

An Exclusive Interview with H.E. Dr Michael Thomas P. Sprenger-Menzel, Grand Master of the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede

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His Excellency Dr. Michael Thomas P. Sprenger-Menzel, Grand Master of the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede with His Excellency The Most Reverend Archbishop Emeritus of Vaduz, Dr. Wolfgang Haas

H.E. Dr. Sprenger-Menzel holds multiple degrees in fields such as Business Administration, Economics, Law, and Theology. His career includes roles as a Chartered Public Accountant at KPMG, senior management positions in the German industry, and service as a Senior Government Official. He is also an Associate Professor in Cologne, focusing on Business Administration, Economics, and Governance, and has authored several scientific textbooks. His extensive background in academia, industry, and government brings a unique perspective to the mission of the Real Compagnia.

Through this exclusive and humbling dialogue, we explore the enduring legacy of the Mercedarian Family and the unique role the Real Compagnia plays in continuing the spiritual and social mission of its founder, **St. Peter Nolasco**.



The Coat of Arms of The Real Compagnia Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede

The Investiture: Your Excellency, what is the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede?

Governatore: *The Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede* is a humble member of the Mercedarian Family, which is composed of all the members of the Order of Mercy, such as the Friars (Priests and Brothers), the Mercedarian Cloistered Nuns and many Mercedarian Congregations of Sisters, *the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede*, the Third Order of Mercy, and a large number of Sodalities, Confraternities, and Archconfraternities of Our Lady of Mercy, who pray, work and evangelize in America, Africa, Europe (especially Southern Europe), India and other places.

The Investiture: What are the origins of the Order of Mercy?

Governatore: The Order of Mercy was founded in Barcelona, in what is now the Kingdom of Spain, on 10 August 1218 by St Peter Nolasco (1189-1256) and King James I, King of Aragon (1213-1276) and King of Mallorca (1229-1276). As a young man, Saint Peter Nolasco began collecting money to free slaves.



St Peter Nolasco and King James I, King of Aragon, Founders of the Order of Mercy

The Investiture: To free slaves?

Governatore: Yes, to free slaves. This was the result of a vision that he, King James and the Bishop of Barcelona had of the Virgin Mary, who urged them to create an order of religious knights to free Christian captives and slaves held and sold by the Muslim Moors, who at that time occupied a large part of Spain and many islands in the Mediterranean.

The Investiture: How was the Foundation born?

Governatore: St Raymond de Peñafort, the confessor of St Peter, a renowned Dominican professor of canon law and legal advisor to the Holy Father, supported the Order by giving the Knights the Rule of St Augustine.

Pope Gregory IX approved the Order of Mercy by papal bull on 17 January 1235. It was called *The Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy for the Ransom of Slaves*, (de Merced (Spanish)/della Mercede (Italian), O. de M. (*Ordo Beatae Mariae de Mercede Redemptionis Captivorum*, abbreviated, *O. de M.*). Its mission was to free Christian slaves by ransom or other means.

It was founded as a royal and (at the same time) papal military order of religious knights, which also included some priests to administer the sacraments. The early knights aided the king's army in the reconquest of Spain, the Balearic Islands, and other larger and smaller islands, freeing many Christian slaves in the process. However, the ransoming of slaves remained the main focus of the Order.

The Investiture: What was the role of King James I?

Governatore: King James I, who had the same vision of the Virgin Mary as St Peter Nolasco, took the Knights of Mercy under his personal protection and gave them apartments and a chapel in his royal palace in Barcelona as their first headquarters. He also granted them the coat of arms of the Kingdom of Aragon as their emblem in perpetuity.

The Investiture: Why is the feast of Saint Laurence important for the Mercedarians?

Governatore: Bishop Berenguer de Palou took the vows of St Peter Nolasco and his fellow knights on the feast of St Laurence in 1218 in his Cathedral of the Holy Cross of Jerusalem in Barcelona and added a silver cross (symbol of the Holy Cross of Jerusalem) to the shield (above the royal crown) as a special expression of his support for their work of liberating the slaves.

The Investiture: The Real Compagnia is also a royal institution. Why is this?

Governatore: The Order of Mercy was canonically constituted as an order of religious knights, and from the beginning, it was *de facto* both a royal and a religious order, having been approved and praised in the first papal bull in 1235 and in many subsequent papal bulls. The kings of Aragon, and later of Spain, continued to recognize the Order, and the historical links can still be seen today, since, as a result of the work and effectiveness of the Order, King Charles II granted the Master Generals of the Order the rank and title of *Grandes de España* (Grandes de España), historically the highest ranking members of the Spanish nobility in perpetuity.



