

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

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St John the Baptist Guide and Witness



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INTRODUCTION

“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist” (Mt 11.11). Jesus’ supreme acclaim illuminates our Order’s choice to take the Baptist as its Patron Saint. The hospitaller religious institution, that is the monastic community founded in Jerusalem by the Blessed Gerard, was called the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. Our Order has kept this name adding to it, after historic vicissitudes, of Rhodes and of Malta. Its official feastday is celebrated on 24 June, the nativity of St. John the Baptist.

We thought it appropriate to dedicate one issue of our “Journal of Spirituality” to St. John. It is not a historical or theological treatise, but it aims simply to illustrate the figure of the Baptist as found in the Holy Texts, providing elements of reflection for the members of the Order.

The suggestions offered by the interconnected themes leave room for a personal encounter with the luminous lessons of life coming from our Order’s Patron Saint.

In the Prayer of the Faithful of our Missal an invocation is found that may be applied to all members of the Order of Malta: “That they may be filled, like St John the Baptist, with constancy, strength and zeal, that they may be witnesses to your saving presence in the world and serve you faithfully and beyond reproach”.

Archibishop Angelo Acerbi

St. John the Baptist
Patron of the Sovereign Order of Malta

(Translated from the Italian)

Since our Sovereign Order took the name of St. John the Baptist at its very outset and nominated him as its Patron Saint, I think that every member of the Order, Knight and Dame, would be interested in learning more about his life and the unique role he was called on to play in the history of salvation.

John is the only saint, besides Mary, Mother of Our Lord, for whom the Church celebrates the date of his birth within this material world (24 June) and the date of his call to the glory of the Saints in Heaven through martyrdom (29 August).

Precursor of Christ, he was born to the world six months before Him. His birth is described by St. Luke the evangelist at the beginning of his gospel. He was born in a village some seven kilometres from Jerusalem, today identified as Ain Karin. His parents, already advanced in years, had given up hoping for a child. The Angel Gabriel appeared to his father Zechariah, a priest, while he was burning incense

inside the temple and announced that Elizabeth would bear him a son. Zechariah was not only surprised but also incredulous and, as punishment, he was struck dumb until the child was born.

When Elizabeth was in her sixth month her young cousin, the Virgin Mary, newly pregnant and betrothed to Joseph, of the house of David, arrived from distant Nazareth after travelling for several days. Entering the house of Elizabeth, she is greeted with these words: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord!" (Lk 1.42-45).

St. Luke then recounts the birth of the child, the decision to name him John on his eighth day and the return of speech to his father Zechariah who, with tongue loosed and full of the Holy Spirit, prophesied: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and he has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David..."; then turning to the newborn baby he exclaims: "and you, child, will be called the

prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins”.

John’s mission began after he came of age in the “wilderness” to where he had withdrawn. Descriptions of his food, clothes and habits create an image of a young, austere and rigorous penitent. "Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair, and a leather girdle around his waist,” as St. Matthew the evangelist tells us, “and his food was locusts and wild honey" (Mt 3.4).

Normally the Precursor stopped to preach on the banks of a river and this is why the Synoptics speak explicitly of the river Jordan. St. John the evangelist, who was among the Baptist’s disciples, together with Andrew, brother of Simon Peter, mentions other places such as Enon, near Salim and "beyond the Jordan”, where there were springs of water. "Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mt 3.5).

His preaching was strong and direct like that of the prophets, summed up in a simple phrase: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt

3.1-2). The Precursor directed everything to this kingdom. His general exhortation was charity: "and the multitudes asked him, "What then, shall we do"? And he answered them, "He who has two coats, let him share with he who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise" (Lk 3.10-11). He also gave practical advice to individual groups: to the tax collectors he recommended justice; to the soldiers, not to do violence and the exact fulfilment of their duties. And he had fierce words against the Pharisees: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'we have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham".

An external sign of inner purification is washing with water; the Precursor also claimed that the Messiah, "he who is coming", would effect a permanent revolution in souls, because he will not give only an external and transient washing but "he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire, his winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary" (Lk 3.17).

His humility and consciousness of being only "the one who goes before and prepares the way" is stressed on the day in which John, while he was baptising in Bethany beyond the Jordan, "saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me'" (Jn 1.29).

From that moment he is destined to disappear, to give way to "he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie" (Lk 3.16); the group of disciples who had gathered around him – including Andrew, brother of Simon Peter and the young John, son of Zebedee – begin to scatter. When Jesus starts out on his public life, the Precursor raises his voice to condemn the tetrarch Herod "because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done" (Lk 3.19): he is put into prison for this.

While in prison, John receives the highest tribute from Jesus. Addressing the crowds, Jesus proclaims: "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man clothed in

soft raiment? Behold, those who are gorgeously appavelled and live in luxury are in kings' courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee.' I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than he."(Lk 7.24-29).

At Herodias' macabre request, king Herod Antipas has John beheaded during a frivolous feast during which, Salome, daughter of the adulterous queen, had given a dance to the consternation of the king and his guests. Mark the evangelist recounts that John's disciples, "came, and took his body, and laid it in a tomb".

Cardinal Pio Laghi

Vocation and formation

VOCATION

One thing that is quite clear about St John the Baptist is that his vocation made him into a public and easily recognizable figure. He came from a priestly family, dedicated to the service of the temple in Jerusalem, but he left all that to go to the desert. The gospels tell us that he was such an extraordinary figure and his message was so arresting that crowds from Jerusalem and Judea made their way to him. They did so by leaving the westward-facing, moist, pleasant part of Palestine, between Jerusalem and the Mediterranean, and going down through the hot, desolate, arid, dusty region that leads from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea. When they got there, they found an ascetic, living on what the desert had to offer, locusts and wild honey, and clad in what he could tie round his waist, a camel-skin. So, although the details of the time and place of John's actual calling are not mentioned in the gospels, we do know how challenging his message was. The crowds were baptized and confessed their sins. John told them how they should amend their lives: *"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance ...any tree*

failing to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire ... anyone who has two tunics must share with the one who has none ... No intimidation! No extortion!"

THE DIPPER

John the Baptist takes his name from what he invented – baptism. In Greek, the root word for “baptize”, *baptō*, means to dip something into water. Baptism is not washing; it is dipping, like plunging into a river and coming out again. Although there are examples of immersion rituals, symbolising washing or purification or renewal, both in other religions and in Judaism itself, baptism is different.

Why did John baptize in the Jordan? Because there is something about it, which recalls the passage of the people of Israel over the Jordan at their entry into the Promised Land. That crossing was definitive. Once the people of Israel had crossed the Jordan, they were inside Palestine. Baptism takes place only once, just as entry into the Promised Land took place once only.

The message of John, as well as demanding a conversion, also announced the coming of a world-shaking event, the coming of the kingdom of God, a kingdom that is not of this world. It was thus also a preparation for what will also happen only once, the

coming of the Messiah, who is to establish that kingdom and who is described in the words of the ancient prophet: *“Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight.”*(Isaiah 40, 3).

All those allusions to the history of the chosen people, the treasures of prophecy, the genius of John the Baptist himself, expressing his message by powerful words and by the dramatic plunging of sinners into the Jordan, they are contained in the wonderful sacrament of baptism. It is significant that the ceremony of baptism in the Catholic Ritual recalls the River Jordan by the way it is done, because those being baptized are not sprinkled with water, but the water is poured upon them like a flowing stream.

BECOMING A MEMBER OF THE ORDER

Becoming a member of the Order of Malta gives the opportunity for discovering our own vocation. Perhaps at the time when we were admitted into the Order, it seemed like something accidental, something brought about by the casual remark of a friend; or perhaps it was due to a family tradition, or to an interest in the Crusades. But whatever the circumstances, we should see being admitted into the Order of Malta as a call from God.

