new creativity of charity”. As members of the Order of Malta, we should see this appeal as being particularly addressed to us. If we take seriously our responsibility as servants in the service of “our Lords, the sick”, we are constantly called upon to use our creativity and all our talents to improve our service and adapt it to the times. Like all Orders of the Church, the Order of Malta also has the responsibility, through the Order’s Charisma and Mission, to carry out pioneer work for the Church. I can see various fields in which we are called upon.

In many countries medical and social care and provision has become largely separated from its originally Christian background. Its supporting principles are no longer the Christian love of neighbour, but “humanitarian” motives. Important connections are thus in danger of becoming lost. Current medico-ethical and bio-ethical debates illustrate this danger, when for example even the killing of an incurably sick person is justified by

reference to humanitarian motives. More clearly than in the past, we must therefore select our fields of activity with a view to taking a clear position in this discussion. Care of the dying and their families by various branches of the Order in hospices and at home is an example of this new priority. And in all our institutions, concern for the teachings of the Church on ethical questions must take on a more central role than was necessary in the past.

Care of mothers and children represents another priority. 80 per cent of persons living below the poverty line are women with their children. Often, children are no longer a source of wealth but a cause of poverty. The maternity hospital in Bethlehem, the programmes to prevent the transmission of Aids from infected pregnant mothers to their children, the focus on mothers and children in disaster and emergency relief, the manifold mother-and-child programmes run by the Latin American Associations, all take this orientation into account.

Thus the Order is taking a clear position in defence of the dignity of the beginning and ending of life, in its special vulnerability.

Many non-Christian organisations do the same work as us, and in good quality. We must concern ourselves with how our actions based on

Christian love of neighbour also make the caring and healing love of God visible to humanity, and can thus also offer witness to God's love in the future. Our actions in the works of the Order must be seen to follow in the footsteps of Christ and be an answer to God's love, so that their character as witness and the connection to "tuitio fidei" is maintained.

The greater the immediate connection, the easier this is. This is why, in our recent history, pilgrimages with the sick and handicapped, especially to Lourdes, have been of such central importance. The majority of the Order's recent initiatives have their source in Lourdes in one way or another. With its care for needy pilgrims, the Order has found its way back to its first founding task in its most visible way, thus fulfilling the duty conferred on the Order in the Council Decree "Perfectae caritatis" to reflect upon its founding Charisma. In an utilitarian world devoid of meaning, the Order thus helps both sufferers and their helpers to experience the Christian meaning of suffering about which it is so difficult to preach.

With other activities it is less easy to make the connections clear. The maintenance of a supporting Christian culture in our hospitals and homes requires greater effort, because it is becoming

more and more difficult to find Christian-motivated Catholic staff, and in certain countries the employment laws forbid the selection of staff based on religious grounds as “discrimination”. But at least we must take care to ensure that the management staff are able to convincingly represent the binding teachings of Catholic faith and living both within and outside the institution.

We face similar challenges in the field of international disaster relief. We are witnessing a strong globalisation and centralisation in disaster relief, coupled with a clear trend towards greater professionalism and standardisation. Christian values play no visible role in this development. But Article 2 Paragraph 2 of the Constitution of the Order presents us with a very concrete responsibility for disaster relief, and does not offer us the option to withdraw from it. With the founding of the Emergency Corps of the Order of Malta (ECOM), we have taken account of this responsibility and recent developments, even though the challenge facing this sole Catholic international relief organisation is enormous. It is also necessary - in a world in which an extensive code of good rules regarding humanitarian international law, human rights and aid standards exists on the one hand, while

on the other hand these values are losing their natural and cultural anchoring and they are therefore breached more often than in the past - to stand up for Christian values. A further challenge in this context is presented by our obligation under our Constitution to offer our aid to every person, regardless of religion or race. In situations in which others concentrate their aid as a matter of course on fellow tribe members and co-religionists, we have to make clear that God's love applies to all, without at the same time neglecting our solidarity with the Christians in the effected region.

The internationalism of the Order and its international responsibility oblige us not to limit our mission to "charity begins at home", but to extend our relief services beyond the borders of our own countries, where possible in international cooperation. This applies in particular to the poor countries, whose populations suffer from the objectively unjust distribution of resources and development possibilities. Manifold healthcare programmes, clinics, deliveries of medicaments and aid to refugees bear witness to the growing awareness of this responsibility, to which the Holy Father never tires of drawing attention. An important task after the fall of the Iron Curtain was the re-establishment of

the Order's activities and relief services in the East European countries, which continue to require support.

