

## The Essential Elements of the Spirituality of the Order Malta

*This essay was presented as a talk at the American Association's Chaplain's Convocation in April 2016 by the Prelate of the Order, His Excellency, Bishop Jean Laffitte. It has been edited to reflect the change from a presentation to an essay.*

In this essay, I will discuss the nature of the spirituality of the Order of Malta. Regardless of the class of membership, a peculiarity of service in the order is that we are called to live the distinct graces of the Order of Malta that are common to all members independent from their individual state of life, religious life, marriage, celibacy, consecrated celibacy, priesthood, whether bound or unbound by promise of obedience.

First, in fact, we are all included in a tradition that is now a thousand years old with a succession of different characters totally dedicated to the service of the sick and of the poor. In the Order, different classes do not live different spiritualities, just different ways of living one spirituality, that of Blessed Gerard and his successors. For us chaplains, it's really important to understand this spirituality which inspires and animates our brothers and sisters who belong to the three classes of the Order of Malta.

Secondly, this year causes us to focus in a special way on the spirituality of the Order - we are called as all the children of the church to experience the graces of the Jubilee of the Holy Year which our Holy Father has placed under the sign of the mercy. This is a grace that we will live together during our pilgrimage of Lourdes. I know that many of us will be present there and I know also that those who cannot come will be there in spirit. They will be united with us in Lourdes, so I hope that it will be a great event and live under the sign of mercy in this particular way of experiencing the Jubilee year.

This special convocation gives us the opportunity to think about our identity which transcends the diversity of personal, geographical, social, historical and vocational origins. It is the first time that the Prelate of the Order has had the opportunity to address you directly and for me, you can imagine the special joy and honor on this unique occasion to establish a personal contact with you as Chaplains of the American Association. This personal contact will be not be limited to this meeting in New York - it opens for the next year also the possibility that we will keep in touch in a personal, friendly and brotherly fraternal way.

My purpose now is to make a few observations on the profound identity of the Sovereign Order of St. John of Jerusalem and to recall the profound intention of the Holy Church towards our spiritual family. How can we define the nature of the Order?

The different texts, essential texts, the constitutional charter, the code and the regulations and commentary, all the fundamental documents define it as religious lay order by tradition, military, chivalrous, nobiliary, Hospitaller. Its mission is addressed the poor and to the sick which is summed up in the charism and the motto of *Obsequium Pauperum*. This expression is, however, always associated and accompanied by the other expression, *Tuitio Fidei*. You all know this of course.

You have noticed that when people who do not belong to the Order speak of its activities, they immediately mention its countless works of service to the poor and the sick and this often generates their admiration. Today, I propose you to turn your attention to the religious nature of

the order and its goals. In the Constitutional Charter, we read, “The purpose of the Order is the promotion of the Glory of God, the sanctification of its members, service to the faith and to the Holy Father, and assistance to one’s neighbor, in accordance with its ancient traditions.” (*article 2.*)

To understand what the term “religious order” means and the specific character of this expression, it is convenient to start, I think, from the universal call of all baptized people to holiness - a truth presented by St. Paul, the Apostle, constantly taught in Christian tradition, and ultimately, expressed in *Lumen Gentium*, the dogmatic constitution of the Second Vatican council. With these words, in the Church, everyone is called to holiness.

“However, this holiness of the Church is unceasingly manifested, and must be manifested, in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful; it is expressed in many ways in individuals, who in their walk of life, tend toward the perfection of charity, thus causing the edification of others; in a very special way this (holiness) appears in the practice of the counsels, customarily called "evangelical." This practice of the counsels, under the impulsion of the Holy Spirit, undertaken by many Christians, either privately or in a Church-approved condition or state of life, gives and must give in the world an outstanding witness and example of this same holiness.” (*Lumen Gentium, Chapter 5, #39*)

From this extract, sanctification of the members is everybody’s vocation but especially in those who live according to the evangelical counsels, the religious. The religious of our Order are not so high in number, around sixty-five or something like that. The religious of the Order express in a special way the vocation of all members to holiness. And to make this mission more clearly understood, the text of the Council adds that those who practice the evangelical counsels give and must give an outstanding witness and example of this same holiness.

