

The Religious Nature of the Order of Malta

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Introduction

Understanding the religious nature of the Order of Malta is critical to understanding the Order itself. Yet, as fundamental as this is, the religious nature of the Order is often not well understood. Over time, it has become evident that many Knights and Dames – even those who have been in the Order for years -- are either unaware or vaguely aware of the fact that, with their installation, they have become part of a *bone fide* religious order that includes members who take the evangelical vows.

In fact, just to illustrate this point... A few years ago, I was approached by a Dame, who along with her husband, had been in the Order over 25 years. She said to me: “My husband would like to be a Knight of Justice. How would he go about doing that?” At First, I didn’t know whether or not she was kidding, since Knights of Justice take the vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. So I replied: “Well, the First thing he’ll have to do is to get rid of you.” “Why?” She asked. “Because,” I said, “he has to be celibate, and you know what that means.” “Well,” she replied, “I don’t think that will be any impediment.”

This paper will discuss three major topics underlying the religious nature of the Order of Malta: First, what makes the Order, from a practical perspective, religious in nature? Second, what is the role of the professed Knights of Justice, the religious, in our Order? And, Third, how is our religious nature reflected in the spirituality of the Order?

What Makes the Order Religious?

Make no mistake. Those who enter the Sovereign Military Order of Malta become members of a religious order or what today’s canon law refers to as a religious institute. It’s a religious Order, but a very unique and distinctive one. From its founding almost 1,000 years ago to the present, the Order of Malta has been a religious Order, much like the Franciscans, the Dominicans or the Jesuits, with one unique characteristic: its sovereignty as a recognized international entity. (In this article, we will leave aside the sovereign aspect of the Order since it is obviously not necessary to be sovereign to be a religious institute.) The Order’s founder, Blessed Gerard, and his collaborators were lay religious brothers, taking the evangelical vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. Thus the Order was deemed a *lay religious* Order because the lay religious brothers, not ordained clerics, comprised the membership and governance of the Order.

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Somewhat surprisingly, there is today apparent confusion within the Order of Malta about the significance of being a “lay religious” Order. Let’s try to clarify this. There are basically two types of religious institutes within the Church: lay religious orders and clerical religious orders. Lay religious in the consecrated life are commonly known as “sisters” (nuns) and “brothers”. They are defined as “lay religious” because they are not ordained, like priests and deacons, who are clerics in Holy Orders.

Therefore, a “lay religious order” – the term used to describe the Order of Malta -- is comprised of nuns or brothers living the consecrated life, and it generally does not include clerics in positions of governance. Examples of lay religious Orders are the Sisters of Charity, the Marist Brothers, Sisters of St. Joseph, LaSalle Brothers and so on – all familiar institutes – and, of course, the Order of Malta. Examples of clerical religious Orders are the Jesuits and the Dominicans, just to name a few.

So, the juridical meaning (that is, the meaning under canon law) of a “lay religious order” has nothing to do with combining the laity with the religious in a single order. As you can see, in the case of the Order of Malta, “lay religious” does not mean that the laity (Knights of Magistral Grace and Knights in Obedience) together with the religious (Knights of Justice) comprise the Order. This is a common misconception. Being a lay religious Order simply signifies that the Knights of Justice are lay religious and not ordained clerics. [See *Membership in the Order of Malta: Regulations and Commentary* (Rome: 2011), p. 28]

In the ensuing centuries after its foundation, the Order grew and flourished, as it pursued its charisms of serving the poor and sick and defending the faith. Along the way, the lay religious brothers, or Knights of Justice, welcomed the laity to assist them in the works of the Order. The confreres who have worked with the professed have been known at various points in history as donats, Knights and Dames of Magistral Grace (Third Class), Knights and Dames in Obedience (Second Class), Knights and Dames of Grace and Devotion and Knights and Dames of Honor and Devotion. The latter two categories – Grace and Devotion and Honor and Devotion -- recognize some form of aristocratic standing.