As well as physical and material need, spiritual and religious need provides an important yardstick for our choice of fields of activity. Precisely these needs are undergoing major changes and demand great attention and flexibility. The victims of social exclusion or rejection are especially dependent on the circumstances where they find themselves. In many places, the Order devotes itself to the homeless. Care for victims of drug addiction is taking on an ever-greater importance. Despite all governmental aid programmes in the countries of the First World, the handicapped still suffer from exclusion and lack of social acceptance. In particular, the significance of vacation activities with the handicapped by young people under the banners of our Order can scarcely be exaggerated. These open up an entirely new dimension for the young people in respect to the loveliness and dignity of human existence, independent of the yardsticks of achievement and enjoyment set by the modern world.

An aspect of our service which must never be neglected is the technical quality of our aid. Goodwill and Christian love are not enough on their

own. The first hospital rules of the Order from the 12th century indicate how much care was taken of this dimension. For “our Lords, the sick”, only the best was good enough.

To strengthen the sources of our Charisma, we must win new faith in the promise that Christ is present in those who are suffering. We must prepare ourselves to interpret the encounter with Christ in the service of the sick and poor to those who do not yet believe. The point is to enable the missionary dimension of the encounter with Christ in the service of the Order to yield even greater fruit.

In my view, a priority here lies in the contribution which the Order makes to the new evangelisation. From this point of view, too, the employment of non-Catholics and even non-Christians as volunteers in the relief services or as staff in the institutions of the Order finds not only its justification but also an argument in its favour.

Since the beginning, the Order of Malta has invited people of goodwill to accompany it on its way and to support its services. With its clear rooting in the Catholic Church, it has the freedom to cooperate in its works with all those who wish to participate in its task and who are open to its purposes. The Order thus offers space to the individual to find his or her

own calling in the encounter with Jesus Christ in the service of the weak and sick. However we must ensure that we can find sufficient strength in personnel and organisation to really pervade our works with this sense of meaning.

In No. 49 of his Letter “Novo Millennio Ineunte”, the Holy Father forcefully reminds us of one of the central biblical fundamentals of the Charisma of our Order in Mt 25,35-36: “*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me*”. And he continues: “This Gospel text is not a simple invitation to charity: it is a page of Christology which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ. By these words, no less than by the orthodoxy of her doctrine, the Church measures her fidelity as the Bride of Christ.”

For this reason, the Holy Father hopes that the new century and millennium will see, to an even greater extent than before, the degree of devotion of which love of the poorest is capable. We hope and pray that the members and helpers of our Order may also be among the witnesses to this.

Albrecht Freiherr von Boeselager

VI

THE EVANGELIC REQUIREMENTS OF THE “OBSEQUIUM PAUPERUM”

(Translated from Italian)

Modern society, unhappily proud of its laicism, refuses to be guided by religious and moral values and every day urges valid solutions and options.

So the mission of today's' Knights and Dames may be regarded as a “full range” mission of testimony and support.

The sword militant is replaced by the zeal and protection of Faith, intended as the stone on which every existence is grounded.

In the prevailing uncertainty of our present days, to recognize the Lord as the Primeval Good and the Ultimate End of the Creation is already a way to give a meaning to the path followed by humankind.

Obsequium Pauperum in its diverse expressions stems from the love and peace of this premise to life.

Man does not hunger for the food he is missing: he also starves for advice, courtesy, company, listening, consolation, sharing of options and times, prayers.

Belonging to the Order is never something to boast about for a Knight or Dame – it is the awareness of a special gift: the call to live closer to the Gospel's Beatitudes.

The Gospel's invitation to love pushes us towards people in different conditions: the ill, the elderly, the marginalized, the refugees, those who are neglected and lonely become our dear travel companions full of humanity.

Knights or Dames do not merely approach them spiritually, but live “strongly” together with them, certain that there may be no happiness unless it is shared.

And in their prayers they raise a choral praise to the Lord and invoke the Consoler Holy Spirit to guide, heal and enlighten human existence.