Real Compagnia pilgrimage to Altötting, the Pontifical Mass of the Immaculate Heart of Mary was celebrated HE Mons. Wolfgang Haas, Archbishop Emeritus of Vaduz, 8 June 2024

The Investiture: Can we see this in the Mercedarian habits?

Governatore: The first knights wore off-white habits made of unbleached wool and bore the coat of arms of Aragon, which consisted of a red shield with a cross patté in chief with five vertical gold bars below the crowns with the royal crown and the silver cross (of the Cathedral of Jerusalem) on top.

The Investiture: There were two other great events in the early days of the Order.

Governatore: You are right. First, in 1265, St Mary of Cervellon founded the branch of the Order of the Merciful Sisters, and the nuns played an important part in the life of the Order almost from the beginning. The second event was the conflict between the knights and the clergy over the leadership of the Order. As a result, Grand Master Raimundo Albert petitioned Pope Clement to change the Order of Mercy from a group of religious and lay knights to a purely clerical order, which he did. In 1398 Pope John XXII confirmed Raimundo Albert as the first Master General of the Order.

The Investiture: What happened to the Knights?

Governatore: The majority of the Knights joined the newly formed Military Order of Montesa. However, some of them never completely severed their links and allegiance with the Order of Mercy and the Mercedarians. For example, the tombs of former Knights of Mercy, commanders, and lieutenants of the Order on the island of Malta (from the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries) bear witness to these contacts.

The Investiture: Was the Order successful in its mission?

Governatore: During St Peter's lifetime, the Order freed more than 2,600 slaves from captivity. By 1315 the Order of Mercy had established 57 houses and 26 churches in Spain, France, and Italy. Its priests and knights traveled widely on missions to rescue slaves, many of whom were martyred in the process.

Some took the place of slaves to await ransom. This was the basis of the Order's 4th vow, after the usual ones for religious orders (poverty, chastity, and obedience).

St Raymond Nonnatus was a famous member of the Order of Mercy who took the place of a slave. He converted several of his captors to Christianity so that his mouth was padlocked. He survived his captivity to become a Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church in 1239 and was later canonized. In all, the order freed more than 80,000 slaves between 1235 and 1803, when the last official liberation took place.

The Mercedarians accompanied Christopher Columbus on his voyage of discovery to the Americas and subsequently established a strong presence there as part of their mission to convert the Indians. The first Mercedarian houses in South America were founded in Honduras in 1550 after King Charles V of Spain granted the Order permission to establish itself throughout South America. By 1526, the Order had grown to 106 convents and had the resources to expand.



Professi di Devozione, Professi and Donati of the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede

The Investiture: Did the Order of Mercy change over time?

Governatore: Not much, but in the 17th century the Order was more or less transformed into a mendicant order of friars, very similar to the Dominicans, who raised money for their remaining mission of ransoming slaves. To this end, much of the Order's work centered on raising funds to pay the ransoms, a cause that was readily accepted by the nobility and the general populace due to the large number of Christians taken as slaves. Many privileges granted by the popes aided this work.

In 1840 the Order was suppressed in Spain but continued to flourish in South America and Italy with its Master General Pedro Armengol Valenzuela, from then on residing in Rome, who ensured not only its survival but even its further growth.

The Investiture: How does the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede fit into all this?

Governatore: In 1926, the energetic new Master General Giovanni del Carmelo Garrido, who brought growth and health to the Order of Mercy after some bitter almost 100 years in the 19th century, restored the category of *Knights of Mercy* that it had in the first two centuries of its existence.

The new Knights found ready acceptance in society, with members of the royal family such as **King Alfonso XIII of Spain** and **Queen Eugenia**, and their son, the **Infante Alfonso Prince of Asturias**, being **Knight Commanders**.



King Alfonso XIII of Spain and Queen Eugenia, 1905

European nobility such as the **Duke and Duchess of Mecklenburg-Strelitz**, the **Archdukes Albert and Franz Joseph of Habsburg**, and the **Princes Colonna of Italy** were also prominent members, to name only a few.

Admiral **Nicholas Horthy, Regent of Hungary**, and the **President of Argentina** were just some of the non-aristocratic leaders who were also members of the Order.

The Queen of Spain, Victoria Eugenia, was a particularly devoted Dame of the Order and was buried in the habit of a **Dame of the Order of Mercy**. In 1928, King Alfonso of Spain issued a decree reinstating the Knights of Mercy as a (royal) order of chivalry, but without granting nobility.

