

ADDRESS OF THE GRAND MASTER TO THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS

H.M.E.H Fra' Andrew Bertie

Rome, 9 January, 2007

Mr. Dean, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Once again I take pleasure in receiving here on the Aventine Hill the members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Order for the traditional ceremony of exchange of greetings.

Mr. Ambassador of Honduras, dear Dean, I am very grateful for the New Year greetings you expressed to me on behalf of the Diplomatic Corps. I would also like to thank you for your sentiments of appreciation, and for the benevolent interest you have shown in the work of Sovereign Order of Malta. And I wish in particular to welcome the ambassadors who are participating in this meeting for the first time.

This annual meeting constitutes a special occasion for me and for the Order's government, since it offers me the opportunity of looking at the world together with you.

A look at the world today

There have been many reasons for pain and apprehension during the year which has just ended, and first of all I wish to express to His Excellency the Ambassador of the Philippines our sentiments of friendship and our prayers for the devastation caused by the Durian typhoon.

Numerous tragic events took place in 2006, with some continuing into this year:

- the tragic situation in Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq;
- the drama of Darfur, where we were forced to interrupt our vaccination programme for safety reasons;
- the deaths of journalists and mass-media representatives in war zones;
- the traffic of human beings in Europe, where hundreds of thousands of men, women and children end up every year in the hands of powerful criminal organisations, specialised in drug trafficking, in prostitution and in the trade of organs;
- the danger represented by the clash between cultures and religions, considering that religions have become the great concern of our millennium;
- the fate of the five Belgian nurses and Palestinian doctor imprisoned for seven years and now condemned to death, for whom we greatly hope in a reprieve;
- and unfortunately many others.....

...despite all this, there are still reasons to hope for a better future. There are positive signs, such as His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI's apostolic visit to Turkey - certainly an extraordinary event which will remain in the history of the Church and the history of humanity.

The Order of Malta in 2006

In this context of continual human dramas, the Order of Malta has steadily carried out its mission in all the regions where its teams were already present or where they have been requested to intervene.

In particular, during 2006 the Order has provided aid:

- In Africa, where our hospitals have assisted patients affected by AIDS, tuberculosis, sleeping sickness and leprosy, treating and giving psychological support to the women affected or raped, looking after refugees, distributing water, medicines and vaccines. Particularly noteworthy is the activity of the Order's teams in the bidonvilles of Nairobi in Kenya, where around 10 per cent of the adults have AIDS or tuberculosis: 600,000 people have been successfully treated. Thanks to a cooperation agreement between the Order of Malta, the Austrian Government and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, funds necessary for continuing this project until 2009 have been allocated.
- In India, a country much affected by AIDS, a programme similar to the one developed in Kenya will be launched next year.
- In Sudan, in the province of Darfur, where the Order has been supporting five health centres since 2005, enabling 115,000 people to be helped.
- In Asia, where the Order intervened in Java, following the earthquake which took place last May.
- In Egypt, where we have launched a project for the medical treatment of leprosy, in agreement with the Governor of Cairo.
- In Vietnam and in the Philippines, where our Emergency Corps has given aid to the victims of the Xangsane typhoon which destroyed entire regions in October last year.
- In southern Sri-Lanka, where the Order has launched a pilot health project.
- In the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where a new health programme is underway to prevent an outbreak of the 'black death'.
- In Romania, following the serious floods from the Danube in 2006, where the Order has started to build eight wells for drinking water for the inhabitants of eight centres in the Tulcea district.
- In Pakistan, where we have continued our activities to help the victims of the terrible earthquake of 2005.
- In Equatorial Guinea, where the Order has been asked to carry out a study for the country's welfare system.
- In New Orleans, where the Order's three North American Associations are developing, with the Malteser International Emergency Corps, a programme for reconstructing the houses destroyed by the Katrina hurricane.
- In central and eastern Europe, where the Order has intervened with emergency actions in 13 countries following the recent floods as well as providing social assistance services for the most needy.
- In Lebanon, where after the latest developments the Order's 12 health centres – which have been performing their work uninterruptedly for over 30 years – have become the only respite for thousands of civilian refugees trapped in the inaccessible

areas in the south. These centres – spread over the entire Lebanese territory – are open to all religious creeds. They are therefore oases of peace, truth and efficiency. They help to bestow faith, courage and determination on the minority Christian populations tempted to leave the country.

- In six regions of Afghanistan, where since 2001, in cooperation with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, we have been bringing help to refugee families. Sadly we have to report the death of two of our volunteers in recent years and one of our doctors last May.
- In Palestine, in Bethlehem, where our Holy Family Hospital has had to support a 30% increase in its activities because of financial problems in the public sector. In 2006, 3000 children, mainly Muslim, were born in the hospital.

And with reference to our dialogue and cooperation with the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Order has offered scholarships to young Russian Orthodox priests to study in Rome.

These are just some of the Order of Malta's main activities carried out last year around the world. It would be impossible here to give an account of the daily work of our 58 Priors and National Associations, operating through their ambulance and assistance corps, their hospitals and medical centres, because it would take too long.

