



SOVEREIGN MILITARY HOSPITALLER ORDER
OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM OF RHODES AND OF MALTA

PERMANENT OBSERVER MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS OFFICE
AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN GENEVA

United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week 2022
7th Annual Interfaith Dialogue
The role of faith in the fight against poverty during health crises

Intervention by H.E. Ambassador Marie-Thérèse Pictet-Althann
Geneva, 11th February 2022

Excellencies,
Mr. Executive Director,
Distinguished panelists,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure and honor to participate once again in the Annual Interfaith Dialogue, organized by UNITAR and the Permanent Mission of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. I express my gratitude to H.E. Ambassador Walid Khalid Obeidat and Assistant Secretary-General Nikhil Seth for your kind invitation. The Sovereign Order of Malta is proud to be a founding member and annual participant at this important event.

This year's theme "*the role of faith in the fight against poverty during health crises*" reflects perfectly the nine-century-old vocation of the Order of Malta under its motto *Tuitio Fidei et Obsequium Pauperum*, defense of the faith and assistance to the poor and the sick. Its "Hospitaller" mission puts it at the forefront of healthcare emergencies and relief, including during the current Covid-19 pandemic.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the respect for the dignity of every human being, the principles of tolerance and non-discrimination, which guide the Order's humanitarian mission. Indeed, our faith in God demands that we treat everyone equally, without any distinction of race or religion. This is a core value present in all faith traditions.

In practice, those principles and values translate in the Order of Malta's diplomatic, medico-social and humanitarian activities in 120 countries by providing assistance to those in need and engaging in interfaith dialogue at all levels, whether at international for a – like here today - or on the ground with partners of other faiths, always acting as a neutral, impartial and apolitical entity.

Throughout history, religion and faith have played an important role in health emergency preparedness and response and frontline medical services. Faith community led action provides support, spiritual care, guidance and reassurance reducing fear and stigma, as well as recommendations on health practices that can limit transmission and save lives. As the Covid-19 pandemic has magnified this role, WHO has developed a strategy designed to strengthen its partnerships with the faith community, recognizing that “working with faith partners results in more people being better protected, prepared and resilient to new emergencies and enjoying better health and well-being, including improved trust and social cohesion”.

The ongoing pandemic has also highlighted how interconnected the world and its citizens are, thereby underscoring the necessity for cooperation, dialogue and global solidarity. This is also true in addressing the huge challenges we face, such as climate change, peace and security, displacement and poverty. According to the World Bank’s recent figures the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is largest for the world’s poorest, thus exacerbating already existing inequalities. Globally, three to four years of progress towards ending extreme poverty are estimated to have been lost, as well as momentum on global humanitarian and development initiatives (Sustainable Development Goals—SDGs). The number of poor people has increased across all regions. Vulnerable groups – women, those with low education and those informally employed in urban areas – were particularly hard hit.

As we celebrate the 2022 World Interfaith Harmony Week and observed the first International Day for Human Fraternity on the 4th February, we are called upon to put our differences aside and focus on what unites us as one human family. The values of coexistence, human fraternity and harmony need to be strengthened today more than ever which implies increased inter-faith dialogue, as well as a further commitment to action oriented cooperation between religious and political leaders.

Allow me to mention two recent such events at which we were invited to participate.

First, the eighth **G20 Interfaith Forum** held under last year’s Italian Presidency of the G20.

This annual gathering serves as a place for high-level encounter and dialogue where faith communities and associated organizations can interact with public officials as well as with active scholars and civil society, building on the vital roles that religious institutions and beliefs play in world affairs. Last September over 730 religious’ leaders, professionals, scholars, activists, and government representatives from across the globe gathered in Bologna, Italy. Discussions centered on ideas and proposals related to a wide range of current world issues—from the refugee crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate emergency, and more—all through the lens and experience of religion and faith.

The topic addressed at the opening session of the G20 Interfaith Forum was “Foreign Policy and Religions” under the IF20 central theme “Time to heal”. Participants emphasized the need to heal the wounds caused by the pandemic crisis, but also the social wounds that have mainly affected the weak and poor, pushing them further to the margins of society and often depriving them of their dignity. The concept of healing therefore involves a holistic vision where mind, body and spirit are intrinsically linked. From the discussions on what it will take to heal, four priorities emerged: the critical importance of rapid progress on vaccination against COVID-19 and engaging religious communities, urgent needs to address rising hunger, the central concern of religious communities for those at the margins, the vulnerable, and common calls for action on climate change.

The Forum also recognized that peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts have suffered during the pandemic. Most ongoing conflicts persist and new forms of conflict have emerged, compounding the devastation caused by Covid-19. Religious engagement in diplomacy and peacebuilding, which often continues when governmental and international organizations' work is disrupted, merit expanded support. The Forum called for collaboration with religious groups that addresses conflict, hate speech, and the dangers of extremism, and advances conflict resolution at local and transnational levels.

In his address to the Forum, His Holiness Ignatius Aphrem II, the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, said:

“Once again, religious and political leaders meet together to answer their duty to promote human life, freedom and dignity. It is the responsibility of religious leaders to encourage dialogue among members of the great human family who find themselves sometimes in disagreement or conflict. Equally important is the role of legislators and politicians in legislating laws that protect people and help in the advancement of societies.”

The second event of interest in this context was the **Global Interfaith Summit** organized during the Dubai Expo last November. The objective of this summit was to build bridges among those of different faiths through our similarities and shared human values. It found that tolerance and inclusivity, are not only moral urgencies, but also the key to unlocking the enormous energies of complex societies. On that occasion the United Arab Emirates' Minister of Tolerance and Coexistence launched the “Global Tolerance Alliance”, a platform promoting tolerance and understanding covering a wide variety of topics ranging from culture and language, interfaith appreciation, through economics, innovation, medicine, science and technology.

Through its long worldwide experience, the Order of Malta has initiated a faith and humanitarian diplomacy which is reflected in its global action. Faith-based diplomacy promotes interfaith dialogue and recognizes the key role religious leaders can play in conflict resolution and peace building To-day, as in the past, the Order of Malta mobilizes its resources to provide emergency and medical care, psychological and spiritual assistance to those isolated, while at the same time, continuing its daily activities in the fields of food security, shelter, the fight against human trafficking and disaster risk reduction. Supporting and advocating for the role of faith-based institutions, facilitating interreligious dialogue – particularly in the Middle East – and promoting international humanitarian and human rights law remain among the Order of Malta's primary goals.

In concluding I would like to quote from Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' message commemorating last week's International Day of Human Fraternity: “At the core of all the faith systems and traditions is the recognition that we are all in this together and that we need to love and support one another to live in harmony and peace in an environmentally sustainable world. ... The need for spiritual guidance has never been greater. It is imperative that we double our efforts to spread the message of good neighborliness based on our common humanity, a message shared by all faith traditions.”

Thank you for your attention.