The Investiture: Was the Vatican happy?

Governatore: Not exactly. In 1930, a commission of cardinals ordered the Master General to stop the creation of knights and even the use of traditional terms such as "royal", "military" or "equestrian", which the Order of Mercy had used in its titles for eight centuries, in order to emphasize (to this day) that the lay members of the Order were **honorary knights**, *de facto* successors of the former historical knights, but without automatically being granted aristocratic rights.

The Investiture: What happened next?

Governatore: Between the First and Second World Wars and later, there were several attempts in North America and in Italy, especially in Sicily, to re-establish the lay members of the Order as "professed" Knights of Mercy, creating a Catholic association of men and women who cherished the old chivalric ideas of the Order of Mercy and who wished to assist the Mercedarian Friars. They were, however, aware of the fact that they were not created aristocrats (*automatically*) by being invested with the Mercedarian habit.

In the '80s and early '90s, with the help of some aristocrats and other pious people of Catania who were able to help the poor and needy as doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, teachers, or secretaries, they succeeded in founding an organization that would carry out spiritual and corporal works of mercy and missionary work under the name of *the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede*.

From the very beginning, the Real Compagnia, with its Marian and Mercedarian spirituality, sought collaboration with the Order of Mercy (O. de M.), i.e. the Mercedarian Friars (*Padri Mercedari*) in Italy. New Commanderies (*Commende*) in Catania, Prato/Florence, Palermo, Rome, and even in Munich, Cologne, Vienna, Berlin, and Sevilla had increasingly friendly relations with the Order of Mercy and its Master General in Rome and elsewhere.

The Investiture: When was the Real Compagnia formally recognized by the Order of Mercy?

Governatore: The formal recognition of *the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede* by the Order of Mercy and a certain reunification of the friars with the lay members took place when, in the Holy Year 2000 (785th year of the Order), the then Most Reverend Master General of the Order of Mercy himself signed a document on the high altar of the *Cathedral of Saint Mary Major (Santa Maria Maggiore)* in Rome, recognizing *the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede* as a Mercedarian sodality.

The then Padre Procuratore Generale of the Order of Mercy and Priore Generale del Governo of the Real Compagnia (in personal union!), Rev. Fr. Ignazio Salvatore Polo, O. de M., called it a ***reaggregazione***.

The Compagnia had become a recognized Mercedarian Confraternity with its own Grand Master (*Governatore*). Thus, 25 years ago, H.E. Governatore Don Emmanuele G. Perez (R.I.P.) and his *Confratelli* (Confreres) and *Cappellani* (chaplains of the Real Compagnia, usually members of the diocesan or religious clergy, who assist the Real Compagnia in their social work and administer the sacraments) became members of the Mercedarian Family again.



The investiture ceremony of new professes of the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede in the Prelate Chapel of the Grand Master, Rome

The Investiture: What are the aims of the Real Compagnia?

Governatore: The primary mission of the Real Compagnia is to support the Mercedarian Order through donations and prayer, and to share in its spirituality. In addition, in the local communities, we try to achieve the ideal of a community of common prayer and fellowship, in order to support each member in his or her personal and spiritual growth and to live a life according to the teachings of the Church.

Some of our lay members have received theological training, either at universities, pontifical faculties, or other institutions recognized by the Church. Some work as lay catechists, helping adults seeking baptism (e.g. former atheists or Muslims) or returning to the Church.

The Investiture: Are there any social and humanitarian projects?

Governatore: In addition to works of spiritual charity, we encourage all Commanderies to help the poor and needy wherever possible, so our members visit prisoners and their families, give catechism lessons and help young (pregnant) mothers and other poor or desperate people.

We organize religious congresses or prayers and pilgrimages to Sanctuaries of Our Lady, such as in Altötting (Bavaria), in Mariazell (Austria), or in Rome (*Santuario della Madonna del Divino Amore*) or near Rome (*Imperial Abbey of Farfa*), Florence, Galgano, Turino (*Basilica della Natività di Maria Vergine in Superga*), Sevilla (Spain) and other places.

One of the oldest sanctuaries of the Order of Mercy is the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Bonaria (*Basilica di Nostra Signora di Bonaria*) in Cagliari, on the island of Sardinia (given to the Order of Mercy by King Alphonso IV of Aragon in 1335!), which is still the seat of a very important Sanctuary and a large monastery of the Order of Mercy.

