



ORDER OF MALTA[®]
FEDERAL ASSOCIATION, U.S.A.

Defense of the Faith in the Contemporary World: A Reflection

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The two great charisms of the Order are Defense of the Faith and Service to the Sick and the Poor—*tuitio fidei* and *obsequium pauperum*. Daily, we are reminded of these ideals in the Prayer of the Order: “Be it mine to practice and defend the catholic, the apostolic, the Roman faith against sacrilege” and “Be it mine to practice charity toward my neighbor, especially the poor and the sick.”

The word “sacrilege,” like many words, has connotations beyond its usual meaning. As Fra’ James-Michael von Stroebel observes: “[T]he normal ‘everyday’ meaning of that word appears inadequate to convey the deep and full intention of the Latin form of the prayer.” *An Explanation of the Revisions of the Daily Prayer of the Order*, June 2019. The Latin version of the defense of faith part of the Prayer is: *Religionem catholicam, apostolicam, Romanam firmiter colam ac adversus impietatem strenue defendam*. In his Explanation, Fra’ James-Michael notes that this sentence “could be translated in a wide variety of ways.” Another translation could be: I shall devote myself completely to the Catholic, apostolic, Roman religion and defend it vigorously against all harm. As Fra’ James-Michael points out, the true meaning of “sacrilege” is “very serious and very encompassing. It covers any violation or harm or intended violation or harm by act or withholding of act or by word toward anyone or anything sacred or held sacred.”

In addition to the Daily Prayer of the Order, each Knight and Dame at his or her investiture promises to “always bear witness to the Catholic faith, to defend the Church, and to lead my life in accordance with the teachings of Holy Mother Church.”

Although they are different, there is a radical unity between the two charisms. Our service to the poor and sick is a visible expression of our faith and therefore is defending the faith. Defending the faith is also more than this, however. According to the newly promulgated Code of the Order, defending the faith includes that “the members of the Order, recognizing the image of God in every individual, are especially called upon to become involved in those situations where human life is threatened in its God given essence and dignity” (Code, Section V, 2). Defending the faith helps others understand how actions of members of the Order are informed by and grounded in our Catholic faith.

The Order is both a military and a hospitaller Order. However in the Christian sense “military” reflects protection, not offensive actions or words. Our activities in devoting ourselves to the faith and defending it must be nonviolent and must be characterized by fidelity to the teachings of the Church, in obedience to the leadership of the Order, and, in keeping with the traditions of the Order, they must be characterized by nobility and chivalry. Our witness must be strong and clear, unselfish and dignified. We are to take our duty seriously and fulfill it joyfully. We must always recall that we are serving and protecting the weak, the voiceless and the suffering. The defense of the faith must be carried out in a spirit of joyful evangelization, not argumentation, rule citing, or proselytization.

How then do members of the Order defend the faith in contemporary times in a practical way? First, we defend it through public witness. Each member of the Order must be ready at all times and in all places to publicly, unhesitatingly, and unapologetically live every facet of life consistent with the principles and doctrines of the Roman Catholic faith. Second, we defend the faith through intellectual engagement. Intellectual engagement helps us to recognize the many challenges to the faith in contemporary society. It helps us to analyze them and to formulate responses, both intellectual and practical, that are consistent with our vocation. In order to do this, members of the Order must have knowledge of the faith and the traditions of the Order. Knowledge of the faith begins with knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, and it extends to knowledge of the teachings of the Church. But we must not only *know* the faith, we must also *understand* its scriptural and rational underpinnings. In addition, we must be aware of contemporary trends, and, armed with knowledge and understanding (as well as spiritual grounding), we must discern those that pose threats to the Church and to the inherent dignity of every human person. Finally, exercising the virtue of prudence, we must identify the best way to combat trends that are evil. Sometimes it may be more effective to educate and persuade; sometimes action may be required, including exercising our rights as citizens. But, again, all action must be consistent with our vocation as members of the Order.

The Federal Association has established a Defense of Faith Committee. The mission of the Committee is to help members explain, defend, and charitably evangelize on behalf of our Order and the Church. Therefore education on matters such as, for example, the Real Presence in the Eucharist, is done not by simply citing rules and holdings of our Church's Magisterium but by a joyful and spiritual approach to how we as members of the Order can both understand and explain the rich teachings of Scripture and Tradition. Our Association also strongly encourages defense of faith committees in our Regions.

There are many challenges to the Gospel as embodied in the teachings of the Church. Many come from outside the Church but some also come from inside the Church. Determining how and when to act must include being mindful of how this charism contributes to the Order's purpose of leading members to sanctification. Members of the Order should be faithful to all of the teachings of Scripture and Tradition of the Church and be willing and able to engage in *tuitio fidei*. Our spirituality, and hence our hope for sanctification, means we should take both of our Order's charisms seriously and carry them out in the chivalrous and joyful sense our Lord hopes for us.