Obsequium Pauperum must therefore be experienced within the Order by example. The example given by the Blessed Gerard, Founder of the Order, when he soothed the plagues of pilgrims in the Holy Land, or by Mother Theresa of Calcutta, when she carried over her fragile

shoulders the dying, forlorn people along the streets of India. The example given every day by the Professed Knights of the Order when they pray for the poor and the sick in the silence of their rooms. The example given in these very days in Afghanistan, Congo or Iraq, where so many volunteers under the flags of the Order are helping entire populations at a loose, translating into their action the words of the Constitutional Charter: “The Order affirms and propagates the Christian virtues of charity and brotherhood. The Order carries out its charitable works for the sick, the needy and the refugees”.

And this mission is always in the mind and heart of those confreres and sisters of the Order that in the torn-apart territories of Palestine and Israel help many children to be born, there, in the Order’s Maternity Hospital of the Holy Family in Bethlehem.

Knight or Dame of the Order, look down in this very moment you will see plenty of hands stretching out. Take one, and help that creature to rise. Together you will reach Heaven.

Gian Luca Chiavari

VII

CARITATIS MYRICAE

(Translated from Italian)

Raids by Night and More

Christmas Eve: it is bitterly cold and those from my volunteer group who, like myself, have their heads uncovered are well aware of it. Every word – hardly any to tell the truth – is accompanied by a puff of white vapour. Words are quite unnecessary: human suffering is the protagonist.

Rome Central Station (underground): a curved and very old woman pushes – or pulls? – a sort of trolley loaded with parcels of rags: her precious belongings. Her fingernails, coloured deep red, stand out against hands that haven't been washed with soap for God knows how long. "It's the Countess", whispers a young volunteer and, against my wishes, tells her: "Countess, may I introduce the Grand Prior of Rome?" This is followed by a perfect curtsy and, in very good and friendly-sounding Italian: "How do you do Sir".

The woman accepts our gifts of hot milk, a shawl, a cap, a woollen blanket and a small Italian Christmas cake with elegant aloofness. Who could she possibly be? Our respect for her privacy restrains our curiosity.

Some metres away, another woman, also of a certain age, walks up and down, to and fro, relentlessly.... nervously. She holds a large plastic bag in each hand. I approach her, in an uncertain manner, and realise that the large plastic bags symmetrically placed along her sides are filled to the brim with smaller plastic ones – all neatly folded. I try to make conversation: “Merry Christmas, Signora! May I offer you some hot chocolate? I also have for you, a blanket, a shawl, a woollen skirt....”. She interrupts with the words: “.... can’t you see how many things I have already?.... don’t you understand that I need nothing?....” I try again: “.... but, Signora, it’s so cold, please take”. Her only reply, a decisive and prolonged “Good evening”, brings our meeting to a halt.

We go down the left subway. It is full of beggars and paupers. Some of them look at us blankly. Others emit a monotonous singsong and some simply lie on pieces of cardboard. The cold

gusts of wind make you shiver. We distribute what we have all around. We also offer words: of friendship, understanding, love. Few thank us but many shake our hands and a few embrace us.

A man of over fifty lies on the floor. I approach him, hopefully: “.... a Merry Christmas, Signore. Please allow me to offer you”, and I add: “.... some hot milk?....”. He looks at me, perplexed, and then says: “But what I would like is some sparkling wine”. And I, somewhat mortified, say: “I’m afraid I haven’t brought any!” He consoles me with the words: “.... oh, very well then. Just give me whatever you have”.

The events that took place on 11th September have, to a certain extent, even weighed upon our voluntary work in favour of those tramps and vagrants who wander by night and who, over recent years, have come to include a considerable number of representatives of the Islamic world.

With regard to this, my volunteers and I always bear in mind that most beautiful and relevant phrase of many years ago, pronounced by Dr. Schweitzer, the lay Apostle of Lambarené: “....

I care not about the colour of your skin, I am not interested in your religious creed, I don't mind your political convictions. I ask you only: what are you suffering from?"

And, to go on: on several occasions the little Italian Christmas cakes we usually offer have been declined by tramps professing the Islamic faith. Little did I know that lard (pig fat!) is unfortunately used in their preparation.

Late one night in November after the fateful 11th September, a night in which I was running a temperature and just hadn't the energy to go out myself, one of my volunteers who was wearing, like all my volunteers do, a red armband with the white eight-pointed cross on his left arm, was roughly, even aggressively, addressed by a Muslim tramp: "... that cross you wear on your arm offends me Remove it, then I can accept your hot milk....". My volunteer promptly answered: "... if you wish I can remove that cross from on my arm, in any case I carry it engraved upon my heart....".