It was visited by Paul VI, Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis. Apart from this, the Real Compagnia, with very few exceptions, does not carry out social and humanitarian projects on its own, since its members all have secular occupations and obligations to their families.

The friars of the Mercedarian Order, on the other hand, have dedicated their whole lives to the Order and to the service of Our Lady of Mercy. They have no obligations other than the mission of the Order. For this reason, we concentrate on supporting them rather than undertaking projects that would overwhelm us.

The Investiture: What are the challenges facing the Real Compagnia?

Governatore: Apart from the lack of funds (is there ever enough money for charitable works?), the greatest challenge is the lack of time. The members of the Real Compagnia are Roman Catholic laypeople, fathers, mothers, businessmen, civil servants, and professionals of all kinds.

They all work for *the Real Compagnia* on a voluntary and honorary basis. The primary mission and duty of married Catholics must be to support their families, which often leaves little time for projects outside of work and family. This is why we focus on prayer, pilgrimages, and donations rather than on concrete works of charity.

Apart from the lack of time and money, the biggest challenge for any Catholic association today is the evaporation of the Catholic faith, especially in the West. But this, too, is part of our mission: To be a true and credible example of a practicing Christian for those who have lost their faith in God or for those who are seeking God in our time.

The Investiture: What are the requirements and the process for someone interested in joining the Real Compagnia?

Governatore: We accept ladies and gentlemen who lead a life according to the Ten Commandments as practicing Catholics, who understand our devotion to the Virgin Mary and the venerable tradition of the Catholic Church as members of the Mercedarian family in the ninth century of the existence of the Order of Mercy.

Before becoming a full member, each postulant must enter the *novitiate* (a period of probation of at least one year). Candidates are required to present a testimony from their parish priest attesting to their commitment to their parish.

On the day of his investiture, the novice must promise to observe the chivalric virtues: faith in the Holy Catholic Church; obedience to the superiors of the Order; honesty towards his neighbor; courtesy and chivalrous behavior towards his neighbor; service to the needy; observance of the rules of the Order.

Neither the Mercedarian Order nor the Real Compagnia have a *fons honorum*. However, one does not become a (professed) Knight of the Blessed Virgin by being appointed by an authority, but by a sovereign and personal decision to serve the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Holy Catholic Church. So, to the question of whether we are knights, let me answer: Yes, we are knights to the extent that we live our vows and uphold the traditional chivalric virtues.



The Insignia of the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede

The Investiture: Does the Real Compagnia have different levels of professed members?

Governatore: Yes, our members have different levels of membership depending on their level of commitment to the Real Compagnia and their willingness to serve and contribute to the Order of Mercy.

The majority of members are so-called **Professi**. They wear a white cape with the Order's crest and a green chapter cord around their shoulders at religious and liturgical events. They have a seat and a vote at Chapter meetings and are eligible for active and passive voting for leadership positions in the Real Compagnia.

The Investiture: Then there are the Professi di Devozione?

Governatore: Yes, these are **Professi** who, after a few years of membership, decide to place themselves at the service of the Compagnia and of the Virgin Mary of Mercy through an even more intense service, both in prayer and through their contributions.

Professi di Devozione (of special devotion to Our Lady of Ransom) must complete a further one-year novitiate. During this time, they are introduced to their new duties, to the faithfulness of their obligatory prayers (daily Rosary and weekly Liturgy of the Hours), and to their readiness to take on the responsibilities of higher leadership in the Compagnia.

On liturgical occasions, **Professi di Devozione** wear a black cowl with the Order's coat of arms and a red chapter cord around their shoulders. We endeavor to ensure that **Professi di Devozione** occupy higher positions of leadership in the Order.

The Investiture: And the Donati?

Governatore: People who feel close to the Compagnia but who, for whatever reason, do not wish to be fully involved in its service can apply to become what are known as **Donati**. They wear a red sash with the Order's crest around their shoulders during liturgical ceremonies. They have the right to sit and vote, but only active voting rights, i.e. they cannot take on leadership roles.

Finally, there are those who, for whatever reason, do not yet meet the requirements for full membership of the Order. They can belong to the community as **Conversi** and take part in our events and prayer life but without the right to sit or vote.

Apart from these regular classes of membership, there are often groups of friends around our local communities (Commanderies) who take part in our pilgrimages or liturgical celebrations from time to time. They have a friendly relationship with us and sometimes a novice or later a professed member emerges from this circle of friends.

The Investiture: What are the goals of the Real Compagnia for the next five to ten years?

