

## TUITIO FIDEI ET OBSEQUIUM PAUPERUM 900 YEARS IN THE SERVICE OF MANKIND

### Interview with Marie-Thérèse Pictet-Althann, Ambassador, Permanent Observer of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta

On the list of observers to the United Nations you will find the Order of Malta. Although the name might seem familiar, not a lot of people know about this institution. Being curious, we went knocking on their door. We were received cordially by Mrs Marie-Thérèse Pictet-Althann, Ambassador of the Order of Malta here in Geneva.

Ms Ambassador is a former UNHCR staff member, and then an Ambassadors for more than fifteen years. Today she is the Ambassador of the Order of Malta to the United Nations and the international organizations in Geneva, a position she has held now since 2005.

Mrs Ambassador is a dynamic woman; not only is she the Ambassador of the Order of Malta, but she is also the Vice-President of the newly re-launched Diplomatic Club in Geneva, and the founding President of the Geneva Diplomatic Spouses' Circle, which she started in 1999 under the aegis of the Foundation for Geneva. Impressive? Yes indeed, and it's all voluntary work ... So now we leave the floor to Mrs Ambassador.

**Q: Could you tell us about the Order of Malta**



The birth of the Order dates back to around 1048. It all began in Jerusalem where monks started a hospitaller to care for pilgrims of any religious faith or race. Later, this religious order was, recognized by the Pope -- the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. The constitution of the Kingdom of Jerusalem regarding the crusades obliged the Order to take on the military defence of the sick, the pilgrims and the territories that the crusaders had conquered from the Moslems. The Order thus added the task of defending the faith to that of its hospital mission.

When the Christians lost Jerusalem, the Knights of St John moved first to Cyprus and then in 1310 to the island of Rhodes. In Rhodes the defence of the Christian world required the organization of a

naval force, so the Order built a powerful fleet that defended the Eastern Mediterranean, fighting many famous battles. They remained in Rhodes until Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent defeated them; they were forced to surrender in 1523 and left Rhodes with military honours.

There was a period during which they were without a territory, until Emperor Charles V granted them the island of Malta, with the approval of Pope Clement VII. It was established that the Order should remain neutral in any war between Christian nations, but that it should defend Christianity. One of the Grand Masters was Fra' Jean de la Vallette, after whom the capital of Malta, Valletta, was named. This beautiful island as we see it today was built by the Order, with its castles, churches, hospitals and many cultural buildings. They also established a medical university, which at that time achieved world-wide renown.

The Order remained in Malta until Napoleon, in 1798 on his way to Egypt, captured the island and, since he was a fellow Christian, the Order could not defend itself -- so the knights were forced to leave Malta. The Order moved to Italy and very soon to Rome where it has been established since 1834, where it owns, with extra-territorial status, the Magistral Palace in Via Condotti 68 and



the Magistral Villa on the Aventine Hill.

**Q: Would you say that it is mainly a humanitarian organization?**

It remains a lay/religious order as it always was -- that has not changed. We have both lay and religious members in the Order. The original mission is exactly the same: TUITIO FIDEI ET OBSEQUIUM PAUPERUM -- defence of the faith and assistance to the poor, the sick and the suffering -- this has not changed over 900 years. What has changed over the centuries is that the Order has adapted itself and continues to do, but Christian values and the humanitarian principles of impartiality and independence remain the foundation of its work. The Order today still has hospitals, medical centres and is involved in helping the poor in many countries and in providing emergency assistance -- all of which they performed in earlier ages, but on a different scale and in a different environment.

**Q: The Order of Malta has permanent observer status in the United Nations. Does this imply that you are also involved in human rights and other activities?**

Our basic mission is to guarantee people's human dignity. Human rights are a

necessary means for the protection and defence of human dignity, so this is the link to human rights. If we participate in the work of the Human Rights Council, it is because there are a number of subjects that directly influence our work. We have a long list of them since the Council finished just last week. For instance, anything to do with health is very important for us. So you have a Special Rapporteur on the Right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental care which includes the right to public health, medical care and social services. In the same area, we have for a long time been involved in the fight against malaria and tuberculosis through on-going humanitarian programmes in Africa and Asia. Leprosy also belongs to our main areas of interest-- the eradication of leprosy has been on the WHO agenda for some time and we have been concerned by this matter for many centuries already. It has now also been brought up at the Human Rights Council because of the discrimination against people with leprosy and their families. Japan is the country that is mainly behind this initiative. People who are affected by leprosy are automatically discriminated against as they are considered as contagious and

unable to work anymore. It is in this light that the Human Rights Council will look into the matter.

