

## **The Knights of Malta.**

There are some strange goings-on in Rome at the moment. Two of the world's smallest sovereign states both headquartered there are having a spat over who calls the shots. The dispute arose when a senior official of the Sovereign Military order of Malta (SMOM or The Knights of Malta), Albrecht Freiherr von Boeselager, the Grand Chancellor, was forced out under protest. He was instructed to resign by the Grand Master, Fra' Matthew Festing. He initially refused but was reminded by Festing of his oath of obedience – so he went. His offence apparently had been to sanction the supply of condoms to combat the spread of Aids as part of the Order's extensive charitable operations. The use of condoms, even to save lives, is contrary to Catholic doctrine.

Now the Pope, being of a more liberal persuasion, called for the setting-up of a special committee, chaired by Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, to look into the controversy. The Order objected and so Festing wrote the Pope a disingenuous and unctuous letter telling him in so many words that he had no authority to interfere in the internal affairs of another sovereign state.

In a publicly issued statement the Order said;

“The Grand Magistry of the Sovereign Order of Malta has learnt of the decision made by the Holy See to appoint a group of five persons to shed light on the replacement of the former Grand Chancellor. The replacement of the former Grand Chancellor is an act of internal governmental administration of the Sovereign Order of Malta and consequently falls solely within its competence.”

Herein lies the rub; the Order's long-recognised claim to be independent is a myth. To be truly sovereign, a country must be wholly independent but the SMOM cannot be; it owes an ultimate allegiance to the Vatican State. The Pope could, if he wished, either excommunicate or dissolve the order. It would then cease to exist as a recognized state. It follows therefore that it is a vassal and not sovereign.

This “state” fails to fulfill the basic requirements of nationhood; it has no land to speak of, almost no citizens and is subsidiary to a larger state even though it may issue passports and stamps, make its own laws, have its own court and send ambassadors to 102 countries. But these are not sufficient conditions for statehood.

The SMOM was officially constituted by a bull of Pope Paschal II in 1113 and given the islands of Malta in 1530 by the Emperor Charles V of Spain. Of course the Maltese were not consulted.

Its leader is elected for life and goes by the portentous title, *His most eminent highness ..... Prince and Grand Master of the Sovereign, Military, Hospitaller, Order of St John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta*. If we unpick this we would expect to find a state with sovereign territory in Rhodes and Jerusalem but it has none. The state has no army, so it is not military in any current sense. **The title is a history lesson not a substantive reality.**

It relinquished its last territory in 1798 when Napoleon forced it to quit Malta. (Malta has been an independent sovereign nation since independence from the British in 1964.) In 1998, Malta granted the Order a 99 years lease of part of an abandoned fort. Other than this the Knights have a lavishly appointed palace on the Via Condotti in Rome and a villa on the Aventine Hill. This is the total sum of their land holdings.

In fairness to the Knights they do undertake charitable work and have built hospitals but then so have *Medecin sans Frontiers* but it is not a country. It hardly needs stating that one does not have to be a state to do good works. The Aga Khan is an hereditary Prince who builds hospitals and has many more adherents than the Knights of Malta, yet he has no state.

What else does the order do apart from occupy lavish properties and award each other pompous titles? It has branches in all the major Roman Catholic countries and others with large Catholic populations such as UK. The branches hold banquets where the male knights dress in archaic uniforms and conduct ceremonies.

The “Sovereign Council” governs the Order; it is elected from the

highest rank of knights, the so-called knights of justice (or professed knights) – who have to swear vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. The officers of the Sovereign Council are holders of pretentious titles such as Grand Commander and Grand Hospitaller. To reach the highest level of knighthood within the order it is still necessary to be male, white, have “noble blood” and be invited to join - one cannot apply – all of them are European, of ancient Catholic lineage, and many have hereditary titles of nobility; so it follows that the Pope would not qualify on all counts. The order justifies this wholly unacceptable discrimination as follows, “The knighthood nature explains and justifies the maintenance of the *noble nature* of the Order, as most of its Religious Knights came from chivalrous and noble Christian families.” – what humbug. This strikes me as decidedly un-Christian; surely Christ taught that all are equal in the sight of God.

Those countries that accord official recognition to this *faux* state should consider why they do so. By what right should an aristocratic, gentlemen’s club be granted the privilege of being called a country? It makes no more sense than according nationhood to Whites.

It would increase their prestige in the world to assume some humility as befits a religious order and renounce its ludicrous claim to be an independent country. The Order would still continue with its admirable charitable work but might be advised to become more in tune with contemporary opinion by recruiting some ordinary people, those without sixteen heraldic quarterings, to its highest echelons.

Could this dispute indicate that the Pope is re-thinking the use of condoms in certain circumstances? Does he think the Order was wrong to dismiss von Boeselager – it would appear so? Will the Pope stand his ground or will he climb down? Possibly a diplomatic fudge, such as joint commission, might be a compromise solution.

Whatever the next step, the SMOM must to drop its claim to nationhood. History moves on and so should the Knights of Malta.

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