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Audience with participants in the General Chapter of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the General Chapter of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters!

I thank Cardinal Silvano Tomasi for his kind words, and I would like to take the opportunity to express my gratitude for all the work he has carried out as my Special Delegate, along with the Working Group that has accompanied him over these last years. I thank Fra' John Dunlap, Lieutenant of the Grand Master, for the expressions of faithfulness and hope that he addressed to me on behalf of you all.

I greet with pleasure the new High Offices and the members of the new Sovereign Council, elected at the General Chapter that you have just concluded. From here you resume with renewed impetus your commitment to *tuitio fidei* and *obsequium pauperum*, giving freely what you have freely received and bearing witness that following Christ in the service of the poor and the sick is a path that replenishes the soul. Indeed, it allows you to encounter the Lord in every face of a brother in need, in every hand you hold in welcome, in every circumstance in which you relive the ideal that Blessed Gerard, your founder, realized by giving his life in the service of "Our Lord's Poor".

I was pleased to learn that the people appointed to the provisional governance last 3 September have gained the confidence of the great majority of the Chapter members. From different territorial situations in the five continents, they have expressed satisfaction and given confidence to those who have "ferried" the Order towards this new path, to apply faithfully the new Constitutional Charter and the new Melitense Code. I am also happy to know that there has been a good discussion on the topics addressed. There will certainly have been no lack of debate, but, as I wrote in the message I addressed to you at the beginning of the General Chapter, the road to follow is the one that comes directly from Christ: *ut unum sint*, so that the world may believe (cf. *Jn 17:21*).

Increasingly united to bear witness to your faith and belonging to the Order; increasingly consistent with the octagonal cross you proudly wear. I am sure that in the election of the Grand Master you will find a sure guide, a guarantor of the unity of the entire Order, in fidelity to the Successor of Peter and to the Church.

In the Chapter of the Professed, which preceded the General Chapter, responding to my invitation and to what has been set forth in the Constitutional Charter and in the Melitense Code, you addressed the issue of the reconstruction, in accordance with the original inspiration, of community life in full observance of the solemn vow of poverty. You have also pragmatically considered the ways to sustain community life and Order's commitment in this regard. I congratulate you for this! I also consider just and prudent the decision not to oblige to community life those who, in giving their vow, knew themselves not to be obliged, and at the same time to affirm that everyone is invited to embrace it. Therefore, those who take their solemn vow from now on, aware that it entails community life, will assume the obligation with full freedom.

I appreciate the decision to reopen a novitiate and I hope that soon others may be added. I pray to the Lord, and I invite you all to do so with me, to send abundant vocations to your Order, not only for the religious profession, but also for the second class, the first collaborator with the professed, and the third class. To keep so many meritorious works alive, it is necessary to pray for this, that the Lord send "good labourers", giving rise to vocations in every class, especially the religious profession, which lives and expresses the vocation of the Order of Saint John to the full.

You have also considered the theme of the initial and ongoing formation of members, indicating some lines that may favour implementation. In particular, there is a need for an adequate formation of the professed – an adequate formation of the professed – as well as of the Knights of the second class, in the concrete sense of the promise of obedience that is made. The formation of the third class should not be neglected, from which I hope solid vocations for the various dimensions of service in the Order may arise.

In the General Chapter my Special Delegate, the Lieutenant of the Grand Master and the High Offices of the provisional governance presented, each one according to his own competences, a detailed report providing information on the state of the Order. Both the questions on the various topics, as well as the relative answers, will enable you to continue with ever greater zeal in your dedication to the many charitable and humanitarian works you carry out, with enthusiasm and Christian fervour. Indeed, the reports of the High Offices, which have been almost unanimously approved, will constitute the lines that, by the will of the Chapter, will be followed by the new governance, ensuring their practical application.

Dear friends, I would like to dwell briefly on the terms that qualify your Order.

Sovereign. It is an entirely unique sovereignty, assumed over the course of the centuries and confirmed by the will of the Popes. It enables you to perform generous and demanding gestures of solidarity, making yourselves close to those most in need, under international diplomatic legal protection.

Military. For the defence of pilgrims and the holy places, as well as Christianity, your Order has written glorious pages. Today, those gestures give way to interreligious dialogue. Moreover, faith in Christ and following him engage you in bearing witness to the Gospel and in the struggle against everything it is opposed to.

Hospitaller. The Order's origins lie in the service Blessed Gerard offered to pilgrims to Jerusalem, in the Hospital dedicated to Saint John the Baptist, who then became your Patron. In that place, Gerard and his first brethren welcomed the pilgrims and those in need, also providing to them the medical care they needed, and this is found again today in your many works. Caring for the sick, you are able to recognize in each one of them the suffering face of Christ, whatever their provenance, nationality or religious creed. And so, when you draw close to them with compassion and tenderness – they are the three methods of the Lord: proximity and closeness, compassion, and tenderness – you yourselves identify with Jesus, the good Shepherd, the good Samaritan. Never forget: works must be well organized, works must be well-managed, but above all they must be a sign of Christ's charity, which is the form all your works should have.

Dear brothers and sisters, you have inscribed a very important page in the history of the Order of Malta, thank you, and you can be proud of this. I urge you to remain faithful to Christ, Teacher and Lord, in going forth and bearing throughout the world his message of healing for the sick and consolation for the afflicted. For this we will one day give an account to God the Father: to have been his faithful witnesses, close to our neighbour, not driven by worldly aspirations, but ardent in service and witness to the Risen One.

From my heart I bless all of you, your families, members, employees, volunteers, the people you assist and your works scattered throughout the world and in so many existential peripheries. And I ask you please: do not forget to pray for me... this job is not easy! Thank you!
