Vatican

Fra' John T. Dunlap, lieutenant of the grand master of the Sovereign Order of Malta and head

Fra' John T. Dunlap, lieutenant of the grand master of the Sovereign Order of Malta and head of the provisional government of the order, is pictured at the Church of St. Mary in Rome in this June 14, 2022, file photo. (CNS photo/Order of Malta)

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For the unity and greater good of the Knights of Malta, Pope Francis has promulgated a new constitution and code for the order, appointed a provisional sovereign council and called for an extraordinary general chapter to be held at the start of the new year.

The Sovereign Order of Malta has been involved in a process to revise its constitution and to promote its spiritual renewal since 2017 with the help of the pope's special delegate, Cardinal Silvano Tomasi, who had been working closely with the order.

After the pope held a private audience with a delegation of the order Sept. 3, the Vatican published the papal decree announcing changes to the order's leadership and the promulgation of the new constitutional charter and code, which all went into

effect the same day.

In the decree, the pope underlined that the Knights of Malta is a religious order, which means it "depends on the Holy See."

He wrote that its sovereign nature is not separate from, but is "intimately connected" to, its religious nature, and such sovereignty is only meant to help facilitate its purpose and function, which includes providing humanitarian and charitable assistance around the world.

Founded in Jerusalem in the 11th century, the Knights of Malta is a lay religious order recognized as a sovereign state by international law, which helps to facilitate its humanitarian missions around the world and maintain diplomatic relations with over 100 countries.

"Over these years, I have followed the progress of the order with paternal concern and care," the pope wrote in the decree.

Appreciative of the work carried out in different parts of the world and "the generous contribution of members and volunteers," the pope said he saw "the need to initiate a profound spiritual, moral and institutional renewal of the whole order, especially and not only of the members of the first class, but also of those of the second class."

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He appointed Cardinal Tomasi to help with this "important work of reform," including the preparation of an extraordinary general chapter to be held Jan. 25, the feast of the conversion of St. Paul.

"Many steps have been taken" on this journey of reform, the pope wrote, "but just as many impediments and difficulties (were) encountered along the way."

"After listening and dialoguing with various representatives of the order, the time has come to complete the renewal process that has been initiated, in fidelity to the original charism," the pope wrote.

The pope issued the decree and promulgated the new constitution and code "to safeguard the unity and greater good" of the Sovereign Order of Malta.

Canadian Fra' John T. Dunlap, the lieutenant of the grand master of the Sovereign Order of Malta and head of the provisional government of the order, said in a written statement, "The Order of Malta welcomes the paternal actions of His Holiness which demonstrate the great love the pontiff has for our order."

"In his careful review of the various proposals put before him these last months, the pope has determined a path forward that promises to ensure the order's future, both as a religious institute and a sovereign entity," he wrote in a statement published on the order's website.

The pope appointing a provisional government "is the first step in a clear blueprint for more efficient, streamlined governance for the order," he wrote, adding that the general chapter will allow for them to vote on "a regularized government in conformity with its new constitution."

One of the changes in the new constitution is that the grand master, who traditionally served for life, is now elected to a 10-year term with the possibility of one renewal; the term automatically ends when the person reaches the age of 85.