Then, of course, the rights to food and access to safe drinking water and sanitation are very important as they are essential to health and well being. As we have been working a great deal in these fields, we are interested in these subjects too. The Human Rights of Migrants is another subject we follow, especially in light of a recently concluded a co-operation agreement with IOM. Then comes the elimination of violence against women. We have a number of projects in the Democratic Republic of Congo where we provide help to women victims of rape and aggression who are suffering from the terrible consequences of sexual violence.

We are also concerned about the rights of internally displaced persons, because we have joint projects based on agreements with UNHCR for the benefit of refugees and internally displaced persons. We worked quite actively with them in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, in the Balkans and also in Asia, where the rights of internally displaced persons are very strongly involved.

As the fight against poverty is at the heart of the Order's mission, we are concerned by human rights and extreme poverty. Furthermore, the eradication of poverty is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals, so we are involved in contributing to achieving this goal. Then, of course, freedom of opinion and expression and the elimination of all forms of intolerance based on religion or belief are subjects we follow closely, not least because we are a religious

order. We strongly believe that everybody has the right to practice freely their own religion, including the right to change one's religion -- a view that is not shared by all members of the Council!

Then there are country situations. We attended the special sessions on Myanmar, Darfur, Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories. We have humanitarian activities in all of those areas, which mean that we follow these debates as well. Sometimes I take the floor in an inter-active dialogue on a specific subject or make a statement in the general debate, depending on what is most appropriate.

**Q: Are you active only in developing countries where there are human rights issues?**

No, we are active in more than 120 countries around the world. For instance, we have a lot of projects in Germany where we run hospitals, homes for the elderly, etc. Our biggest national associations are to be found in Europe and the United States.

**Q: How does the organization work?**

We have a small government which is based in Rome. The head of the Order is the Grand Master. He is elected among the religious members of the Order -- for life, just like the Pope.

There are four main ministries in our government: the Grand Chancellor, whose office includes those of the ministries of the Interior and of Foreign Affairs with the diplomatic service; the Grand Hospitaller is in fact our Minister of Health, Social Affairs, Humanitarian Action and International Co-

operation and Development; the Receiver of the Common Treasure is the Minister of Finance; and the Grand Commander \_ is in charge of religious aspects.

The Order's organizations worldwide are responsible for carrying out its activities. We have the national associations -- forty-seven altogether -- which are fairly independent, since they have their own budgets and their own projects. We have foundations and international organizations, the most visible one of which is Malteser International, which is the Order's worldwide relief agency. Many of the national associations are members of Malteser International. Thus, for instance, when you have a natural disaster, like the recent floods in Mexico, the national organization would contact the Order for help.

So Malteser International itself would not necessarily become active on the spot as there already exists an association in the country, but they would help with obtaining funds and assistance. The Order itself would carry out fund-raising to help the local organization overcome the crisis.

In countries where we do not have any associations, Malteser International intervenes directly and carries out the relief work. It has a very professional set up and its headquarters are in Cologne in Germany.

**Q: How do you obtain the funds to do all this?**

Funding is as varied as our activities. First of all, each national association carries out its own fund-raising. Donations, gifts, legacies and fundraising campaigns are the main sources of income. For instance, if you walk on the

streets of Vienna or perhaps Paris on certain days, you will see people collecting money for the Order. Many socio-medical care centres and hospitaller establishments receive funding from the national health and social security systems, together with subsidies from governments and foundations. The German national association, for instance, obtains funds from the German Government to run its hospitals or other social welfare centres. One could say that it depends on the country and the national activities.

The Order itself has other kinds of revenue. First of all, the 12,500 members -- the knights and dames around the world -- pay a yearly contribution to the Order. Furthermore we have approximately 80,000 trained volunteers in, as well as about 13,000 professional staff, who work on the different projects. The Order is primarily based upon voluntarism. Among the 13,000 employees the majority are medical personnel - doctors, nurses, etc. Malteser International is very professional, because when disasters strike you need professionals who can act immediately.

The Order has some real-estate properties. It also receives inheritances from persons who leave their possessions to the Order. The Order also has a philatelic service that sells stamps and coins.

For large-scale projects we seek contributions from, for instance, the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) in Brussels, which has the biggest humanitarian budget in the world. One has to submit the projects, and then ECHO decides whether or not to provide funding. We also work as an implementing partner of specialised

agencies in projects in the field. For instance, if we are cooperating with UNHCR in the field, they will use us as an implementing partner, and in a particular crisis they would probably have the funding available.

**Q: You have a specific number of members?**

There are about 12,500 knights and dames around the world. Most national associations like the German, the Austrian, the French, etc., have what they call assistance organizations. In France it is called *Les Œuvres hospitalières françaises de l'Ordre de Malte*, a sub-organization of the national association. There, you will find hundreds of people who are volunteers of the organization, but not necessarily members of the Order.