These laymen were attracted by the Order’s charisms, but were not called by vocation to the consecrated or religious life as professed Knights. Working side by side with the Knights of Justice as collaborators, they were generally referred to as “confreres”, meaning “with the brothers”, the Knights of Justice, a term we still use today.²

By the 20th century, the numbers of confreres invited to assist the brothers far outnumbered the professed Knights of Justice.³ In 1955, there were only 17 Knights of Justice. Today, there are 62, a dramatic increase in percentage, and one of the most impressive growth rates in post-Vatican II religious life, but still a small number of professed Knights in an Order of some 13,000. Consequently, in 1956 Pope Pius XII approved the establishment of a Second Class, or Knights in Obedience – later extended to Dames -- to allow the

² The term “consoeurs” has been used with the term “confreres” to refer to Dames and Knights to recognize the presence of men and women (as sisters and brothers in the Order). In its historical context, the tem “confreres” was derived from the Latin (con + frater) and meant “with the brothers”. The term referred to both men and women who worked side by side with the brothers of the First Class, the Knights of Justice. That historical meaning of the word is the context in which “confreres” is used in this paper.

³ [H.J.A. Sire, *The Knights of Malta: A Modern Resurrection* (London: 2016), p. 223.]

laity to share with the professed the management of the fast-growing Order. In this, the Order of Malta was far ahead of other Catholic religious Orders which, largely since Vatican II, have established “Third Orders” or “Associations” of laypeople to assist in their apostolates and ministries. Almost universally, however, the professed in these religious orders have not shared with the laity the governance and leadership of their congregations as extensively as the Order of Malta’s professed have done.

Today, lay persons (members of Magistral Grace and in Obedience) hold the overwhelming majority of the leadership positions. This is true in the three U.S. Associations. In fact, lay leadership has become, for practical reasons, prevalent throughout the global Order.

Certain key positions are still reserved for the Order’s religious, such as the Grand Master, Grand Commander and a majority on the Sovereign Council, the supreme governing body of the Order. But the growth of the Order, especially beginning in the latter part of the 20th century, has resulted in the sharing of governance, between professed religious and their lay confreres in Magistral Grace and in Obedience, in proportions unknown in any other Catholic religious institute.

This welcoming and nurturing the participation of laypersons in the work of a religious Order is a very important initiative. It was strongly encouraged by St. John Paul II and his successors. In *Vita Consecrata* (1996), John Paul’s exhortation on religious life in the Church, he wrote:

Today, often as a result of new situations, many [religious] institutes have come to the conclusion that *their charism can be shared with the laity*⁴. The laity is therefore invited to share more intensely in the spirituality and mission of these institutes. We may say that, in the light of certain historical experiences such as those of the secular or Third Orders, a new chapter, rich in hope, has begun in the history of relations between consecrated persons and the laity.⁵

For the Order of Malta, which has been a leader among religious orders in involving the laity, the relationship between the professed in consecrated life and other members of the Order is critical. Yet, many Knights and Dames today are unaware of even the existence of the professed within the Order, not to mention the centrality of their role in its history, development and future as a religious congregation.

From a very practical perspective, if someday the Order can no longer attract vocations to the First Class and therefore has no professed Knights, then it will cease to exist as a religious Order, for it is the existence of the professed that gives the Order of Malta its religious nature. Without the professed, the Order will lose its status as a religious institute, at risk of becoming just another NGO, fraternal society, or charitable foundation or disappearing altogether. Furthermore, there are some scholars who also believe that the Order, should it survive in some non-religious form, will lose its sovereignty, should there someday be no Knights of Justice.

⁴ This, in the context of the Order of Malta, refers to all non-professed members of the Order, including Knights and Dames in the Second and Third Classes, auxiliary, employees and volunteers.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* (Vatican City: March 26, 1996).

So, the Order of Malta is a lay religious order by virtue of the fact that it has, as members, religious in the consecrated life, Knights of Justice, who have taken the evangelical vows. But it is an Order of 13,000 members, the vast majority of whom are lay men and lay women whose gifts of leadership, care and resolve are essential to the work of the Order.