With the aim of coordinating its activities on both a national and international level, the Order's government organised a number of conferences last year:

- To coincide with the state visit I made to Cameroon at the invitation of President Biya in February, we organised in Yaounde a Regional Conference on Africa, which examined all the Order's activities on that continent. I would like once again to thank warmly the President of Cameroon for his hospitality.
- The 14th Conference of European Hospitallers was held in Dublin in March.
- The 6th Conference of Hospitallers of South and North America was held in Miami in November.
- Finally, on 5 December, we organised for the second time in Rome the Annual Conference on the Order's activities worldwide, this time focusing on our work in Lebanon, the Congo and Eastern Europe. I would like to thank the many participants at this meeting, which we will repeat next December.

For 2007 we have already scheduled:

- The Conference of European Hospitallers in Paris
- The Regional Conference of the Americas in Mexico City
- The Regional Conference of Eastern Europe in Vienna.

On the institutional level, I wish to recall the excellent and deep relations we have with the Holy See, strengthened by the frequent and cordial conversations I have had in the Magistral Palace with members of the Curia and ecclesiastic personalities. I send my best wishes to the Cardinal Secretary of State and the Secretary for Relations with States of the Holy See, both of whom have recently taken office.

I would like equally to stress the excellence of our relations with our beloved Italy. One of the most significant moments in these relations was the state visit made by President Ciampi to the Magistral Palace in April, not to mention the numerous meetings with members of Government and Parliament. I am also pleased that two cooperation agreements have recently been signed with the Italian Government, one with Civil Defence and the other with the Ministry of Health.

Concerning diplomatic relations, 2006 was marked by the visits of the Heads of State of Italy, Austria, Hungary, Burkina Faso, Seychelles, Montenegro, Costa Rica and Serbia, of the Prime Minister of Poland, and of the Director-General of the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). In turn, I made state visits to Bulgaria and Cameroon. Over the next weeks I will go to Brussels to meet the President of the European Commission and the members of the Belgian government.

I would like to take this opportunity to recall Kofi Annan's dedication to the cause of peace and to give his successor as Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon, our best wishes for the accomplishment of his elevated mission, so essential for the world today.

The Order of Malta's humanitarian action and 'specific nature'

Humanitarian activity has suddenly become newsworthy, 'fashionable', too often manipulated for political or economic interests. But at the same time one has to realise that, in many cases, commitment of a missionary or voluntary nature is also disappearing or turning into a progressively secularised and entrepreneurial activity. It is becoming increasingly more an 'economic and social activity' and increasingly less a 'freely given service'.

This tendency highlights the characteristic that differentiates the Order of Malta from other humanitarian organisations. Allow me to dwell for a moment on this issue, which journalists often raise with me.

The members of the Order experience their faith not as an instrument of evangelisation or proselytism but as a way of living in the service of others, of the poor and the sick, in an authentic spirit of humanity that recognises the image of God in the person who suffers, regardless of their race, origin or religion.

For us, what counts is not the quantity or variety of initiatives completed, and still less the money spent or the number of medical operations performed, but the attention devoted to the sick, to each individual, because we are always seeking to be 'the servants of the poor and the sick'. What counts is this 'heartfelt concern' with which we look at our neighbour 'with the eyes of Christ', as the Holy Father says so clearly in his Encyclical Letter 'Deus Caritas est'. You know that we are Hospitallers first, and before anything else.

The Order of Malta is not a humanitarian organisation like others. Subject of international public law, neutral, impartial and apolitical by vocation, the Order is first of all, on the operational level, a transnational, global and decentralised structure, at the service of the poor, the sick, refugees and all those in difficulty. Its 12,500 members, its 80,000

permanent volunteers and its professional medical staff 11,000 doctors, nurses and stretcher-bearers make up an exceptional network permanently present in 120 countries. The Order is sovereign, it does not depend on any other state or government and it does not pursue any economic or political goal. It is an institution whose members belong to 45 nations on the five continents, and which has diplomatic relations with the Holy See, Italy and with another 94 states, as well as official relations with six governments and with the European Commission. It has permanent observer missions to the United Nations and its main agencies.

This international statute is indispensable for the Order to guarantee the continuity of its humanitarian projects and to protect it from external influence or coercion. It permits the Order to perform humanitarian mediation on the basis of the prestige and consideration it has enjoyed for centuries and in particular by appealing to its numerous diplomats and to the international jurists, members of the Order's courts.

I will visit the Holy Land during 2007 within the framework of an international pilgrimage that I will be carrying out next October.

In this spirit I would like to recall the various observations which have been made over the years with regard to the problem of the Holy Places, and in particular the position of the Holy See in relation to Jerusalem. A city of three religions, it is at the same time a land of two peoples, Jews and Palestinians, as well as a World Heritage centre. Pilgrims from all over the world must be able to have access to it. It should thus be given a special, internationally guaranteed statute.

The Sovereign Order of Malta, for whom the protection of the Holy Places has always been an absolute priority in its mission in the service of the Church and in its hospitaller and humanitarian activities, is at the disposal of governments to help seek any kind of solution, bearing in mind the aspirations and legitimate interests of the different populations involved.

This is because Jerusalem must be a permanent place for seeking peace and reconciliation between religions, peoples and cultures.

Your Excellencies,

In the hope of finding peaceful and just solutions for Lebanon and all the Middle East and comforted by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI's promise of a renewal of dialogue between cultures and religions, I express my heartfelt wishes for prosperity and health to all of you, to your families and to the peoples you represent so worthily.