God sometimes uses what seems casual to us as a way of bringing about his designs, as when Saul went to look for the lost donkeys of his father and returned home, having been anointed King of Israel (I Samuel, chapters 9 and 10).

Being called by God demands a serious response from us. It needs a response to God, as creator and redeemer. God does not call idly, as into a void. God's call is creative. It indicates what God wants us to become.

BLESSED ANNE

To ignore a call from God would be a rejection of his designs, which would be awesome. We should look at our membership of the Order of Malta in the same way. There can something awesome about being faced with one's vocation. We might feel inadequate, but, if we do, we should take comfort from Blessed Anne of San Bartolome. She was a lay sister at the Carmel of St Joseph in Avila, who was very close to St Teresa, acted as her secretary and attended to her on her deathbed. After St Teresa's death, Sister Ana was sent with other Spanish sisters to France to found houses of the reformed Carmelites there. Because Sister Ana had known St Teresa so well and because everyone

wanted to hear about her, Sister Ana became well known and was appointed prioress, which very much distressed her. The prospect of having a position of authority over her sisters made her conscious of her peasant background and she was appalled at the thought of having to govern sisters from noble or wealthy families. Sister Ana turned to God in prayer and pleaded with him not to allow this to happen, saying that she was only a wisp of straw. The Lord said to her “It is with straws that I light my fire.” (1)

The important thing for us to do is to respond to our call, even though we are conscious of inadequacy. God wants willing inadequates, who rely on him to achieve his plans. To put our trust in him is to rely on the source of real strength, the inner strength that comes from God.

As members of the Order of Malta, we have the privilege of being called to make a retreat every year. A retreat should be a time of reflection, a time when we face the question: “What does God want me to do as a member of the Order? What are the practical possibilities of such a vocation in today’s world? What is practical for me, in view of my other commitments, to my family and to my profession?”

FORMATION

For a Christian, becoming conscious of a vocation leads to something else; it leads to the conversion of our life style. But we need not panic. I guess that our change of life style will not be nearly as remarkable as John the Baptist's was. In order to understand what is required of us, we have to reflect on the meaning of an important word: "formation".

There is however something difficult about trying to reflect on that word. Surprising though it may be, it has a totally different meaning in current English from the meaning it has in Catholic spiritual writings. In normal English parlance, and I quote from the *Oxford English Dictionary 1989*, formation refers to putting things together in a material way. The formal structure of things is referred to as their *formation*. Thus the structure of fibres in a sheet of paper is called their *formation*. If botanists come across a group of plants, which have adapted themselves to similar climatic conditions, they speak of the *formation* of a particular species. In military terms, the disposition of soldiers is a *formation*, a flight of aircraft is in a particular *formation*. There is no example in the dictionary of any reference to a religious use of the term.

In Catholic writing on spirituality, however, formation refers to an important aspect of spiritual development. It is a reflection on the secular nature of English culture that no aspect of a use that is common in French, Italian and Spanish has been noted in our main English dictionary, although it does occur in writings by Catholic writers in Britain and in America. In fact such a meaning is consciously prevented from seeping into current English; a student told me that he had used the word with its religious meaning in an essay, and that his tutor had corrected him by writing “*not this word*” in the margin.

FORMATION & EDUCATION

The starting point in understanding the Catholic meaning of formation is training or education. We know that in life, skills, information and behaviour have to be learnt. Our human way of doing things is to have things explained to us, to learn them, practice them, and also to transmit them. This is a normal though complex process on which civilisation is based. Learning does not only involve our own mind; it needs to be helped by the minds of others - parents, siblings, teachers, superiors etc.

FORMATION & GOD'S INDWELLING

Formation is deeper than education and it therefore requires a special word to describe it. The reason why formation is deeper than education is that it is about the activity within the human learning process of a mind that can have direct access to human activity, i.e. the mind of God. For Christians this is an idea that is brought to us by the Bible, where we read of God dwelling in those who love him (2) and the Spirit of God guiding believers (3). We are talking here of the act of faith. As a human activity, it is free, so that man is able to call it his own but is also free to refuse it. It is his response to a message that is proclaimed by witnesses, witnesses who are guided and guaranteed by God, i.e. the apostles and their successors, the bishops of the Catholic Church. As an activity that comes to us from God, faith gives us insights into a reality that we would not have without his activity in us; we call that grace. As such, it gives to faith a certainty that explains why Christians are willing, in some circumstances, to lay down their lives for what they believe.

The importance of education in helping our understanding of the faith to grow and develop is

obvious. It is the starting point for understanding what we call the mysteries of our faith i.e. the Incarnation, the Redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, eternal life, the Trinity of God and his Oneness and so on. These mysteries make it possible for us to make sense of this present life in a way that nothing else can. That is why the present effort of the Church to produce an effective catechesis is so timely. In a society where community structures supporting the Church often seem to be failing, the response of the Christian to God through a personal faith is very important

Education should lead to a deepened spirituality. We are lucky in the Order of Malta to be able to benefit every year from retreats and days of recollection that are arranged especially for us; in the process that leads from education to formation, they have an important part to play. A retreat is a time for assessing where we are in our spiritual life and for remembering how closely we are joined to Our Lord Jesus Christ. Do we think enough of the wonder of having a redeemer who is both God and Man, so that the Eucharist can be at the centre of our spiritual life while we are on earth?

EDUCATION & SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Since our spirituality is a growing process, it needs guidance, especially at its early stages. That is why choosing a spiritual guide goes back a long way in the history of the Church. The monks who went to live in the Egyptian desert in the 4th century used to find a hermit who could give them advice on the life of prayer that they had chosen; thus a spiritual director became a part of formation for monks and nuns. In the 16th century, the success of St Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* meant that many lay people made the *Exercises* too and some chose a spiritual director as well. Spiritual direction thus came to be seen throughout the Church as a part of formation.

It is encouraging to find St Paul actually writing about "formation" (using the Greek root *morphe*, form or shape) when he describes the progress that he is trying to instil into his rather disappointing Galatian converts: "My children, I am going through the pain of giving birth to you, all over again, until Christ is formed in you," Gal. 4:19. The other comparisons that St Paul uses are *renewal* (4), *transformation* (5) and *being moulded to the pattern of God's son* (6). These are profound comparisons,

dependent upon the action of God himself on the first generations of Christians. It is no wonder that the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* blanched at introducing such notions into their dictionary; but perhaps they had never come across this English Catholic usage.

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Archbishop emeritus of Birmingham

REFERENCES

- (1) Butler's Lives of the Saints (Burns and Dates and The Liturgical Press Collegeville, Minnesota, 1997), June volume, pp.64-5.
- (2) "Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we shall come to him and make a home in him." John 14, 23. New Jerusalem Bible 1985 for these and other quotations.
- (3) "You live not by your natural inclinations, but by the spirit since the Spirit of God has made a home in you." Romans 8, 9.
- (4) "Do not model your behaviour on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you." Romans 12, 2.
- (5) "All of us ... are being transformed into the image that we reflect." 2 Corinthians 3, 18.
- (6) "God ... decided beforehand who were the ones destined to be moulded to the pattern of his Son." Romans 8, 29.

The preaching of John the Baptist and the ideals of the Order

The reasons why the first hospitallers placed themselves under the patronage of St. John the Baptist remain obscure and were rapidly enveloped in the mist of legend¹. It is said that the first hospitaller foundation was built on the site of the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth and that they themselves had established a first hospital there. I do not here want to enter into a critical analysis of this texts. But although I think that the mediaeval accounts of Zechariah, Elizabeth and the infant John “serving God in the hospital of the poor” in Jerusalem have no historical basis, they do show the hospitallers’ desire to link their new activity to the figure of the Precursor.

The knights had a great devotion for St. John the Baptist, invoked in the formula of the vows². Most of the Order’s churches were dedicated to him and

¹ On these marvelous origins and the *Miracula*, see A.