To be religious means to live a Christian life, structured by the evangelical counsels, the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. In reality, all three evangelical counsels are oriented towards that which profoundly characterizes this state of life. To be a religious means to give the absolute first place to one’s spiritual life as we are reminded by the decree *Perfectae Caritatis* on the religious life.

“Let those who make profession of the evangelical counsels seek and love above all else God who has first loved us (cf. 1 John 4:10) and let them strive to foster in all circumstances a life hidden with Christ in God (cf. Col. 3:3). This love of God both excites and energizes that love of one's neighbor which contributes to the salvation of the world and the building up of the Church. This love, in addition, quickens and directs the actual practice of the evangelical counsels.” (*Perfectae Caritatis:6*)

The first class of the Order is found by those members who made this fundamental choice. It gives to all our family, to all of us, the religious identity of the Order and incarnates the unique vocation of the Order which consist first and foremost in the sanctification of its members as it is stated in the article of charter just quoted before.

The first class directs all the other members of the Order, that means all of us, to the radicality of the message of the Gospel. Religious life is always a sign of using weakness to lead to eternal life. This is, let’s say, the basic dimension of religious life. This leads us to recall the address of Pope Benedict the 16 made on February 9, 2013, on the occasion of the 900 anniversary of the solemn privilege *Pie Postulatio Voluntatis* of Pope Pascal II, February 15, 1113.

After having remembered that the Order of Malta continues even in modern times (the Pope and the context of the speech referred to the 19 century and our days now), even in modern times, and I quote the Pope, “In the nineteenth century, the Order opened up to new and more ample forms of apostolate in the area of charitable assistance and service of the sick and the poor, but without ever abandoning the original ideals, especially that of the intense spiritual life of individual members. In this sense, your commitment must continue with a very particular attention to the religious consecration of the professed members – which constitutes the heart of the Order. You must never forget your roots, when Blessed Gérard and his companions consecrated themselves with vows to the service of the poor, and their vocation was sanctioned by the privilege *Pie Postulatio Voluntatis*. The members of the newly created institute were thus configured with the features of religious life: commitment to attain Christian perfection by profession of the three vows, the charism for which they were consecrated, and fraternity among the members. The vocation of the professed members, still today, must be the object of great attention, combined with attention to the spiritual life of all.” (*Benedict XVI, to the members of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, Vatican Basilica, Saturday, 9 February 2013*)

It’s interesting the way the Pope reminds us all of this origin. Religious life takes on different ways. Our Order is defined as a religious lay order. For those who might see a kind of contradiction between the two terms, religious and lay, it’s normal to have this first reaction. I recall that the decree on religious life *Perfectae Caritatis* dedicates one paragraph specifically to religious lay life. Interesting, it’s number 10.

“The religious life, undertaken by lay people, either men or women, is a state for the profession of the evangelical counsels which is complete in itself. While holding in high esteem therefore this way of life so useful to the pastoral mission of the Church in educating youth, caring for the sick, here we are, and carrying out its other ministries, the sacred synod confirms these religious in their vocations and urges them to adjust their way of life to modern needs.”

This is very interesting. I would like to get back to the three vows to show that we are concerned by this even if a majority of members are not religious, these three vows refer also to something that concerns us deeply, because they are a gift of the Holy Spirit and therefore, we feel the spiritual family which embraces all states of life, religious, married, ministers of the Sacrament of Order – they have a real advantage for every one of us.

Poverty establishes a special bond which links us with the suffering Lord. It makes us available in a very special way for the service of the poor and the sick in whom Jesus gets close to us in our humanity. Chastity, which is always for the Kingdom of Heaven and not for other things, has the effect of making our heart, the heart of man, free, thus allowing him to orientate himself towards charity for all men. It is a sublime sign of the celestial goods and makes us more disposed to service.

And in the third place, obedience prepares for the sacrifice of one’s will and for humility, and certainly, we all know that obedience and acceptance of authority is most difficult. I think we have to experience it, as I suppose that many of you could agree with that - when we don’t understand what is the superior is asking and when we are tempted to criticize the superior, it’s always a difficulty. When we accept what the Lord really wants for us and when we can accept the requirements of this vow, then it’s a special, peaceful grace. It is a gift of God. So obedience is extraordinary and with humility, it is an extraordinary gift.

