



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

### **HRC61 side-event**

## **Standing with persecuted Christians - Defending the faith and Christian values**

**Intervention by H.E. Ambassador Marie-Thérèse Pictet-Althann, Permanent Observer**

*4 March 2026, Geneva*

Excellencies, Distinguished panellists, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We thank the Permanent Mission of Hungary for organizing this important event, which not only raises awareness on the rise of persecution of Christians across the world, but also gives us the opportunity to speak and show our shared commitment in protecting victims.

We greatly value our cooperation with the Government of Hungary, especially on this topic, considering our historical relations dating back centuries. Today, the Humanitarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta (MMSz) is the largest social institution in the country. Only a fortnight ago, the President of the Republic of Hungary paid an official visit to the Prince and Grand Master of the Order in Rome.

Our shared commitment to humanitarian action has gradually evolved into the close and intensive cooperation that characterizes our partnership today with the Hungarian authorities, notably through the Hungarian Association of the Order of Malta and the Hungarian Relief Service, in support of our charitable activities.

This convergence of humanitarian concerns was further reflected in another significant development in the relations between the Sovereign Order of Malta and Hungary, namely the signing, in 2019, of a Memorandum of Understanding aimed at strengthening cooperation and enhancing the response to the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities in crisis regions. This MoU was renewed during the Grand Master's 2024 State Visit. Additionally, we welcome the continued dialogue between the Order and Hungarian authorities, including our commitment to further strengthening cooperation in the social sphere, particularly within the Hungary Helps Program.

In a similar spirit to Hungary, the Order of Malta shares its commitment to persecuted Christians and other religious minorities as a concerning issue. Rooted in its core principles, of the preservation of human dignity and taking care of all those in need.

The Sovereign Order of Malta is one of the oldest institutions of Western and Christian civilization. It is a unique institution in the world, as it is at the same time a lay religious order of the Catholic Church, a subject of international law, and a global humanitarian actor.



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The Order of Malta is deeply concerned about the increasingly notorious persecution of Christians, a persecution that is silenced or not dealt with sufficiently. The concerning number of victims affecting 8 million new Christians annually is by no means a declining trend. We cannot allow this to affect more people, because no human being deserves to suffer from any of these practices. But above all, because we should not be killed for our faith.

Christian communities are shrinking in several parts of the world due to a mix of religious persecution, political instability, legal discrimination, and forced displacement. Economic collapse leading to forced displacement and demographic differences are also important factors. The shrinking is concentrated in historic heartlands like parts of the Middle East, the Holy Land where ancient Christian communities are becoming much smaller or in danger of disappearance.

The respect for human rights in general and the right to freedom of religion or belief in particular is one of the root causes for persecution. To counter this, it is essential to strengthen the Rule of Law and legal protection in countries concerned. Governments should also take into consideration the special needs of Christian minorities in political and policymaking decisions.

Furthermore, a number of measures can alleviate the pressures on persecuted populations through:

- International diplomatic pressure, impose sanctions on officials responsible for severe abuses, tie foreign aid to human right protection, raise cases at the United Nations, appoint special invoice for religious freedom,
- Protection and security measures in high-risk areas, community base security system, protection of churches and religious sites, early warning systems MOB violence, policy reforms and training
- Economic support and reconstruction, rebuilding homes and businesses, micro finance programs, job creation initiatives, restoring schools and clinics
- Interfaith dialogue/initiatives and social cohesion, countering extremism propaganda and community mediation program, joint Muslim-Christian, Hindu-Christian or other initiatives community mediation

The Order of Malta is fully committed to supporting persecuted Christians rather than political intervention, its contribution focuses on protecting dignity, preserving communities and promoting religious freedom through service. Through its humanitarian activities in 130 countries, support is provided, regardless of race, religion or origin, yet with a focus on supporting Christian communities at risk of displacement or extinction.



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We have been especially active in Syria and Iraq, helping displaced Christian communities after ISIS, in Lebanon supporting vulnerable Christian families and in the Holy Land. For example, in Iraq the Order helped rebuild Christian villages in the Nineveh Plains. In summary, the Order of Malta combats the persecution of Christians primarily through:

- Humanitarian relief: emergency assistance while providing much needed spiritual support
- Medical care: hospitals and clinics, mobile medical units, trauma and rehabilitation centres, programs for the elderly and disabled
- Diplomatic advocacy: we raise concern about religious persecution, advocate for religious freedom, and promote humanitarian access in crisis areas
- Reconstruction and refugee support: we assist also Christian refugee fleeing persecution; helps families remain in their ancestral homelands; support schools and community rebuilding projects

The Order of Malta's work is rooted in its dual mission of *Tuitio Fidei* (protection of the Faith) and *Obsequium Pauperum* (service to the poor). By combining humanitarian action, diplomacy, and spiritual solidarity, the Order not only alleviates suffering but also strengthens the presence and witness of Christianity in regions where it is under threat.

Thank you.