Beltjens, *Aux origines de l’Ordre de Malte*, Brussels 1995, ch. II

² *Moy N. je jure et promets et fais vœu à Dieu Tout-Puissant et à la Glorieuse Vierge Marie et Monsieur Saint Jean Baptiste mon patron ... Cf. La forme de donner l’habit aux chevaliers de l’Ordre de S. Jean de Hierusalem*, Paris 1654, p.172.

even the professed knights' cloak was “*like the garment made of camel's hair that our patron saint John the Baptist wore in the desert*”³. The Valletta museum has a painting by Mattia Preti (1613-1699) in which St. John the Baptist is wearing the knights' red “soubreveste” (tunic) with a white cross⁴. The first page of the French missal reproduces a fine early XVIth-century picture on wood, coming from Rhodes and kept in Apt, showing a knight kneeling at the foot of the Precursor and the coat-of-arms of Grand Master de l'Isle-Adam (1521-1534). The inscription reads: ***In te sperantes dirige, adjuva et protege, precursor Xti sanctissime*** (*Blessed Precursor of Christ, help, protect and lead those who hope in you*).

If we pass from legend to the texts of the gospels, we can find many indications which enable us, like the knights of old, to link our activities and our way of living the Order's charisma to the spiritual figure of St. John the Baptist. We can transpose an expression from the Consecration of the Order of Malta to the Blessed Virgin, which we hear every year in the pilgrimage to Lourdes, and which requires us

³ *La manière de donner l'habit ... p.172.*

⁴ Reproduction in the catalogue of the exhibition *L'Ordre de Malte autour du Grand Maître Frà Jean-Paul Lascaris*, Nice, 2000, p. 91.

to be “steadfast in our faith and effective in our works”⁵. Equally, we can say that St. John the Baptist, prophet, preacher and martyr for truth, encourages us to put into practice the two aspects of the Order’s charisma that he has consecrated: effectiveness in charitable works and steadfastness in the confession of the faith.

THE PREACHING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST, APPEAL FOR AN EFFECTIVE CHARITY

The gospels according to St. Matthew and St. Luke give us details of John the Baptist’s preaching on the banks of the Jordan⁶:

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come for baptism, he said to them: ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘we have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Mt 3.7-10)

⁵ *Missel ...de l’Ordre de Malte*, typical Francophone edition, Paris 2002, p. 514

⁶ Matthew 3.7-10; Luke 3. 7-9

This preaching is striking in its extremely direct and concrete character. His listeners could not hide behind their role as the chosen people: “*Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘we have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham*”. What is asked of them is a conversion translated into practical behaviour, so as to produce real “*fruits befitting repentance*”. Similarly, some of us are not satisfied with just a formal membership of the Order of Malta, but feel the need for practical actions based on this membership. This is the Baptist’s first lesson to us! Although St. Matthew’s gospel tells us that the Pharisees and Sadducees turned their backs on John’s exhortation, St. Luke recounts that other groups of listeners were more receptive:

“The multitudes asked him, ‘What then, shall we do?’ And he [John the Baptist] answered them, ‘He who has two coats, let him share with he who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise’. Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ and He said to them, ‘Collect no more than is appointed you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages’” (Lk 3.10-14).

These words are very clear about the simple but concrete behaviour that God expects from us to “*prepare His way*”. John the Baptist talks to his followers about their everyday actions, the realities of their lives as soldiers or as tax collectors. Because this is where conversion is to be sought and not in extraordinary or imaginary activities. What God asks from each of us is that, first of all, we perform our jobs to the best of our abilities – we would call it the duty of our state of life. It is tempting to compare this text with the teaching of Vatican Council II. The Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, in the chapter on the lay apostolate, states that they seek to live the Christian way of life and its sanctification by work and practical activities:

“But the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way

they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity”⁷.

In the same way, the Order’s texts stress how important it is for every member to put the duty of their state of life alongside their duty to the family and to their work. The Constitutional Charter, in article 9, recalls that members must “*conduct their lives in an exemplary manner in conformity with the teachings and precepts of the Church*”. The Chapter General of 1969 explained these words in its *Regulations and Commentary*⁸ referring precisely to Vatican Council II. *Le Directoire de vie*⁹ in turn takes up the themes of the Conciliar Constitution *Lumen Gentium* to stress that devotion to daily life is required of all the Order’s members, a devotion that is both a personal way of sanctification and the first step of the apostolate. This could seem elementary, but we still need to be constantly reminded of it. John the Baptist’s listeners perhaps expected the prophet to answer their question: “What then shall we do?” by proposing difficult

⁷ Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, n°31.

⁸ Regulations and Commentary, Rome, 1969: Spiritual Guidelines for all the Members of the Order.

⁹ Rome 1993

actions or extraordinary repentance; but he simply refers them back to their daily life - the tax collector is referred back to his financial accounts and the soldier is referred back to his military service.

In John the Baptist's answer there is also an element which should have a strong echo for all members of the Order of Malta: the first requirement of conversion is to share with those who are in need:

“He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise” (Lk 3.11).

Our membership in the Order should make us even more aware of this dimension and the fact that it concerns a fundamental element of all Christian life, over and above the Order's traditions. To echo the preaching of John the Baptist, we can always turn to the texts of Vatican Council II. In the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, we find that, even forty years after their publication, the following words have never lost their pertinence:

“This Council lays stress on reverence for man; everyone must consider his every neighbour without exception as another self, taking into account first of all His life and the means

necessary to living it with dignity, so as not to imitate the rich man who had no concern for the poor man Lazarus.

In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbour of every person without exception, and of actively helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign labourer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of an unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by recalling the voice of the Lord, ‘As long as you did it for one of these the least of my brethren, you did it for me’”¹⁰.

The preaching of John the Baptist, like the Council text, gives us a better idea of the central place occupied by active charity in our personal life as well as in the Church’s life and mission. To link this with the Order’s basic texts, we should also recall the beautiful passage in the Regulations and Commentary that invites the Order’s members to be “outposts” of charity¹¹:

“The history of the Order teaches us to be the outposts of the church and to place ourselves on the borderline beyond which the Church is in danger of being attacked by a hostile world.

¹⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, n° 27

¹¹ Regulations and Commentary, Rome 1969, Pledge and Commitments of the Knights of Obedience.

Throughout the centuries we have fought with the weapons that were at the time most adequate. At present, we use the most modern scientific means to help the sick as well as those who are in danger, and especially where the danger is greatest ...the poorest leper in a distant jungle, as well as anyone who suffers and does not know Christ or denies Him, is our neighbour."

For the members of the Order who want to meditate on them, these lines in which we can hear an echo of John the Baptist's preaching are very valuable: they nourish our ideal of an "active spirituality" made up of faithfulness to daily duty and willingness to serve the poorest.

JOHN THE BAPTIST, REVEALER OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE

There is another aspect of John the Baptist's message that concerns the Order's second basic tenet, that of the defence, or illustration, of the faith. There is, as we know, a direct line from one to the other: the highest deed of active charity is to lead those who do not know Him to Christ. The *Regulations and Commentary* emphasize this and put it on the same level as "*the assistance to the poor and the apostolate among those who are away from Christ*". To accomplish this specific duty towards "those

seeking the light of truth”¹², we can again be inspired by what the gospels tell us of John the Baptist’s preaching.

The most interesting passage for us is at the beginning of St. John’s gospel:

“And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ he confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’ And they asked him, ‘What then, are you Elijah?’ he said, ‘I am not,’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ - And he answered: ‘No.’ They said to him then, ‘Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ - He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.’ They asked him, ‘Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’ John answered them, ‘I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.’” (Jn 1.19-27)

These words are of great interest for us because they sum up John the Baptist’s mission. He is not the Christ, the promised Messiah, and he does not seek to be mistaken for Him: he is just “a

¹² Id.

voice' who makes way for Him who is the Word of God; nothing but a finger pointing to the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world (cf. Jn 1, 29). Saint Augustine, in a sermon for the nativity of St. John the Baptist, stresses this contrast:

“John is the voice, but the Lord is *the Word who was in the beginning*. John is the voice that lasts for a time; from the beginning Christ is the Word who lives for ever...