St. John Paul II encouraged the involvement of the laity in religious orders. He understood that we are in a period of transition in the religious life of the Church, and men and women in the consecrated life are radically diminishing in numbers. He realized that someday many religious institutes may be in the position that the Order of Malta is in today: few professed and many lay men and lay women. He, therefore, placed high expectations and responsibilities upon those in consecrated life to do their best to preserve the religious nature of *Prophetic Witness* institutes in transition.

For the Order of Malta, the pope calls the Knights of Justice to lead by example and to encourage and nurture among the Order's members prophetic witness, servant leadership, and the promotion of care and comity among members – all concepts that are integral to being a religious order.

What do we mean by prophetic witness? The Order of Malta's professed live the consecrated life, taking the evangelical vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. As John Paul II wrote, "the consecrated life constitutes a living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting...it is the living tradition of the Savior's life and message."⁶ All religious, throughout the universal Church, in the consecrated life share this basic reality described by John Paul II. That is, the very nature of their calling consists in a living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting.

At the same time, religious live out their vocations in accordance with the specific rule of their congregations. Some live in cloistered communities, like the Trappists or the Carmelites, while others are fully engaged in the world's activities, like the Jesuits or the Marist Brothers. The Order of Malta's professed are expected to be fully engaged in the world, serving as witnesses to Christ in the workplace, in society, and especially within the Order. As *Vita Consecrata* puts it, "In our world, where it often seems that the signs of God's presence have been lost from sight, a convincing prophetic witness on the part of consecrated persons is increasingly necessary."⁷

It is important to understand what is meant by the "prophetic role" of the professed. By the very fact that consecrated persons have taken the evangelical vows, they publicly affirm, as John Paul says, "The primacy of God and of eternal life, as evidenced in the following and imitation of the chaste, poor and obedient Christ..."⁸ In this public affirmation and attempt to imitate Christ, the prophetic witness is accomplished. This prophetic witness does not depend on the perfection of the consecrated person any more than a valid Mass depends on the state of the priest's soul. Of course, it is incumbent upon those in consecrated life to strive always to be "...the living tradition of the Savior's life and message"⁹, which is no easy task.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Pope John Paul II, *op. cit.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

Yet, their prophetic witness, simply as individuals publicly affirming the evangelical vows, is of great importance to the Church and the faithful.

The long 900 year history of the Order has resulted in a particular tradition of religious life, what canon law calls the “character” of the institute. Canon law (Code 578) requires that we be faithful to that character. Much like consecrated persons in other religious congregations, the professed brothers who founded the Order were men of action in the world. They were busy hospitallers and feared defenders of the faith. Their distinctive mission led to a tradition and a character that saw the Knights of Justice largely living on their own and supporting themselves, except in times of war, crisis, or Order business, when they would be called by the Grand Master to the Convent.

Today, the Knights of Justice adhere to this traditional character of the Order. They are, like their forbearers, men of action, fully immersed in witnessing Christ in the world. They live singly – not in common -- at their own expense. They continue to own property in patrimony, although they forgo the right to acquire or dispose of assets without the permission of their religious superiors, thus putting them in conformity with the vow of poverty. The words of John Paul II in describing the consecrated life have a particular application to the professed of the Order of Malta:

In seeking to live out their consecration to God in the world through the profession of the evangelical counsels in the midst of temporal realities, they wish in this way to be...a witness of Grace within cultural, economic and political life. Through their own specific blending of presence in the world and consecration, they seek to make present in society the newness and power of Christ’s kingdom, striving to transfigure the world from within by the power of the beatitudes.¹⁰

By blending their “presence in the world and [their] consecration”, the Order’s professed Knights demonstrate to the world the “newness and power” of Christ’s kingdom and the “power of the beatitudes”, which it happens are represented by the eight points of the cross of Malta.