Among the 12,500 members, there are about forty religious members. For instance, the Grand Master is chosen among the religious members, and they undertake the monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, like any other Catholic religious order.

**Q: Are the knights and dames part of the nobility?**

No, not necessarily! There are different categories. For instance, in the United States where we have the highest number of members, they do not have any tradition of nobility. The nobility concept has remained because of European tradition. Over the centuries, it was mainly men from noble families who joined the Order, but that has changed enormously. The Order has adapted itself to the times, otherwise it would not have survived.

Nowadays, you can say that you have people from all

walks of life. Because it's a Catholic Order, you have to live according to the rules of the Catholic Church. When joining, you commit yourself to serve the Order. Most people perform this task by looking after those in need, taking sick people on pilgrimages to Lourdes, organizing summer camps for the handicapped, etc. I belong to a minority because I'm not involved directly with humanitarian work; I serve in the diplomatic service. However, we are all expected to contribute on the humanitarian front. Most people do this work in their free time because they have their own careers, professions, etc.

A very important point is that according to its Constitution, the Order carries out its humanitarian work "for the sick, the needy and refugees without distinction of religion, race, origin and age".

**Q: Could you tell us a little bit more about the Order's activities in the diplomatic field?**

We have bilateral relations with 100 states today. We became a Permanent Observer to the United Nations in 1994. That, of course, also gave us observer status here in Geneva and in Vienna, with FAO in Rome, with UNESCO in Paris. In this way we work closely with the United Nations.

For us, Geneva is very important because it is here that most humanitarian organizations are based -- UNHCR, WHO, IOM, ICRC, etc. It is evident that even when we work with these organizations in the field, their headquarters are here in Geneva.

**Q: You are a religious order. Do you have relations with the other religious organizations, such as Jewish or**

### Muslim ones?

In the UN there is no other entity like ours. For instance, the Organization of the Islamic Conference is an inter-governmental organization. We do have very close links to the Holy See, because we are an Order of the Catholic Church and our Grand Master has the rank of cardinal in the church.

We elect our Grand Master and the Pope takes note of it. The Pope's representative to the Order is also a cardinal. We are very close to the Vatican in that sense. Of course, the Holy See has its own network, but it is not a humanitarian institution like the Order of Malta.

The Order is involved in the inter-religious dialogue that the previous Pope launched. It is a very important issue, but this takes place in Rome and not in Geneva. Quite a lot of our activities concern places that are not necessarily Christian. For instance, in Aceh we rebuilt a mosque after the Tsunami, and in the Southern Lebanon we work very closely with a well known Shiite foundation. We work with many local NGOs, irrespective of the religious aspect.

### Q: We do not hear a lot about the Order?

Yes, that's true. We do not draw media attention every day, nor do we have a big communications machinery. It is an area we are working hard to improve, particularly since we need to increase fund-raising for our projects. Organizations in the humanitarian field, such as IOM, know about us, but the general public -- as you suggest -- does not.

We encourage the national associations to have websites so that people can locate information about us and our

activities. I also spend quite a lot of my time informing my colleagues about our work, since they do not always know who we are and what we do.

### Q: If people want to contact you, can they do so?

Permanent Observer Mission of the Order of Malta  
3, Place Claparède  
CH 1205 Genève

Tél: +41.22.346.86.87  
Fax: +41.22.347.08.61  
Email: [mission.order-malta@ties.itu.int](mailto:mission.order-malta@ties.itu.int)  
<http://www.missionorderof-malta.org/UNGeneva/>  
The Order's official website:  
<http://www.orderofmalta.org>

*In Switzerland there is an association where you can obtain further information:*  
ASSOCIATION HELVE-TIQUE (1961),  
34, route de Sonzier,

1822 Chermex,  
Tel/Fax: + 41.21.963.38.91  
E-mail: [gillesdeweck@bluewin.ch](mailto:gillesdeweck@bluewin.ch)  
Web: [www.malteserorden.ch](http://www.malteserorden.ch)



DIPLOMATIC SALES / TAX FREE

 **ALCADIS**  
LE SPECIALISTE A GENEVE  
 **HYUNDAI**  **SSANGYONG**

ALCADIS Rhône • Rte du Pont-Butin 14 • T. 022 879 03 33  
ALCADIS Carouge • Ch. de la Marbrerie 10 • T. 022 343 00 20  
[www.alcadis.ch](http://www.alcadis.ch) • [www.hyundai.ch](http://www.hyundai.ch)