However, let us observe what happens when we first seek to build up our hearts... when I think about what I am going to say, the word or message is already in my heart. When I want to speak to you, I look for a way to share with your heart what is already in mine.

In my search for a way to let this message reach you, so that the word already in my heart may find place also in yours, I use my voice to speak to you. The sound of my voice brings the meaning of the word to you [...]

Because it is hard to distinguish word from voice, even John himself was thought to be the Christ. The voice was thought to be the word. But the voice acknowledged what it was, anxious not to give offense to the word. *I am not the Christ, he said, nor Elijah, nor the prophet*. And the question came:

Who are you, then? He replied: *I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord.* The voice of one crying in the wilderness is the voice of one breaking the silence. Prepare the way for the Lord, he says, as though he were saying: I speak out in order to lead him into your hearts, but he does not choose to come where I lead him unless you prepare the way for him”¹³.

Very precious remarks indeed! Every messenger is tempted to identify with the message that he or she has to transmit. We must not preach about ourselves, nor even act as promoters of an Order considered as a value in itself. We are nothing else than “a voice” which has to efface itself in front of Him who has been announced. When speaking of *tuitio fidei*, the Order’s members often tend to claim that they lack the qualifications to bear witness to the faith – and certainly the acquisition of these qualifications is one of the first duties of each member. Nevertheless, we all can and must bear witness: nobody can protest that he

¹³ St. Augustine, Sermon for the Birth of St. John the Baptist, Sermon 293,3 ; PL 38, 1328-1329. This passage appears in the Liturgy of the Hours, as the second homily of the Office of the Third Sunday in Lent.

or she is inadequate and thus shirk the duty of being “*a voice*”, a simple voice that proclaims the presence of Christ and that invites us to prepare for his coming. We thus realise that John the Baptist’s preaching is very simple: it is not based on philosophical or theological considerations; it simply urges us to share and to perform our daily duties. This simple behaviour will enable us to make the extraordinary discovery that the Lord is already present among us: “*but among you stands one whom you do not know*”.

The Order of Malta’s apostolate is not, in its historic tradition, an apostolate of the intellectual or speculative type. The Order’s “voice” is its works, its charitable works through which it invites people to discover the presence of Christ among them. We can interpret these words of John the Baptist “*but among you stands one whom you do not know*” in two ways. For us, members of the Order, the Christ who is not known, is the One we encounter under the guise of the poor, the sick, all those who are hurt by life and rejected by society, those whom we are sent to assist. We have to discover for ourselves and bear witness before people – before our society which cares so little – that wherever there is someone who suffers, there is Christ : *Truly, I say to*

you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. But through our gestures of love and compassion, we have to realise that we are also intermediaries of Christ, images of Christ who through us attends to the suffering. Is not our eight-pointed cross the symbol of this? In every one of our actions we bear witness to Christ in whose name we act. Like John the Baptist, we are not the Christ, far from it! – but we are signs of his presence.

Since we are celebrating the forty years since the closure of Vatican Council II, it is interesting to note that we are also celebrating one of the great theological intuitions of the Council. The great Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, opens with the idea that only Christ is the light of nations: *Lumen gentium cum sit Christus*; but to bring this light of Christ to all men it must be *brightly visible on the countenance of the Church* and in this way become *a sacrament or a sign and instrument* of the presence of God to humanity¹⁴. Transposed to the level of the Order of Malta this means that each of its members, as a member but first of all as one baptised and true to Christ, feels involved in this mission of being

¹⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, ch. I

“sign and instrument” of the presence of Christ. What we learn from the spiritual figure of John the Baptist, under whose banner we march, is that the *announcer* of the Christ also urges us to be ready to efface ourselves before him: “*He must increase, but I must decrease*” (John 3.30). The image we must have of our patron saint is as “a voice” which conveys the Eternal Word and then disappears; or, with reference to the iconographic tradition of the Baptist, the finger that points to the Lamb of God and leads men towards him (cf. Jn 1. 35-37)

These remarks outline what we can learn about Saint John the Baptist from the gospels. I have dealt with some elements of his preaching that seem to correspond to how our Order is currently expressing its centuries-old charisma. The Baptist’s request to produce “*fruits of repentance*” is met with our desire to be “*effective in our works*”. May the way in which we can bear witness to Christ always be modelled on the behaviour of one who simply announced the Lamb of God and then effaced himself before him.

Bruno Martin
Magistral Chaplain

John, Witness and Friend of the Lord

(Translated from the Italian)

BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD

One day Jesus was walking towards the river Jordan. John sees him and exclaims: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said. ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me’” (Jn 1.29-30). But John’s cry does not seem to have made much impression on those who had come to him for baptism.

“The next day,” again John the evangelist is speaking, “John was standing with two of his disciples; and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said: ‘Behold, the Lamb of God’. The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them: ‘what do you seek?’ And they said to him: ‘Rabbi, where are you staying?’” (Jn 1.35-39). Jesus’ same soul-searching gaze was later turned on James of Zebedee and John his brother who were in their boat mending the nets on the shore of the Sea of Galilee:

“He called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him”.
(Mc 1,20)

Long before this meeting on the banks of the Jordan, Jesus had encountered John the Baptist when Mary his Mother entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. In that proximity, in that encounter, John is sanctified by the source of grace living in Mary; he is filled with the Holy Spirit and rejoices in the womb of his mother Elizabeth, thus predicting the birth of Christ the Lord, as the hymn of the Christmas Lauds recites.

The life and mission of John the Baptist was always to be directed towards Him, the Christ. John’s vocation is entirely addressed to the Advent, to the coming of the Messiah Saviour. The Gospel sets John’s call in a solemn framework, with a wealth of historical references: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.....“The voice of one crying in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord”” (Lk 3.1-4).

John had chosen to live in the isolation of the desert in a life of austerity and prayer.

John reveals his mission with the baptism of repentance that he administered to people to prepare the way. And while he performs this ritual of conversion, he bears witness that: “I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” (Jn 1.26-27). When Jesus, after overcoming the Baptist’s reluctance, receives baptism John declares: “I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me. ‘He on whom you see the spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’. And I have seen and I have born witness that this is the Son of God” (Jn 1.31-33). Now John knows that Jesus is the Son of God. His mission will be to bear witness of what he has seen.

BEARING WITNESS TO THE LIGHT

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John, He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light...he was not the light, but came to bear

witness to the light” (Jn 1.5-8). John’s life and mission are illuminated by the light of Christ. John the evangelist, who makes this solemn declaration in the prologue to his gospel, is the favourite apostle. He who during the Last Supper leant his head on the Lord’s breast, drawing, as St. Augustine writes, directly from the source of grace. The person of his Master was to be the centre of his life and in his first letter he will write: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life....this we testify to.” (I Jn 1.2).

The two Johns come together as witnesses to the light of Christ that has pervaded their existence.

Paul on the road to Damascus was also struck by the light and he heard, believed and bore witness among the people. Paul writes to the Philippians about his faith: “Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ....that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection...” (Phil 3.7-10). To know Him; this is living faith in the person of Christ that becomes a life programme: “and the life

I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2.20).

AROUSING FAITH

The mission of John the Baptist was that of preparing the way for Christ and arousing faith in Him. In one of the prefaces to the Advent we read: “His future coming was proclaimed by all the prophets, the Virgin Mother waited for and bore him in her womb with love beyond all telling. John the Baptist was his herald and made him known when at last he came”.

To arouse faith. And now it is time to relate our reflection to the lives of the Order of Malta’s members, even though the quoted texts are as enlightening for them as they are for any other Christian. Faith is a gift of God. We received it in Baptism. Baptism has justified us and has initiated a journey of faith which has Christ at its centre because it is He who changes us inside with his grace, especially by means of the Sacraments. A faith that becomes life with Christ: “that I may know Him, and the power of his resurrection” (Phil 3.10).