Governatore: Our goal is defined by our mission, which is to help our members grow in faith and to support the Mercedarian Brothers with our donations, sacrifices, and prayers. This was, is, and will always be our goal. In order to achieve this, we are open to new members who are willing to help us in our service by contributing loyally and actively to our community.

We do not want to grow at any cost, just to increase our membership. We would rather have a small number of members if only they are actively involved in our community and want to support our Brothers, the Friars of Mercy (*Padri Mercedari*) with all their hearts.

The Investiture: As Governor, what are you most proud of in the Real Compagnia?

Governatore: I am not "proud" of anything, I just want to live and work as a humble servant of God and follower of St. Peter Nolasco, trying to do my best, with the help of God and the help of Our Lady of Mercy, to stabilize and improve the works of the Real Compagnia and to help the Order of Mercy in these troubled times wherever I can.

As our members live and work in several countries, usually in the larger cities such as Berlin, Cologne, Florence, Hamburg, Milan, Munich, Philadelphia, Rome, Seville and Vienna, the Governatore works hard to integrate the different personalities in the various Commanderies (a group of professed members under a Commander *or Capo Commenda* in Italian) and Lieutenancies (several Commanderies in a region or country under the direction of a Lieutenant of the Governatore).

The Investiture: How can outsiders support the mission of the Real Compagnia?

Governatore: We are grateful for prayers. We are grateful for every active contribution to the works of mercy carried out by the members of our Commanderies. There are already many external helpers, for example, people who pay for free medical consultations by doctors who are members of the Real Compagnia or not, free medicines, help to feed the needy, even offer baths and showers, as in our Commandery Saint Thomas (*San Tommaso*) in Catania, and support them with clothes and shoes, which we receive as donations from people, organizations, such as non-profit organizations or companies, or through donations of money.

The work of our members for *the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede* is always free (*for God's reward*). All our personal expenses, such as telephone calls, travel or hotel accommodation, and meals during our activities, are not paid by the Order, but by the members themselves as a donation to help Real Compagnia fulfill its mission.

Each donation is used 100% to help the poor and needy and to support the projects of the Brothers of Mercy and Sister Convents of Mercy in various countries, such as schools, and old people's homes. or other places, for example, the homeless or the families of prisoners.

The Investiture: How has the original mission of the Order of Mercy been adapted in the Real Compagnia?

Governatore: The traditional mission of the Order was to ransom Christians held captive or enslaved by Muslim pirates. Although such things still happen, and the Order is still active in freeing slaves (albeit in secret for security reasons), the focus today is on modern versions of slavery: poverty in all its forms, including lack of education and care for children and teenagers. The Order therefore runs or supports schools and orphanages, especially in the Mediterranean, North and Latin America, Africa, and India.

The Real Compagnia supports the Order's charitable works with donations, prayers, and sacrifices. However, we have another focus: we believe that one of the most harmful forms of slavery today is modern society's neglect of God the Almighty. Therefore, we seek to build small and stable communities of devout lay people who are devoted to Christ the Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Holy Catholic Church, and her holy Magisterium.



Professi of the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede

The Investiture: What message would you like to give to the readers of *The Investiture* about the importance of the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede?

Governatore: We are not "important" and we do not want to be "important", but we try to live a Christian life in our professional work, in our families, and as members of *the Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede*. With the help of Our Lady of Mercy and all the martyrs, blessed, and saints of the Order of Mercy, we hope to be an example of Christian life in the world.

Most of the readers of your excellent magazine are probably Europeans or live in a society influenced by European culture (and decadence). Here is my question to Europeans: What makes Europe unique? What is the single factor that underlies our European culture? What made possible the development of the idea of universal human rights and the rule of law? The answer is - Christianity, the unifying factor that has brought together peoples as different as Catalans and Poles, for example, or Italians and Irish.

The part of Europe that neglects this simple truth is doomed to failure. There will always be non-believers and atheists. This freedom to deny God is a consequence of God's gift of freedom to human beings. Why is there this freedom? Because without freedom there can be no love. The problem is that a (humanly speaking "influential") part of Europe pretends that God does not exist. They replace the understanding of who we are, where we come from, and what is right or wrong with cheap relativism.

Observers outside Europe recognize this dangerous and self-destructive development. Europe is seen by many as a dying continent. The statistics prove them right. *The Real Compagnia di Santa Maria della Mercede* wants to do its part to help Europe regain its Christian roots and thus flourish again, simply by loving the beautiful tradition and enlightening teachings of the Church.