Although the popes speak specifically of those in consecrated life, much of what they have taught may, to some extent, be applied to the Order’s Second and Third Classes. In a substantive way, members of the Second Class, who have taken the promise of Obedience, also serve as public witnesses to Christ’s life and work. Although they do not live the consecrated life, Knights and Dames in Obedience have publicly professed their commitment to live a well-examined Christian life and, by virtue of their promise, “they can be called”, as the Code states, “to charges immediately connected with the religious nature of the Order”.¹¹ Although not a canonical vow, the promise of Obedience binds those who take it to the observance of one of the three evangelical vows, making a common cause with the professed. Members in Obedience share with the professed the requirement to witness their faith by being “example(s) of piety and virtue, of apostolic zeal and of devotion to the holy Church.”¹²

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Members of the Order of Malta: Regulations and Commentary* (Rome: 2011), p. 64

¹² *Ibid.* p. 62

Although Knights and Dames of Magistral Grace do not make the promise or take the evangelical vows, they nevertheless should reflect the religious nature of the Order to which they belong. The public declaration made by them commits them to witness the faith, adhere to the dogma of Catholicism and lead exemplary Christian lives. Knights and Dames of all Classes offer prophetic witness in varying ways, according to their stations in the Order, but they are all prophetic witnesses to Christ's way of living, each and every one of them.

Servant leadership

The Second responsibility of the professed Knights of Justice, articulated over the years by several popes, is to provide examples of servant leadership, and to encourage this governance style among the many Knights and Dames in leadership roles in the Order. In short, taking on meaningful and visible responsibilities in religious Orders means adhering to a "servant leadership" approach to management. This is the responsibility of every member of the Order – whether religious or lay.

Catholic notions of servant leadership have been articulated by many national bishops' conferences and by Catholic moralists and theologians around the world. In short, servant leadership has four basic elements.¹³

First, the servant leader must exhibit personal integrity and morality. In the case of the leadership of the Order of Malta, this involves adherence to the doctrines of the Catholic Church and its Magisterium. Leading by example, the servant leader also encourages the importance of moral reasoning and ethical reflection throughout the entire organization.

Second, the servant leader does not focus on organizational goals alone. She also concentrates on the well-being and good of the members of her community, nurturing the members' personal and spiritual growth. Of course, the servant leader must display general managerial competence, but especially in a religious Order, this competence is alone not sufficient. It must be combined with a sense of responsibility for taking actions that lead its members to their full human potential before God.

Third, the servant leader demonstrates a concern for the well-being of all stakeholders. In the case of the Order, these are: the poor and the sick; employees, auxiliary and volunteers; chaplains; Knights and Dames in the Second and Third Classes; and the professed. In the Order, those who are served, "our lords, the sick and the poor" have always been foremost among all stakeholders, and, as the least privileged, must remain so. Yet, the servant leader recognizes the need to be aware of how his stewardship is affecting all stakeholders and mindful of his responsibilities to promote their individual welfare.

Fourth, the servant leader is self-reflective, as a counterweight to the pride and hubris that so often tempt the leaders of well-known and highly regarded organizations. (Take Harvey Weinstein as a contemporary example of the dangers of pride, entitlement and power in a leader.) In the Order of Malta, members of all Classes (First, Second and Third) share in some measure in leadership. Because of their relatively few numbers, the professed rely upon the Knights and Dames in Obedience to support them and the work of

¹³ Peter Servidio, *Servant Leadership: How Catholics Are Called to Lead* (February 5, 2017).

the Order. Those in Obedience do so by assuming leadership roles, as appropriate, and forming communities of priories and sub-priories where the professed find their spiritual homes. Because of the prominence of laypersons within the Order, it is critical that the professed take up the challenge of encouraging servant leadership among all Classes of the Order.

In the end, of course, the servant leader must ask herself the basic question: How would Christ lead in this situation? In doing so, she may recall Jesus' words, "The greatest among you must be your servant,"¹⁴ and "...the greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, the leader as if he were the one who serves... [for] here i am among you as one who serves."¹⁵

Reconciliation and Community

The third role of the religious, according to St. John Paul, is to promote peace and reconciliation within the community. In this, the pope put the onus on the professed to serve as catalysts of institutional peace. But keep in mind that all Knights and Dames, because of the very fact that they are in a religious Order, have a responsibility to promote comity and fraternal care within our community among all members, religious and lay.