Thus belonging to the Order of Malta entails a strong and specific commitment requested by its charisma of *tuitio fidei*. These words contain a twofold meaning - the need to live one's faith consistently and to arouse it in others.

A force from on high emanates from John's person and words. His long contemplation in the wilderness and the austerity of a life consecrated to God gave his testimony a special and persuasive power.

Following its pledge to *tuitio fidei*, the Order of Malta has a missionary task of bearing witness. Insofar as the Order's members place Christ the Lord at the centre of their life, their testimony can awaken others to the faith. It is love of Christ that prompts us to spread the "good news", to evangelize: "*Caritas Christi urget nos*" (2 Cor 5.14).

"Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" This is the testimony of John that will remain. We find it in the liturgy of the Mass, when the priest indicates Jesus present in the Eucharist before dispensing Communion.

In calling Jesus the "Lamb of God" John, accustomed to meditating on the holy texts, must have had the Easter Lamb in his mind; his words are therefore a prophetic reference to the sacrifice.

The Eucharist is the sacramental renewal of the sacrifice of the Cross, it is our Easter and the centre of a Christian's spiritual life. It nourishes faith and contains the need for charity towards one's neighbour, urging us to perform it. "*Fides sine operibus mortua est*": "so faith by itself, if it has no works, it is dead" (Jas 2.17).

The Reformers claimed that humankind's justification is given by faith alone and that, through faith, justification is attributed to the sinner by the merits of Jesus Christ. The Catholics have claimed that works are necessary as a consequence of the justification given by Christ with an inner sanctification. The controversy concerning justification is weakening now, as a result of the common declaration of Catholics and Lutherans, on justification.

The Order of Malta's members have always closely linked their charitable works to the *tuitio fidei*. The *obsequium pauperum*, in its multiple expressions, and especially service to the poor and the sick, has Christ the Lord both as source and as term of reference. We find ground and confirmation of it in Matthew's Gospel, which gives the commanding words of Jesus, Lord and Judge: "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the

kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink....I was sick and you visited me... Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me” (Mt 25.34-36-45).

These words also demonstrate the friendship that the Lord conveys through the poor and the sick. St. Paul attributes the following words to the Lord Jesus “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20.35). This is not only a fine sentiment inherent in a simple humanitarian act. Service to the poor and the sick, as carried out in the spirit of the Order of Malta, goes well beyond the person to whom good is done. John the Baptist declared that he was as a friend of Jesus and that it gave him an immense joy: “the friend of the bridegroom...rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice” (Jn 3.29).

It is Jesus himself who wanted to identify himself with the poor, the sick, and the least of his brothers and, in doing so, give us true joy with his friendship.

Angelo Acerbi
Titular Archbishop of Zella

Oportet illum crescere Me autem minui

HISTORY AND PROPHECY

John the Baptist bore witness to the Light that advances through History. His mission is the highest, his dignity, which Jesus was to bear witness to, is greater than any human dignity, because he feels, as his spirit leaps, that he has only to announce, to prepare the way for the One who is coming. God's secret conceals an appointment, a coming for which the prophets are preparing. In his utter humility, John accepts the limits of his presence in the History of Salvation; he is only a voice that cries, proclaiming One who is coming. Hence our admiration for this prophetic figure of the desert and of Jordan, who emerges suddenly in History, to bear witness, to show the way and then to disappear.

ECCE AGNUS DEI

He begins his vocation: John, inspired and sustained by the Spirit, goes forth and announces to

all, with a persuasive vehemence and passion: “Prepare yourselves, He is here!”.

“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare yourself, the glory of the Lord is near, produce fruit in keeping with repentance, of conversion...’, ... the axe is already at the root of the trees,... Convert ... He is near, he – the hidden God – is amongst us and you do not know him...” (cf. Jn 1, passim)

When suddenly, on the banks of the river Jordan where he was baptizing while awaiting the arrival of God, He, the Word of God, appears. John the Baptist’s knees tremble: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie”... (cf. Jn 1, passim).

In the meantime the crowd and John’s disciples, attracted by his pragmatic preaching, had multiplied around him, listening to him, venerating and obeying him, following him in his wanderings. But behold Jesus, the Christ appears. And John, with holiness and humility, assumes his role as forerunner, as herald “I am not the Christ.. I am not the prophet. I am only a voice.... because the bridegroom has arrived”.

NOW I CAN DISAPPEAR

Many then begin to follow Jesus, and this was what John wanted. But his most faithful and loyal disciples, perhaps irritated by this, run to him to announce the fact. John listens to them but says they have not understood: he was a voice announcing; now He who had been announced had come and he could disappear.

His soul is enveloped in the grace and truth of God, everything is transformed into extraordinary humility. He is not upset, on the contrary, he is joyful because of the presence of Jesus. "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full." (Jn 3.9). I was here, I was among you only to prepare you for his arrival. He has arrived. He is here, He is the Lamb of God! "Therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease" - *Oportet illum crescere, me autem minui* (Jn 3.29-30).

We can only be silent before this spiritual magnanimity, before these words in which a great man becomes small, a teacher becomes a disciple, a prophet falls silent.

With a leap of the Spirit, John has gone beyond the great barrier of egoism that divides us all, one from the other. Thus envy is defeated by another's magnanimity. This is the true humility that becomes joy because truth appears. And once more, perhaps for the last time, John points to the Christ: He must increase, I can disappear. Meanwhile, in the distance looms the sinister fortress of Machaerous where his martyrdom will take place.

GOD - NOT I

The annulment of oneself before God is the most difficult and noblest tension of the human spirit. It is the recognition of one's own nothingness before God.

Humility is equal to truth. It is the certainty of an infinite and eternal God and of an abject self, limited in space and time. The self that only finds a little light if it enters into the shadow of the emerging Sun that calls it to the divine.

At the same moment that John announces that his mission is over because "the Proclaimed One", "the Promised One", is entering the full light of recognition, he can withdraw, he can decrease, disappear. He has done all he had to.

He must increase, but I must decrease: this is the spiritual testament of the Baptist, the last words of one who believes in truth and consequently in Humility. It is the most authentic and moving epigraph for his sepulchre, written by him: "He must increase, but I must decrease".

HUMILITY OF JESUS

It was also to come for Jesus on the night of the betrayal, and he will say to his disciples during the last supper "Father, I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them." (Jn 17.26). And John's words echo this: "I have made Him known to you, now follow Him, listen to Him:

I can disappear. I have done all that God asked of me, I have performed my duty, I have accomplished my mission, I have honoured my charisma".

This is true humility, understood in the contemplation of the mystery of Christ that the Apostle Paul reveals as a mystery of humility and humiliation. It is the famous Christological text of the letter to the Philippians (Ph 2, 6-11): "Who,

though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”

Meekness, patience, kindness, closeness to the weak, to the least and to the humble, to those who have no one; these are signs of Jesus’ messianism. He is comfortable with the rejects, the lepers, the failures. He sits down to eat with sinners, lets one cry at his feet....

In the last supper, He the Lord – He the Teacher, puts on an apron and on his knees washes the feet of his disciples, of Judas, of us poor men.

Never forget this scene, Order of Malta! Because He came to serve and not to be served. Remember this.

TO SERVE AND NOT BE SERVED BY GOD

Faced with the spiritual behaviour of the Baptist, who quietly and joyfully accepts silence and concealment immediately the will of God becomes known, we have realistically to examine our ability to accept that a role with exterior importance can

change and to embrace a situation of inner life and serenity, to encounter the will of God wherein lies our peace.

John the Baptist's humble acceptance of his new mission without fuss is the spiritual programme of every witness, of every consecrated person called to open a way in society for letting Christ in, to preach the gospel to the poor and hope to the suffering, through a Faith incarnated in works – *Tuitio Fidei* with *Obsequium Pauperum*.

