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STATEMENT

BY

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to the United Nations

**HIGH-LEVEL DIALOGUE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON
INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING AND
COOPERATION FOR PEACE**

New York, October 5, 2007

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Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta is honored to take part in this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace.

General Assembly Resolution 61/221 recognizes that “respect for religious and cultural diversity in an increasingly globalizing world contributes to international cooperation, promotes enhanced dialogue among religions, cultures and civilizations and helps to create an environment conducive to the exchange of human experience.” My distinguished colleagues are as acutely aware as I am that, in a world where more and more peoples of different religious and cultural backgrounds are living together, it is crucial that social policies encourage religious and cultural interactions in a free, respectful and tolerant environment. Today, true coexistence between social groups is only possible if everyone recognizes some fundamental ethical criteria.

Our world still suffers from war and armed conflict, continually wounded by major injustices. The Informal Thematic Debate on ‘Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: obstacles and opportunities’ held here in early May was a useful forum for the Order to examine, among experts, how religious differences often worsen the effects of and are used to justify, these conflicts. Cultural and religious interactions will not survive

if we do not respect every single human being. The right to life and the dignity of the human person is a basic ethical value that must be universally recognized.

It is precisely this awareness that gives the Order of Malta confidence to hold its Christian origin and ethos firmly and positively, while reaching out in service and in membership to peoples of other religious, cultural and ethnic identities. As underlined by our Grand Master in his address to the Diplomatic Corps last January, members of the Order experience their faith not as an instrument of evangelization or proselytism but as a way of living in the service of others, of the poor and the sick, in an authentic spirit of humanity that recognizes the presence of God in the person who suffers, *regardless of their race, origin, or religion.*

Mr. President,

A prudent and sincere dialogue among different cultures, civilizations and peoples can only be carried out in a space where the fundamental rights of men and women are respected. It is appropriate to recall, in the light of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, the two basic reasons for the struggle by the Catholic Church, in close alliance with the other Christian churches, for the promotion of human rights, and particularly, religious freedom. These are: The eminent dignity of the human being and the necessary interpersonal solidarity based on our universal fraternity.

It is noteworthy that the international community has continuously shown interest in the last decades in protecting human rights and fundamental liberties, including respect for freedom of conscience and of religion, in major documents such as: the UN Universal

Declaration of Human Rights; the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; and the Final Act of the Conference on European Security and Cooperation.

Mr. President,

A significant cause of interreligious and intercultural problems, which needs to be addressed, is the social gap between the rich and the poor. In this area, Governments and religious groups must recognize that development, peace and security, and human rights are interlinked. The world's agenda is also the agenda of the world religions. It is in this spirit that the Catholic Church emphasizes education and agrees with other faiths on promoting the "integral development of man" and the "development of the whole man", according to the famous statement by Pope Paul VI in the Encyclical "Populorum Progressio."

His Royal Highness Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan had this in mind in his March 15th, 2007, address in Brussels on the subject of the coexistence of civilizations. He said that change should be sought "from the bottom up", filling the gap between the intelligencia, the government and the general public and "motivating the silenced majority" to help build a new international order. Prince Hassan said he was working to create "public spaces for co-existence" and discussion since, to quote from UNESCO's Constitution, "wars begin in the minds of men...(so) it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed".

Mr. President,

We all know that religious and cultural interactions will not bear fruits without a free, respectful and mindful environment, without the awareness that religion is a choice that improves the quality of our lives, not a weapon against our brothers. We welcome the fact that the United Nations has long been involved in the question of elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. Far from being the opiate of the people, authentic Religion places human objectives in their true proportions and stimulates respect of basic ethical values that are indispensable to coexistence among peoples. Learning respect for others and for dialogue is an essential element of human education. In this context allow me to remind us that the distinguished Theologian John Courtney Murray, SJ, once said that intolerance was a terrible vice, but that toleration was not much of a virtue. We must go far beyond tolerance. He knew that the greatest outrages in the last century were committed not by religious communities, but by secular totalitarian regimes of the Right and Left that murdered tens of millions of people.

Mr. President,

If the objectives of this dialogue are to be attained there will first have to be a renewal of attitudes and far-reaching social changes. Doing so will require public and private organizations to gradually align themselves with the strengthening and betterment of human qualities and for the protection of human rights. These organizations must dedicate themselves to be at the service of the dignity and destiny of humanity; safeguarding basic human rights under every political and social system in spite of the

considerable effort involved. It is this sentiment that led the General Assembly to emphasize in resolution 61/221 the need for all levels of society, including the private sector and the media, to become agents for change by encouraging efforts which strengthen freedom, justice, democracy, solidarity, cooperation, pluralism, respect for diversity of culture and religion or belief, dialogue and understanding, which are key ingredients for social cohesion and peace.

To help individuals to carry out more carefully their obligations towards themselves and towards the various groups to which they belong, they must be carefully educated to a higher degree of culture through the employment of the immense resources available today. Therefore, the Order of Malta commends UNESCO for its efforts in fostering the use of information and communication technologies, such as community radio, newspaper and the Internet, in communities and schools to promote a culture of peace and peace education on issues related to non-violence, tolerance and mutual understanding. For the more deeply we come to understand the ways of thinking of those who think and act differently from us in social, political, and religious matters the more easily we will be able to enter into dialogue with them. Above all, we must undertake the training of youth from all social backgrounds if we are to produce the kind of men and women so urgently needed today, men and women who not only are highly cultured but are generous in spirit as well.

Thank you, Mr. President