In speaking of reconciliation and community, St. John Paul II recognized the special vocation of the professed to what he called "a life of communion in love".¹⁶ Within the Order of Malta, this special vocation clearly extends to the care for laymen and laywomen who have been invited to work alongside the professed brothers and who today play such an important role in the Order.

In his *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People*, Pope Francis echoed John Paul's emphasis on the professed as keepers of peace and harmony within their religious orders. Francis reminded the professed that one of their principal tasks was to spread the spirituality of communion, "... First of all, in their internal life and then in the Church community, and even beyond its boundaries, by beginning or continuing a dialogue in charity..."¹⁷

In the best of times, promoting genuine fraternity within religious orders is no easy task. For the religious in an order with many more lay confreres than professed, it is particularly difficult. But, as Pope Francis says, its difficulty should not dissuade those in consecrated life from going about their work with hope. He writes:

This hope is not based on statistics or accomplishments, but on the One in whom we have put our trust..., the One for whom "nothing is impossible"...this is the hope which does not disappoint, it is the hope which enables the consecrated life to keep writing its great history well into the future.¹⁸

¹⁴ Matthew 23:11

¹⁵ Luke 22:26-27

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Pope Francis I, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People* (Vatican City: November 21, 2014).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

St. John Paul urged active religious institutes to involve the laity in forms of pastoral collaboration, something the Order of Malta has done for hundreds of years. He says that, with proper formation of both the professed and the laity, "...there can be a mutual assistance which fosters an understanding of the beauty of each state of life."¹⁹

This is an important point, for successful collaboration between the laity and religious within a religious congregation requires adequate formation of *both* groups. Within the Order of Malta, a religious congregation, it is worrying that so many laypersons do not understand either the nature of the Order as religious or the role of the professed Knights. Without improved formation and a more collaborative effort between the professed and those in Obedience, genuine cooperation to advance the works of the Order is difficult to achieve.

At the same time, the Order of Malta benefits from its unique structure that includes lay members in Third Class, who make a public commitment to live exemplary Christian lives, lay members of the Second Class, who take the promise of Obedience, and professed members of the First Class, who live the consecrated life. While papal teaching expects much from those in consecrated life, the building and nurturing of community and love within the Order cannot be accomplished without the confreres of the Second and Third Classes. Together, all members of the Order have roles to play in this effort.

The professed must recognize and accept the responsibility placed upon them by *Vita Consecrata* to be servants to their lay confreres. The Second Class, as the Code states, must realize its important status as an "intermediary...within the three Classes of the Order,"²⁰ and as a support and help to the First Class. The Third Class should understand that, although they are not professed nor do they take the promise, they, as the Code further states, are members of a religious order "devoting themselves to the charitable activities of the Order". With greater understanding among all the members, the peace, tranquility and comity of the Order – so desired by the popes for religious congregations – can be achieved.

Finally, we must recognize an important fact about our involvement in the works and apostolates of the Order. That is, as a religious institute, our works are not ends in and of themselves. They are a means to an end. Our works – indeed we – are the hands and heart of Christ in the world. And, yet, too often we become laser beam focused on our ministries, failing to remind ourselves of why we care for the poor and sick. It is not because we are philanthropic, not because we are compassionate and caring, and not because we are scoring points in our quest for eternal life. It is because, in our work with the poor and the sick, or in our promotion of an understanding and knowledge of the faith, we are bringing Christ to people and, in turn, we see Christ in them. This is a fundamental part of being a religious order. Yes, according to canon law, we cannot be a religious institute without Knights of Justice. But neither can we be a true religious order if we do not fundamentally absorb the fact that what we are all about is bringing Christ's healing and care to His people.