We, of the Order of Malta, like all the Orders and all Christians, must not speak about ourselves but about Christ who comes. We dispense the mysteries of God and the Church.

In the light of John's example, all those called to bear witness to the Gospels must humbly dispense the Word, ready to decrease, to make way for Christ : "Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom" (Col. 1. 28).

People have the right to find Christ in the Apostle. They must find Christ and his Church in the Priest. People have the right to find faith and dedicated service to suffering in the Knight and Dame of Malta. People "must find the Church's authentic richness in favour of humanity" (John Paul II) in the Sovereign Order of Malta.

Following John's example, it is the glory of God that has to grow and figure in all our actions and activities and not ourselves. It is the spirit of faith, of humility, of obedience that must reverberate on the Order and not on us.

It is the Order with its millenary charisma that has to grow. We, having done our duty as best we can, can also ... decrease. Because you who are in the Order must serve the Order and not be served by it.

WHO IS HUMBLE

To find the great hope of the Gospel, to make the love of God grow, we must accept to become a simple voice preaching to the least of us that the Kingdom of Heaven is for the People of the Beatitudes. It is for this that we must pledge ourselves.

In John's noble and humble words "He increases, I decrease" there is every possibility for us to perform our role with the awareness that we are serving, respectful of others' qualities and abilities, ready for any change dictated by experience and obedience.

The humble serenely accept inferior positions, because before God everything is great and important.

The humble take a back seat and leave the limelight to others, without jealousy, without rancour, without complaining and without accusation. They respect decisions without argument and pray and offer to God. They do not judge nor condemn; they speak of the qualities and not of the defects of their fellow men and women.

We know that it is difficult and arduous, but mindful of John's words "He must increase, but I must decrease", we must desire that others, our brothers and sisters, are more loved, more consulted and more esteemed than we are.

Our Patron Saint shows us the way of holiness in service, so that we can rejoice that others grow in the eyes of the world and of our superiors. That they are praised and preferred and we are relegated to second place, even if we know how, and are able, to do good. This is holiness. This is humility. This is the spirit of the Baptist.

THE ORDER OF MALTA'S VOCATION

The Order of Malta's vocation leads us as members to make "room" for our brothers; at the same time it gives us strength to devote ourselves "*usque ad summum*" should we have been chosen to

hold posts of responsibility, not for our own works, but for God and the Order. That is, to accomplish our work and then be ready to disappear. John's testimony must not induce us to put our vocation in second place, saying "anyway I have to withdraw!", but must encourage us to dedicate ourselves passionately to the responsibilities that Providence entrusts to us.

These considerations on the willingness of John the Baptist to decrease, to disappear, to leave his place to one more worthy and greater than he, should persuade us to have a profound faith in God and to do everything for Him in our actions, whatever they might be, because everything passes and only God remains.

This conviction of performing God's work in our daily efforts will help us always, even when we are no longer in positions of power.

SERENE ACCEPTANCE

Naturally, this inner serenity and self-detachment while performing our duties of guidance and direction in the Order does not mean underestimating these positions of responsibility, governance and leadership. We must do everything

with love and commitment in the spirit of service and in the light of John's example. If our position should change, that is if we should decrease and others emerge, we should remain serenely serving God.

These past years we have all admired the way in which eminent princes of the church, great bishops, general superiors and also dignitaries of our Order, of every rank, approach – like everyone else – the crucial step of retirement, of leaving humbly and serenely their office, their responsibilities, to entrust them to others, to the successor chosen either by superiors or by voting.

Each of them can be comforted by the example of the Precursor ... “I am happy that you increase and I decrease” so that the soul can aim increasingly at God and think of eternity.

UNUM EST NECESSARIUM

I will always remember, when preaching the spiritual exercises of the Knights of Justice, asking His Highness the Grand Master what he thought I should say to my venerable professed confreres to stress their importance in the Order, and what they could expect from the Order, given the need to

have Knights of Justice and given their ranking. After a long silence His Highness slowly said to me: “Tell them that just one thing is necessary: holiness and not power. And that in fact the greatest, the most important position, the most desirable rank or class in the Order of Malta, involves solely the honour of being called by God to serve him not as servants but as ‘Friends’ in poverty – in chastity – in obedience. All the rest is secondary. Even the highest responsibilities are worth nothing compared with the honour of being consecrated to God”.

Mary, Mother of God, humbly proclaims herself a handmaid: “*Ecce Ancilla*”, so that St. Bernard exclaims with emotion: “*Humilitate placuit – Virginitate concepit!*”.

CONCLUSION

As John, prophet of God’s future, humbly declares his joy in abasing himself in the light of Christ’s coming, we also – members of the Order – engaged in bearing witness to the *Tuitio Fidei* and *Obsequium Pauperum*, serenely accept every task, every responsibility. We accept every obligation, large or small, whether it is an honour or a burden, to ensure that the Jesus Christ announced by John

is proclaimed and borne witness to in our lives,
consecrated to the Order of Malta's ideal; so that
He, He alone grows, while we also can fade away.

Giusepppe Azelio Manzetti,
Principal Chaplain of the Grand Priory of Rome

The Youth of the Order

‘Amici sponsi – Friends of the Bridegroom’

It was while staying in Lebanon, where since 1998 a group of the German Community of Young Malteser (GjM) travels every year to be with handicapped Lebanese boys for two months: The team leader was introducing one of the members of the team to a benefactor of ours saying: “This is my best man.” Our Lebanese friend, obviously not familiar with this English expression for a witness at a marriage, objected against what he found was an unfair preference with a wide gesture over the whole team of helpers saying: “No, no! You mustn’t say that. Everyone is ‘best man’ and ‘best woman!’” I had forgotten about this amusing misunderstanding until I read the Gospel again, where St. John the Baptist speaks about Jesus as the “bridegroom” and where he calls himself “amicus sponsi – the bridegroom’s friend” (John 3,29). Our Patron, the “witness to the light” (John 1,7) is witness and friend of the bridegroom; he is Jesus’ ‘best man’. What can this self-characterisation mean to young men and women who belong to a community that is standing under the patronage of

St. John? How can it characterize their relationship to Jesus and to those they are sent to in his name?

DISCERNING THE BRIDEGROOM'S VOICE

St. John the Baptist recalls old and well-known metaphors for the relationship between God and his people when he speaks about Jesus as the bridegroom and his people as the bride. His listeners had known it from the Psalms (45,10) and the Prophets, where God either rejoices in his people as the bridegroom rejoices in his bride (Is 62,5) or banishes it as his disloyal bride in the desert (Hos 2,4-25). Now, in the days of St. John the Baptist this divine wedding is about to begin. The bridegroom, God himself, stands in the middle of his people as a human being in the person of Jesus from Nazareth. Through his life and death, he leads his people into the wedding feast, that already begins in human history and is fulfilled when the New Jerusalem is seen coming down from Heaven “prepared as a bride dressed for her husband” (Rev 21,2). At this turning-point of the history of the universe our patron, St. John the Baptist, is sent as the pioneer, the ‘door-opener’ of the bridegroom. He calls himself simply “the bridegroom’s friend”,

and he instantly explains what he means by that: He is the one who “stands there and listens to him” and who is “filled with joy at the bridegroom’s voice” (John 3,29). Being the “bridegroom’s friend” means to listen to and to become familiar with the voice of the bridegroom. St. John is not talking about *seeing* Jesus, but *hearing* him and *listening* to his voice. For listening to the voice of someone else without seeing him, it is necessary to know him very well. It needs a very familiar, very intimate relationship with the bridegroom to be able to differentiate his voice from other voices. Especially in our young lives, there are so many voices that sound as if they were Jesus’, the bridegroom’s, voice. The “friend of the bridegroom” gets to know Jesus better and better. The more we become familiar with the person and life of Jesus, with his word in the Gospel and with the witness of his disciples, the better we will be able to identify his word for us today, his call in what is occurring to us and in the yearning of our hearts and in the fundamental decisions we have to take. This also leads to a new perspective on the history of the Order of Malta. It needs to learn from the witness of those who have gone before us (the dead and the living!), and to find out where they really

understood and obeyed his call in a knightly and brave way, following and serving Jesus Christ, and where they failed to do so. St. John tells us the most important criterion for this identification of the bridegroom's voice: it is the voice that fills the heart with joy (Joh 3,29). There are joyful experiences of many voices, but most of them leave a big sadness behind when they fade. The joy left behind by the voice of God in Jesus Christ remains, even if the voice itself fades, even in the fear of the battle, even in darkness and desert.