In our Order, let us not forget this, there are many who make a promise of obedience, the members of the second class. It is moving to see what it means to be obedient in people that live this, having made a step, a definitive step to that cannot be abrogated. These are the words of regulations too but the promise is an extraordinary grace.

The Promise of Obedience is not a vow but it already indicates striving towards the perfection of Christian life in conformity with the obligations of their state. We observe that the same article states that all the member of the third class, the Knights and Dames, the Conventual Chaplains, 'ad honorem', Magistral Chaplains, are to conduct their lives in an exemplary manner, "In conformity with the teachings and precepts of the church and to devote themselves to the charitable activities of the Order according to the provision of the code."

As one can see, every member of the Order of Malta, whichever class he or she may belong to, is invited to a special relationship with God, evangelical perfection or striving toward that perfection or living a Christian life in conformity to the obligation of the state of life – we are all moving in the same direction - conforming one's life to the teaching and precepts of the church in order to better accomplish the Order's activities.

So the Order of Malta is the exact opposite of an NGO, a Nongovernment Organization, because of this priority of God's Glory and personal sanctification. Every member is called to holiness. All their work, all our works are inspired by this love which binds them to Christ the Lord. The activities do not in the first place give some moral or spiritual merit. On the contrary, it is the spiritual bond with the Lord and with the church which inspires and makes really fruitful our activities. It's exactly the contrary of moralism, voluntarism or Pelagianism, to use a technical word.

All of this, dear Brother Chaplains, must enlighten and inspire our priestly service, not only inside but also outside the Order. On one side, we help other members to live better their engagement, their commitment. On the other, we are supported by the example of many of them to live better our priesthood. The way many of them experience a broader prayer life, attendance to the word of God, sacramental life, especially the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, their personal and family behavior, their humble attachment to the person or the successor of Peter, all these things can encourage us in our efforts toward sanctification. This, of course, requires that we detach ourselves, separate ourselves from a shallow, mundane life, one not irrigated by the living bond with the person of Christ. It also fosters a special responsibility in our collegial spirit which should be exemplary. And I am especially thinking about the magisterial teachings, both on matters of doctrine and on moral matters *in moribus*, as we say.

I assure you that in less than one year of different meetings, many meetings but only one year of meetings, I have been able to assess everywhere the immense, the huge expectation from our members on these matters. It's extraordinary, the expectation and the hope. The members of the Order expect much from their chaplains - not only spiritual guidance, of course, but also a teaching guidance and attention, availability, a disposition to explain, to transmit with mercy but with clearness and clarity, the teachings of the Church.

The Order encourages its members, in addition, to participate in spiritual retreats, to work toward permanent formation. That's an important point and it's important for members to deepen their knowledge of the moral teaching of the Church by means of sessions of formation or conversations or discussions. It's exactly what is done in the meeting of the chaplain with other

members. We must be careful in the way we help our members concerning these issues. When obsequium pauperum is mentioned, we need to help our members with an explanation of the meaning and relationship of tuitio fidei. “Nurturing, protecting, witnessing and defending the Christian faith” is how it is stated according to the brief definition of the glossary which closes the document, Regulations and Commentary, promulgated on February 18 in 2011 by His Most Eminent Highness, the Grand Master, Prince and Grand Master with the approval of the Sovereign Council.

I would like to invite each of you to familiarize yourself with this fundamental text. It is obviously an essential source for gaining and enhancing our knowledge of who we are and of who we are invited by the Grace of God to become. The religious nature of the Order of Malta, the family of Malta, must be a reason of pride for each one of us. It is our distinctive mark.

We are proud of it because it is a gift of God. And we proud also because of the example of many of our fellow Knights and Dames who, during the centuries, have offered their lives in the spirit of Blessed Gerard, serving the poor and the sick. May Our Lady of Philermo and St. John the Baptist and Blessed Gerard intercede for us and may we be faithful always in our vocation.