

Mass for St John's Day with the Order of Malta  
Brompton Oratory, London, June 24 2010

My dear brothers and sisters of the Order and friends,

Recently, though on different dates, each of the Bishops' Conferences of these islands celebrated a Day for Life.

In Scotland that day is marked each year on the feast of the Visitation, May 31, the day which the Church places between the Annunciation and this feast of the birth of St John the Baptist to recall Our Lady's visit to her cousin Elizabeth who was already advanced in her pregnancy.

That scene of the Visitation at which Mary exclaims those most memorable words ... *Magnificat anima mea Dominum* ... is a great paean to life, and what life!

The meeting of the unborn incarnate son of God, and John the Baptist, whose birth we mark today in such solemnity, between the Queen of Heaven and St Elizabeth was surely the most grace-filled encounter in human history.

Our Order is proud to bear the name of the Baptist ... The Order of St John of Jerusalem is one of the oldest institutions of Western and Christian civilisation. Present in Palestine in around 1050, it is a lay religious Order. Its 12,500 members include Professed Friars and others who have made vows of obedience. The other Knights and Dames are lay members, devoted to the exercise of Christian virtue and charity.

What distinguishes the Knights of Malta is our commitment to reaching our spiritual perfection within the Church and to expending our energies serving the poor and the sick.

The Order of Malta remains true to its inspiring principles, summarised in the motto "Tuitio Fidei et Obsequium Pauperum", defence of the Faith and assistance to the poor and the suffering, which become reality through the voluntary work carried out by Dames and Knights in humanitarian assistance and medical and social activities in over 120 countries.

Today the Church is faced with many contradictions to its faith and practice, and as the Church is challenged, so too the Order of Malta is challenged, perhaps more radically than at any point in its history, to live up to its motto, yes even to a heroic degree.

The care of the “*pauperum*” can take many guises over the centuries. But I would say that today the most needy poor are those at the end of their natural life, the chronically sick and terminally ill.

Many are the forces today campaigning for practices which are not only hell-bent on undermining our traditional understanding of the value and dignity of human life, but are also intent on undermining the confidence and trust which should be the hallmark of the doctor patient relationship.

In a year in which the Holy Father is to beatify that great Oratorian whom we recall with a special fondness in this magnificent Oratory, Cardinal John Henry Newman, we can do no better than look at his beautiful description in the *Dream of Gerontius* of the death of the faithful Christian, “fortified by the rites of Holy Church” and surrounded by the love and support of family and friends.

This is a very different experience of death to that considered by some in modern society as an exit from this world to be completed at a time of one’s own choosing, a dangerous approach exemplified by the *End of Life (Scotland) Bill* currently being considered by the Scottish Parliament and other similar initiatives which have, at various times, been introduced at Westminster.

We must be vigorous in opposing such attacks on the fundamental dignity of human life, remembering the heroic, knightly origins of our Order and applying the gifts of fortitude and prudence to the fight ahead.

We must be pro-life issues in the widest sense. It is important to remind ourselves every so often that being pro-life does not mean confining our interest only to the pre-birth and terminal stages of human existence, but rather means an embrace of the whole of God-given life: beginning, middle and end.

This has meant that The Bishops’ Conferences of these islands have focused on a variety of themes over the years in their Day for Life message which have not fallen into the typical pro-life category. A couple of years ago our focus was on living with disability – a subject with which many members of our order are well acquainted and able advocates; other topics covered have included mental health issues and dealing with suicide.

This year, as I have said, given the imminent threat in our various legislatures, we have focused on dying, offering a spiritual and practical *vademecum* which tries to offer a fully holistic and fully Catholic key to understanding the process of dying, seeing it not as the final curtain to life, but rather the precious moment of transformation from time to eternity.

We started by considering that great paean to life at the Visitation, we conclude with a reflection on the mystery of Christian death.

What a journey ... how far we have come in a few short minutes.

But perhaps we have not come very far at all ... Death is perhaps an unusual choice as a theme for a “day for life” ... but that paradox lies at the heart of our Christianity and the heart of our Order’s mission. It is a choice made under the shadow of the cross, but illuminated by the empty tomb.

For, as St Francis of Assisi put it so memorably: “It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”