PREPARING THE WEDDING

Jesus himself helps us to understand what it means to be his 'best man' or 'best woman' in the school of St. John: it means firstly inviting the guests, secondly having a culture of celebration and thirdly discreetly stepping back, when bride and bridegroom meet.

1. Jesus compares the kingdom of Heaven with a wedding feast, to which invited guests refuse to come and servants are sent out to invite those "from the streets and roads of the town" to lead them to the wedding-hall (Lk 14,15-24). He needs servants who risk danger, who are willing to go far

out to fetch the guests, the poor and the lame, from the places nobody very much likes to go to, and to join the feast with them.

2. This requires that the servants, who Jesus himself also calls 'friends' (John 15,15), master the art of celebration as servants, friends and guests of the wedding. To me, it seems to be necessary that we young people regain the differentiation and the rhythm of feasting and fasting, and the relationship between liturgy and feast. Jesus Christ is the bridegroom, in whose presence his disciples, the guests of the wedding, must not fast (Mt 9,15). Do our feasts, does the way we celebrate and choose our guests, have this dimension of the wedding of God and his people? I am speaking of real feasts (like the one in Cana), of eating and drinking and singing at the sound of music with Christ among us. As long as the bridegroom is with them the disciples must not fast; but their feasts have all a bridal dimension and they are more than only a party. Their feasts integrate the whole human being and the whole creation as it is in the eyes of God – the *party* reaches only a *part* of it. They lead to the experience of the working of the Holy Spirit, and send us newly strengthened back into the service; the party leads only to a headache. If the liturgy and

the feasts we celebrate together are not related (because they both are dimensions of the wedding feast, which has already begun) we will earlier or later skip either the one or the other or even both. The culture of celebration includes the fasting too. There will be days, when the bridegroom is taken away, and then the disciples will fast, says Jesus (Mt 9,15). There is time for us to fast, when we realize that we are separated from the bridegroom. Since the Resurrection and Pentecost, it is no longer Jesus Christ who is absent (even though the fact that it is a *hidden* presence can make us fearful); it is me who is absent, who separated myself from him and who needs to come back and to give him new space in my life. And there can be a service of fasting together with those, who don't know Christ, who live in the darkness of their suffering, a fasting while going with Christ and in his name to those, who have no light and no hope – to find together with them the way to the wedding.

3. The “bridegroom’s friend” is also the one who steps back, when bride and bridegroom meet. The Baptist continues: “He must grow greater, I must grow less” (John 3,30). The “bridegroom’s friend” shows us a very discreet way to serve. It is not only us through whom Jesus wants to come to

the sick and the poor, and on the other hand we must not search Jesus 'in' them as if they were nothing but a impersonal container of his presence. St. John steps back in joy. We shall step back too, to let Jesus reach those we care for, so that they will be his witness to us and others. There are times to be close and times to step back from the wheelchair in front of the grotto in Lourdes, and to give time for the coming of the bridegroom and for the working of his spirit.

FRIENDS OF THE BRIDE

At the same time when we learn from St. John the Baptist to be friends of the bridegroom, we will also learn to be friends of the bride. Now some might object: "But we *belong* to the bride, we even are the bride, God's people, the Church. How can we be the bride's friends at the same time?" It is true; we belong to the Church and the intimacy of belonging to her and to Jesus becomes obvious when St. Paul says we were a limb of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12,27). But as we belong to Jesus Christ and at the same time stand in a personal relationship to him, we also belong to the Church and simultaneously we are facing her. There are

many in the Church (both conservative and progressive ones) who insist in belonging to the Church on the one hand, and who on the other hand never stop complaining about her and disagreeing with her. It is even possible to hate what we belong to, and for some this seems to be the only way of ‘being different’. The friend of the bridegroom is also the friend of the bride. The Church desperately needs not only *members* but *friends*. People who love her, even when she shows her old shrinking face, because they are the ones who can make visible her bridal beauty, her youth and her “first love” (Rev 2,4). St. John prepares God’s people and us in the Church for the bridegroom. But this ministry of preparation is also something that every limb of the body of the Church has to follow – everyone according to his or her vocation, every Order and Community according to their spirituality. Going into the school of St. John the Baptist, the bridegroom’s friend, for us young members of the Order and its works, also means preparing the bride for the bridegroom, ourselves and one another in the communities we live in for making the presence of Christ and his working by the Holy Spirit more and more visible. It means to learn the charisma of

correction and of being corrected – also in the Order of Malta and its limbs. Preparing the bride as the bridegroom’s friends (and being prepared as the bride by friends of the bridegroom) also means to remember and to be reminded of the Church’s and the Order’s fidelity as the Bride of Christ. The Order of Malta has a special call for this ‘active recollection’, because by Christ’s word about his identification with the least (Mt 25,31-45) “no less than by the orthodoxy of her doctrine, the Church measures her fidelity as the Bride of Christ” (Pope John Paul II., *Novo millennio ineunte* 49).

SERVING AT THE HEARTBEAT OF THE BRIDE

During the International Summer Camp in Eschweiler on occasion of the World-Youth-Day 2005 in Cologne many members of different youth-organisations of the Order of Malta have been taught a painful but important lesson of where in the Church their place is to serve – the place of the bridegroom’s friend. The Vigil held in Eschweiler on Saturday night was over; after some initial objections, most of the handicapped participants had decided to set out very early in the morning to join the final Holy Mass, celebrated by the Holy

Father on the Saint-Mary's-Field, and most of us had gone to sleep. The telephone rang at 1.45 a.m. and we were told that we, a group of 450 handicapped guests and helpers, couldn't come. During the vigil with the Pope, participants had swamped from behind the two sectors that originally were reserved for us and there was no possibility of clearing this area without risking injury. There was a big sadness in many faces both that night and the following morning. But at the same time there were two messages for the vocation of the youth of the Order. The first one was to stay with those, who cannot move and are unable to take their place in society and in the Church. Maybe this was the reason why even in that night a big peace came over us and a spirit of mutual consolation on being told it was not possible to participate: we knew very clearly where our place was. And the second message came with the explicit greeting that Cardinal Meisner sent us in the name of Pope Benedict XIV. at the beginning of the Mass (that we followed on big screens in Eschweiler). With this gesture the Holy Father had given back to the excluded their place at the wedding-table. Many of us understood that it is for us to serve the fidelity of the Church by keeping

clear the place for the poor in the centre of the Church, and to remember that the heartbeat of the Church is most vital where she follows the call of Jesus in caring for his brothers, the least, for whom he has given his life.

Going into the school of St. John the Baptist we, young members of the Order or of one of its organisations, can learn to discern the voice of the bridegroom Jesus Christ, to prepare God's wedding with his people and with the whole creation in the Church, and to enter this feast together with those to whom we are sent. So finally we may find that our Lebanese friend was not that wrong: In the school of St. John the Baptist, we are called to be "amici sponsi – Friends of the bridegroom" and friends of the bride: "Everyone is 'best man' and 'best woman'!"

