



Albrecht von Boeselager, second from right, walks in procession along with other Knights of Malta before the election of the new Grand Master, at the order's Villa Magistrale on Rome's Aventine Hill ahead of the secret balloting on April 29, 2017 (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

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ROME — A top leader of the Knights of Malta, an ancient aristocratic Catholic order that provides humanitarian aid around the world, warned the group's members on Wednesday that the Holy See's latest proposals to reform the order threaten its internationally recognized status as a sovereign state.

The Knights' grand chancellor, Albrecht von Boeselager, wrote a letter to the Knights' members saying the Vatican proposals contradict [assurances he had been given that Pope Francis](#) doesn't want to put the order's sovereignty at risk. That sovereign status allows the Knights to have diplomatic relations with more than 100 countries, which facilitates the delivery of humanitarian aid in war zones and conflict areas, and participate in the U.N. and other international organizations as an observer state.

Von Boeselager, who acts as the order's prime minister and foreign minister, said he would normally raise his objections directly with the Holy See, from one sovereign state to another. "But that avenue has been closed to me," he wrote in the letter obtained by The Associated Press, suggesting he had essentially been cut off from direct contact with the Vatican.

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The Knights of Malta is an ancient chivalric order that runs hospitals and clinics around the world. It counts 13,500 knights, dames and chaplains, 80,000 permanent volunteers and 42,000 employees, most of them medical personnel who lend first aid in areas of natural disasters and conflict zones.

The order experienced [a governance crisis in 2016-2017](#) sparked by a condom distribution scandal that resulted in Francis ousting the then-grand master and imposing years of Vatican-mandated reforms. Francis in 2020 appointed his latest envoy to oversee those reforms, Cardinal Silvano Tomasi, and last year gave Tomasi sweeping powers to override the Knights' existing constitution and governance structures to push the changes through.

According to Tomasi's latest draft of the proposed new constitution, the Knights would be a "subject of the Holy See," not a sovereign entity, according to people familiar with the draft.

Von Boeselager complained that Tomasi's draft proposals "constitute a hazard to its long-held sovereignty." Saying he could not accept the changes in good conscience, von Boeselager announced he was relinquishing his role in the reform process and that two delegates would represent the order at a meeting next week that Tomasi has called to discuss the draft.

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