

### *Preface*

As a preface to my remarks this evening, I want to express my appreciation to our out-going President, Dr. Peter Kelly, for his outstanding service to the American Association of our Order in these years that have seen two extra-ordinary challenges: first, the challenge of leading us forward on the path of the reform set for the Order by Pope Francis; second, the challenge of navigating a prudent course for us to follow in the time of COVID and its aftermath, in order to live out faithfully our mission of defending the faith and caring for our Lords and Ladies, the sick and the poor. Personally, Peter, I appreciate the ways I have been able to collaborate with you and am honored to have been invited to speak at this dinner.

### *Introduction: a pastor's testimony about the Order of Malta*

I first became connected with Order of Malta at the beginning of my service as Bishop of Oakland, California, in 2003. The Knights and Dames of the Bay Area were, from the first, a great source of encouragement and support in my ministry. At their urging, I joined them on the Lourdes pilgrimage, and, as a result of that experience of their devotion to the sick and manifest evangelical piety, I readily accepted the invitation to become a chaplain – a role I have continued to fill in the American Association after Pope Benedict transferred me to the See of Detroit.

I offer that background to explain what I hope to accomplish with my remarks. I want to offer my testimony as a chaplain, that is as a “pastor,” my witness about what I have seen and come to know about the Order of Malta. My hope, thereby, is principally to reinforce the resolve of each of you to be faithful to your profession in the Order, and also to elicit in all of us praise and thanks to God for the grace that is our membership in the Order.

### *Authentically Evangelical*

First and foremost, I know from experience that membership in the Order of Malta is, what it claims to be: a form of the Gospel way of life. That is, the Knights and Dames do, indeed, aspire to love God with their whole heart and mind and soul, and to love their neighbors, especially their “emarginated” neighbors as a fruit and proof of that divine love. These aspirations to supernatural charity come as a personal response to that call to holiness which the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed goes out from the Heart of Christ to the heart of each of his disciples.

To frame it simply, I have seen that the Knights and Dames of our Order, while not perfect, are steadfast in the commitment which they affirm daily in the “Prayer of the Order”: to be forgetful of oneself and to learn ever from the Holy Gospel a spirit of deep and generous Christian devotion.”

### *Specific Evangelical Charisms*

As a chaplain of the Order for almost two decades, I can testify that profession in the Order is a commitment to a Gospel way of life *which is truly distinctive* – enriched by God the Holy Spirit with *specific graces* (i.e., “charisms”) that mark it off from other ways a disciple can answer the Lord Jesus’ call to follow him.

It seems to me, as a chaplain, that the foundational grace for the other particular charisms of the Order of Malta is precisely its identity as a religious order – an identity most recently and authoritatively confirmed by our Holy Father Francis.

Let me, then, highlight four particular graces or charisms that to me as a pastor seem to follow from Malta’s identity as a religious order, and that underscore for me the worth of the Order for the eternal salvation for its members.

*First:* membership in the Order is, as is the case for all religious orders in the Church, a particular vocation. The inspiration to be part of the Order, if it is authentic, comes as a graced invitation, certainly through the circumstances of one’s life, but ultimately from God. What to make of one’s inclination to join the Order must entail a process of discernment by the light of the Holy Spirit. And the decision to join is rightly recognized as a religious commitment, not principally to an organization, but to Christ himself, in the fellowship of the Order.

*Secondly:* according to my lights, Malta’s identity as a specifically *lay* religious order is a great grace not only for the Knights and Dames, but also for the whole Church. This dimension of the Order’s identity underscores the truth that a disciple need not withdraw from the affairs of the secular world in order to grow in that holiness of life which is a share in the mind and heart of Jesus. This is a truth which I, as pastor, want every Catholic to embrace, and I deeply appreciate the witness to it which you Knights and Dames offer.

*Third:* As a chaplain I have observed that the identity of the Order of Malta as a “Military Order,” with an almost millennium-long tradition, is a grace for its members. This identity as a Military Order brings with it the rich cultural tradition of chivalry, a culture that affirms what the Gospel teaches: that those who have power and worldly resources need to put these goods at the service of those who are powerless. This long tradition does not obscure the demands of the Gospel, but works to amplify them for members of the Order and to sustain their response.

And I testify that in the lives of the Knights and Dames this heritage is not mere mummery but rather a living impulse. So that, referring to the sick and the poor as our “Lords and Ladies” bespeaks a recognition of their noble dignity, of which Knights and Dames are ever mindful and which commands them to offer their self-sacrificial service.

Further, I give my witness that this tradition lives in the “hands on” service of the sick and the poor that is expected of every Knight and Dame. Since the sick and the poor are, indeed, our Lords and Ladies, it would never be enough to send them a donation, to right a check. No, their nobility demands personal service. As a pastor in a country so abundantly blessed with material resources, I give God thanks for a Gospel way of life that clearly call for such.

*Fourth:* As a chaplain I can testify to the mutual support which the members of the Order offer to each other in efforts to “promote God’s glory, the world’s peace and all that may benefit the Order.” Such a commitment comes with a cost, the cost of personal self-sacrifice, and Christ Jesus in his wisdom has given his disciples to each other for mutual encouragement and support, and this is a living reality in our Order.

*Finally:* From my experience as a chaplain, I want to testify to what I know about the Lourdes pilgrimage. Certainly, the Order existed before the pilgrimage, and could continue without the pilgrimage, but I find it hard to imagine another initiative which would exemplify the charisms of the Order as vividly as the pilgrimage to Lourdes. I have seen for myself how during those days the malades become the full focus for all the thoughts and actions of the Knights and Dames, who offer them and their caregivers the devoted personal service which they deserve as their Lords and Ladies. For the Knights and Dames, each is reinforcing the efforts of all on this path of Gospel holiness. And in all of this, the very same kind of life and service which Blessed Gerard gave in the Hospital of St. John in Jerusalem is present again in our time.

To summarize: What I know about the Order of Malta as one of your chaplains is that you, Knights and Dames, have embraced a life dedicated to “Evangelical Charity,” and so have embarked on a course that witnesses to the world that Jesus is Lord and that, faithfully followed, will fulfill the mission for which each of you was created and will bring you at last to the place prepared for you at the Heavenly Banquet. For all these abundant graces, I, as a pastor of souls, give God thanks.

As a post-script, let me affirm, that I am a better priest, from my years of giving pastoral care to members of the Order. The graces and charisms you have received not only enrich you personally and render your service pleasing to God, but they have also enriched my life, and for that I give God thanks tonight.