Fr. Georg Lengerke

Imprisoned for Truth and Justice

(Translated from the Italian)

The merchants of Amalfi who, under the leadership of Blessed Gerard, founded first the hospice and then the hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, put their institution under the patronage of St. John the Baptist. This was before the Order had acquired its military character, but it anticipated it.

A military order's activities are always associated with the defence of the Christian Faith or *Tuitio Fidei*; if armed warriors are involved, it must be a defensive war and never waged merely for secular aims. And no one better than the Baptist was able to express this character, this purpose. He is the last of the prophets, the greatest saint after the Blessed Virgin, and is profoundly linked to the Holy Land, for whose defence the Order added a military aim to its assistance to the sick and the poor. The Baptist is the defender of Truth and Justice, under whose banner the Christian knight must always fight and whose greatest enemies are dishonesty and injustice.

The Baptist recognises the Messiah in Jesus and proclaims him such before the people: it was the truth and so why not announce it? The Baptist asks nothing for himself and effaces himself before his Lord, giving a rare example of extreme humility, a virtue that always accompanies Truth and Justice because it tells us who we are before God, that is nothing, and gives us our deserts before God (justice is giving to each person his due), that is nothing. Everything we have is given by divine Mercy. John is also the courageous defender of Truth and Justice (which after all are twins) and he staunchly chastises Sadducees and Pharisees who come to him to be baptized without repenting, that is dishonestly. The Baptist denounces them although he knows he will arouse their hatred, the hatred of the powerful. He also reproaches Herod in the name of justice because Herod had stolen his brother's wife.

She, Herodias, was the wife of Philip Herod, her uncle, but she had left him to marry Herod Antipas, also her uncle. The latter had also been married but had repudiated his wife. Herod's actions were against the laws of Jahweh (Lev 18.16). John, fulfilling his prophetic mission to

recall the Law to those violating it, tells Herod that: “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife” (Mk 6.18).

Finally, when the Baptist sends his disciples to ask Jesus: “Are you he that is to come, or is there another?” (to which Jesus replies citing Isaiah), he shows his eagerness for truth. One can legitimately wonder whether the Baptist’s question was intended to enlighten his followers, victims like all the Jews at that time of the glorious and worldly interpretation of messianism. But even admitting that the question was prompted by the Baptist’s doubt, it still shows his thirst for truth, a truth not only for him but for everyone. It was no coincidence that the Lord sang the praises of the Baptist after answering his messengers. He died in prison for Truth and Justice. Truth has to be shouted out as “the voice crying in the wilderness”: this cry drowns out any other voice and is like a sword cutting through silence.

Following the Baptist’s example, the Knight of Malta has a particular duty with regards to Truth: he must defend it without respecting any man, even shouting it out when necessary. Because the *Tuitio Fidei* which is the *Tuitio Veritatis* is no longer defended by the sword but by example, by word

and by writing. Similarly for Justice, again following the Baptist's example, the Knight of Malta must when necessary raise his voice against oppression and injustice. He must do everything possible to fight oppression and to rectify injustice, exposing false pretences that often conceal both the real essence of oppression and justify injustice. The Baptist also performed this operation *pro Veritate*.

Count Neri Capponi

The martyrdom

(Translated from the Italian)

**"I WANT YOU TO GIVE ME AT ONCE
THE HEAD OF JOHN THE BAPTIST ON A PLATTER"**

(Gospel, Mark 6.17-29)

The Baptist's martyrdom concludes, exalts and gives full worth to his mission as forerunner. And St. John can assert that: "Therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease". Martyrdom! Our spirits shake just to see the bloody and terrible images evoked by the phrase: *effusio sanguinis* ! And if we turn our attention to its etymology, we have the confirmation that the word "martyr" has its roots in the ancient SMARM then MAR – later becoming the Greek martyr – which stands for "observe", but also and especially for "bearing witness". A martyr is therefore one who suffers torment and death "to vouch for the truth of the doctrine he professes".

I think St. Bede's description of him is helpful:

"As a forerunner of our Lord's birth, preaching and death, the blessed John showed in his struggle a goodness

worthy of the sight of heaven. In the words of Scripture (Wisdom 3.4) 'Though in the sight of men he suffered torments, his hope is full of immortality'. We justly commemorate the day of his birth with a joyful celebration, a day which he himself made festive for us through his suffering and which he adorned with the crimson splendor of his own blood. We do rightly revere his memory with joyful hearts, for he stamped with the seal of martyrdom the testimony which he delivered on behalf of our Lord.

There is no doubt that blessed John suffered imprisonment and chains as a witness to our Redeemer, whose forerunner he was, and gave his life for him. His persecutor had demanded not that he should deny Christ, but only that he should keep silent about the truth. Nevertheless, he died for Christ.

Does Christ not say: 'I am the truth?' (John 14.6). Therefore, because John shed his blood for the truth, he surely died for Christ. Through his birth, preaching and baptizing, he bore witness to the coming birth, preaching and baptism of Christ, and by his own suffering he showed that Christ also would suffer.

Such was the quality and strength of the man who accepted the end of this present life by shedding his blood after the long imprisonment. He preached the freedom of heavenly peace, yet was thrown into irons by ungodly men;

he was locked away in the darkness of prison, though he came bearing witness to the Light of life and deserved to be called a bright and shining lamp by that Light itself, which is Christ. John was baptized in his own blood, though he had been privileged to baptize the Redeemer of the world, to hear the voice of the Father above him, and to see the grace of the Holy Spirit descending upon him. But to endure temporal agonies for the sake of the truth was not a heavy burden for such men as John; rather it was easily borne and even desirable, for he knew eternal joy would be his reward. Since death was ever near at hand through the inescapable necessity of nature, such men considered it a blessing to embrace it and thus gain the reward of eternal life by acknowledging Christ's name. Hence the apostle Paul rightly says: 'You have been granted the privilege not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for his sake' (Philippians 1.29). He tells us why it is Christ's gift that his chosen ones should suffer for him: 'The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.' (Romans 8.18)."

The liturgy solemnly celebrates the birth of St. John the Baptist every 24 June. The only saint that the Redeemer Himself canonized: "This is he of

whom it is written: 'Behold I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11.10-11).

* * *

But what thoughts troubled his mind and even more his heart as he faced his executioner? Did his entire life pass in front of his eyes in the space of a few seconds? Did he see the aim of his existence and the focal points of the Meeting and the Knowledge?

On 29 August the Church celebrates the feast of the Martyrdom of the Baptist: St. John Beheaded. Many artists were inspired to represent this most excruciating of visions, including Taddeo Gaddi, Daniele da Volterra, Andrea del Sarto, Giorgio Vasari, Cosimo Gamberucci, Luca Cambiaso, Gerolamo Franck and Rubens. Bernardino Luini has a painting in the Louvre – for a long time wrongly attributed to the great Leonardo – in which the executioner has just given Herodias the

head of the Precursor on a silver platter, and Guercino and Carlo Dolci have treated the same subject with equal mastery.

* * *

Since the 4th century particular homage has been rendered to the Precursor. Pope Sergius III (904-911) wanted to dedicate to him and St. John the Evangelist the reconstructed Lateran Basilica, that is the Cathedral of Rome, Mother Church of Christianity. Almost a millennium ago, the Hierosolymite Order made its great tribute to the Baptist by electing him to be its Patron and Protector, on the island of Malta and in every other site of our jurisdiction, erecting to him places of worship, of “hospitality” and of “hospitalization” for the beloved Lords the Sick, for the poor - *obsequium pauperum*, our sacred charisma – and for the *peregrinatores*.

Giacomo Bosio recalls that even on the tragic 24 June of 1565, Grand Master La Vallette ordered "joyful signals and fires to honour the feast and

solemnity of the glorious St. John the Baptist,
Patron of this Religion..."

* * *

O glorious Saint, our Patron, protect and
sustain our most beloved Order so that it may be
and remain everlastingly faithful to its almost
millenary tradition.

Fra' Franz von Lobstein

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