In short, our spirituality must be the font or the source of our service. For only a strong and vibrant individual spiritual life can serve as a counter-weight to a world fixated on wealth accumulation and

¹⁹ Pope John Paul II, *op. cit.*

²⁰ *Regulations and Commentary*, p. 64

personal fame, measured today by the number of “likes” and “followers” on social media sites. The religious nature of our Order calls each of us, not just the Knights of Justice, to be contemplatives in action. We are called to work in a world that is increasingly materialistic and hostile to our ideas and sometimes even to our very efforts on behalf of the poor and sick. Isn't it obvious that in our work, we cannot be sustained by humanitarian feelings and motives alone? Rather, we must rely on our spirituality – nurtured by our participation in our religious Order – to support our work and give us the strength to live out our charisms: to defend the faith by promoting an understanding of the faith and to serve the sick and the poor.

This means that our goal of personal sanctification through membership in the Order is also a source of our strength. It is our spiritual strength that enables us to undertake the works of the Order, and to undertake these works in the face of the indifference and even hostility of the world. For without a robust spiritual life, our works will wither on the vine, devoid, as they would be, of spiritual sustenance. Through the development of our spiritual life, as Henri Nouwen writes, we come to recognize God in all things, and God in us. We can then embrace creation, in all its imperfections, as a way of knowing and experiencing God.

Prayer and contemplation – in other words, the growth of our spiritual strength – put us in touch with this reality. Once this happens, the sense of God as present in all whom we encounter in our ministries takes hold – in prisoners, in the sick and dying, in undocumented migrants, in the homeless, and in victims and perpetrators of racism, sexism and abuse. With a spiritual life that comes through our participation in the life of a religious order, we go into the world around us, seeing God everywhere and in everyone. We recognize the God in us, who, in turn, helps us to see God in others.

This nurturing of our spiritual development is a major element of our lives in a religious order. It is the wellspring from which the Knights and Dames draw the strength to carry out their mission in the world. There is, in the final analysis, no clash between contemplation, on the one hand, and action in the world, on the other. The well-known English Benedictine, Dom Wulstan Mork, put it this way: “In fact, both are aspects of the same act of love. We go to prayer out of love, and we go to action impelled by that same love.”

Conclusion

The religious nature of the Order of Malta depends, from a juridical point of view, on the continued existence of the professed Knights who have, throughout history, been referred to as the “heart of the Order”. But if the Order cannot exist without the professed, neither could it continue its global works, so beneficial to millions, without its lay members, the Knights and Dames of Magistral Grace and in Obedience.

It is very important to recognize that all members participate in, benefit from, and contribute to the religious nature of the Order. Canon law may require the existence of professed Knights. The Church may expect the professed to take on a particular responsibility to provide prophetic witness, encourage servant leadership, promote peace and comity, and assist in spiritual growth of the membership. But the laity also plays a critical role in all of these areas. We are at a point in our 900 year old history where the professed

Knights are but 62 of some 13,000. How can we be true to our character as a religious order if we do not work together to promote each other's personal sanctity and to fulfill our charisms?

In a religious institute such as the Order of Malta -- especially one with a large lay element -- the leadership must provide prophetic witness, a living witness to the life and values of Christ. This witness cannot only come from the public profession of the evangelical vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, nor from the taking of the promise of Obedience. This is not sufficient. To be true to the character of our religious Order, each and every Knight and Dame must be an example and witness of Christ's life and love in his or her everyday life.

For the last 60 years, popes have called upon those in consecrated life to bear witness to love and conciliation within their religious communities. This is not an easy task. But in our Order, it is a task that needs doing, not just by the professed Knights of Justice, but by everyone in the Order. Everyone -- including the most recent Knights and Dames of Magistral Grace -- shoulders this responsibility. Facilitating cooperation and comity between and among the three Classes is of critical importance for the future of the Order. The popes have challenged the professed to "spread the spirituality of communion". This is a papal charge that should not be taken lightly.

In the end, it should be apparent that -- apart from the necessary existence of the professed -- the religious nature of our Order is dependent upon the collective and individual commitment of each and every member. A commitment to personal sanctity and spiritual development. A commitment to bearing prophetic witness in the world. A commitment to servant leadership. A commitment to promoting harmony and community within the Order. And a commitment to our works grounded in our faith. These commitments -- and the continued presence of the Knights of Justice -- are, in the final analysis, what is meant by the religious nature of the Order of Malta.

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