The armband, of course, was not removed. A moment of uncertainty followed. Then my volunteer and the Muslim embraced one another.

Christmas luncheon was offered by us on 26th December that year.

Several tables decorated with red tablecloths fill the side aisles of the Grillo Palatine Chapel in Rome: 180 tramps, our brothers, take their places at the tables. Instead of place cards, each place is distinguished by a little useful gift. Some dames, some confreres, a large number of volunteers, our dear Monsignor and I serve the meal.

Oven baked pasta, meat (strictly veal), vegetables, pudding, coffee and mineral water.

Towards the end, a long and haunting song of thanksgiving and of praise to the Lord is raised from three tables occupied by Georgians.

One of our volunteers, gifted with a most beautiful voice, sings Neapolitan songs accompanied by recorded background music.

It is February and the cold together with the strong North winds are no laughing matter. The long night “round”, along the Roman Tuscolana road and thereabouts, has proved most exhausting for one amongst us, far from young in age and

afflicted with severe arthrosis of the knees. Even my young volunteers are somewhat tried. We cannot bear it any longer. Without anyone seeing us, the dear Priest, who for years has followed and encouraged me, and I hide, worn out. We sit on the ground behind a low wall. We become invisible and listen. We hear that the others are looking for us but we want to be on our own, to reflect, just a little bit longer. We hear that the others are beginning to worry about us, not having seen us any more. We listen carefully and hear a sentence that sounds like music to our ears when a very young volunteer tells another: “.... you know, I feel dead tired but tonight I feel better than when in a disco....”.

Praise be to You, my Lord: we do not, therefore, live in vain!

Rome: a December hunt by night

It is Friday, 9.30 p.m. The month is January and if it were not so commonplace to say so in these circumstances, I would add that it is simply “filthy weather”. The point is that we’re getting ice-cold rain: it’s incessant, and raining hard, and the wind is trying its utmost to slap our faces strongly.

There are around thirty of us volunteers, young and not so young, and we're going hunting. A rather special hunt, to tell the truth: we want to find and to help those who live on the street, our less fortunate brothers, the tramps. It's raining. It's still raining: the sky is leaden and the air is freezing.

Scalo San Lorenzo: sheltered, as it were, by an unsafe cardboard canopy wet through. Here's a group: all are from extra-EU countries. One of them, who looks more or less forty years old, groans feebly. A filthy bandage does nothing to hide the swelling on his left calf. Andrea, our young volunteer, is a physician or rather, a surgeon. He looks at me with a grave expression on his face and sets to work: after cleaning the skin on the lower limb, he removes a stinking large black crust from the cut - and a bad cut it is - and disinfects the wound carefully. He then administers a penicillin injection and bandages it up and will be returning the day after to check on the progress. Our brother who has just undergone treatment says nothing: his unspoken smile is, however, full of light and an expression of thanks. He enjoys the bowl of hot soup we offer him. I ask him over and over again why he didn't go to Casualty Department. His face darkens and he shakes his head in refusal. It dawns

on me that the fear of being expelled from Italy is an absolute deterrent from doing something like that.

We move from one group to another offering hot food: coffee with milk, hot chocolate, tea, vegetable soup as well as blankets, more blankets and even more blankets.

Under the arcades around Piazza Vittorio lies another sixty-year-old man (is that really his age?), crouching and cuddling up, so to speak, under a light piece of cloth of an undefined colour. I quickly cover him up with one of our soft woolen blankets and out of his eyes, which remain closed, slowly roll two large teardrops down his face.

And at 10.30 p.m., in that dark corner under the arcades around Piazza Vittorio while it is still raining hard, why ever does the sun suddenly shine for us humble itinerants?

Eighty children at Santa Maria del Priorato

Instigated by two of my dames, unrestrained and indefatigable in their works of charity, I invited around eighty children, normally assisted by our Roman Centro di Assistenza del Laurentino 38, to the villa at the Santa Maria del Priorato complex.

The Laurentino 38 district is notoriously ill-famed: every home is a microtheatre of misery, a story of sadness, degradation, distress. Distress.

These very young guests of mine all come from “difficult” families.

For them we have prepared, with much love, bread rolls – delicious ones – and cold drinks.

The first meeting with them, however, is in the cool and white Piranesi church which, on this glorious sunny morning (11 o'clock on a very hot 26th June) is filled with spear-like rays of light. The whole is of the brightest possible shade of white. The young are all “sitting”, or should I say “squatting”?, on the red fitted-carpet, since the benches have been removed after the celebrations, for the members of the Diplomatic Corps, in honour of the feast of St. John the Baptist. The carpet is now covered with the inquisitive faces of young children. The buzzing sound they make reminds one of the chirping of birds. We distribute amongst them specially-made caps which carry the white eight-pointed cross on the peak and, as always, a novelty proves to be a sure success. Many questions and much laughter can now be heard.

Questions as if in a quiz-programme, not so much on the history of the Order as on its meaning in the world of today.

Suddenly, a very thin little boy, aged about five or six, springs up. I am later told he is seven and a half years old, but being so undernourished he looks younger than he really is. He pulls at one of my sleeves, demanding and getting the attention he desires. He shows me the muscles (sic) of his slender arm and tells me with an authoritative yet imploring tone: “Why don’t you make me one of your knights? I’m young and I can defend you....”.

We “listen to” the deep silence which has fallen all around: is it the hurried beating of our heart?

Fra’ Franz von Lobstein

VIII

ENCOUNTER IN THE NORTH EAST OF BRAZIL

(Translated from Italian)

Leprosy. Pronouncing this word produces in the majority of people a sensation of disgust and repulsion. In spite of that, Hansen's disease – this is the scientific name – is an illness that is easy to cure and heal at very low costs. Its increasing spread in the developing countries is due most of all to serious lack of hygiene, ignorance and the well-rooted and ancestral prejudices linked to this of pathology. The patient is a prey to fear and to an instinctive guilt complex that leads him into isolation, while the relatives are pervaded by a sense of shame that prevents them from informing the health authorities of the disease.

When I am standing before a patient, I think of Jesus, who healed the lepers just by touching them – that Jesus, who knew the human soul so well (and especially the soul of the lepers, the outcasts, the isolated or damned people, who knew how much this kind of patients needed

understanding, friendship, and physical contact with other human beings. He could have healed them also from a distance, but by “touching” them, he showed them how much he loved them for the very reason of their misery: those who nobody wanted to see or meet.

I remember a little episode that happened to me at the beginning of my aid activity in Northeastern Brazil. I was visiting the parish priest of Jaicós, a little town about 50 km from Picos in the state of Piauí. They had spoken to me of a sick man, who was supposed to have contracted leprosy, but he very seldom went around and therefore only very few people had met or got acquainted to him. I found out where he lived – just behind the house of his wife and children – and saw a shanty built with dried mud and covered with straw. Two pieces of wood served as a door, and there were no windows. I approached the shanty and shouted: “Adao, are you home?”. In the half-light I saw a figure hiding behind some rags hanging on a rope. A voice answered: “Don’t enter, you can’t enter! I’m sick”. I tried to calm him down and said: “You mustn’t be afraid. I’m not afraid of you, and you needn’t be afraid of me. I know what

disease you have, and there's no danger. Come show yourself'.

He overcame his fear, caused by my unexpected visit, and came out of the shanty. He had neither fingers nor toes. The external signs of leprosy – which had reached and advanced stage – were all too evident. We began to talk after he'd made me enter the hut, which resembled more a poultry pen than the house of a human being, and then he told me his story. I convinced him to see a doctor. He took off his few rags, and I could see how the disease had changed the skin on his body: It was fully of pustules, patches and erythemas. I asked him if he felt pain when I squeezed his skin with my fingers. We had a conversations on various subjects for about half an hour, and I promised him that I would be back. I also gave him a few cruzeiros, so he could buy himself something to eat, since his families would give only give him some rice two or three times a week. Then I wanted to leave, but at that point he began to cry. So I tried to comfort him, saying that the worst was over, that he'd receive medicines and that he had found a friend to assist him. He told me: "You know why I am crying? Because I have been ill for twenty-five

years, and this is the first time anybody has ever touched me”.

Now it is on this front that we are fighting the hardest battle. We are working to eradicate many sorts of prejudices and to overcome the fear and shame clutching the sick and their families, in order to create a new kind of mentality. This will allow to discover any new cases more easily and early, so that the further spread of a plague, which may be defeated by modern science, may be avoided.

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