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OF THE MONASTIC MILITARY ORDERS

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- The Papal Bull
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- The Grand Prior of the Conventual Church
- From Healing Brothers to “Fratres Equites et Armigerentes”
The Evolution of the Hospitaller Military arm in the Latin Kingdom

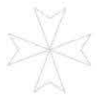




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Kneeling crusader from the Westminster Psalter, c.1250

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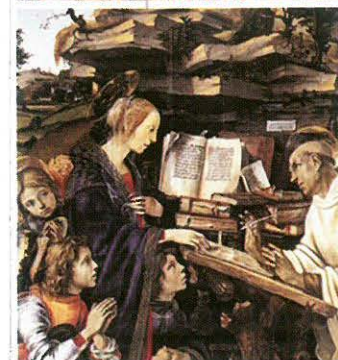
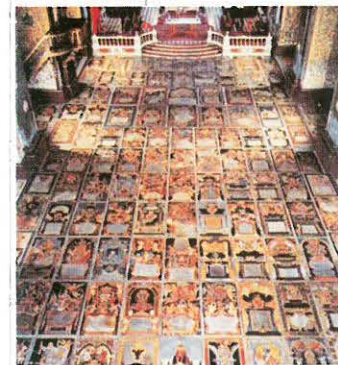
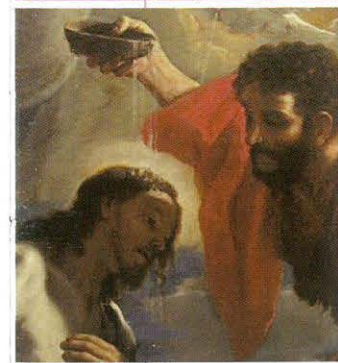
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Editorial		pg vi
<hr/>		
A Descriptive Analysis of the Last Days & Funeral of Emanuel Pinto de Fonseca	Catherine Tabone	pg 1
<hr/>		
On the Patronage of the Order	Dane Munro	pg13
<hr/>		
The Papal Bull	Charles Savona Ventura	pg 21
<hr/>		
The Holy Infirmary of the Order	Michael Ellul	pg 39
<hr/>		
A Pilgrimage of Faith, War, and Charity	Victor Mallia Milanes	pg 51
<hr/>		
The trials of Templars Revisited	Malcolm Barber	pg 61
<hr/>		
From Healing Brothers to “Fratres Equites et Armigerentes” The Evolution of the Hospitaller Military arm in the Latin Kingdom	George Gregory Buttigieg	pg 71
<hr/>		
Editor’s Note		pg 85
<hr/>		
The Grand Prior of the Conventual Church	Michael Galea	pg 87
<hr/>		
The Military Monastic Orders in the Holy Land	George Cassar	pg 107
<hr/>		
Book Review	Emanuel Buttigieg	pg 115
<hr/>		
List of Contributors		pg 123
<hr/>		
Index		pg 125
<hr/>		



On the Patronage of the Order

Dane Munro

The patron-saint of the Sovereign Military and Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta is St John. At present it is clear that, at least since the papal bull of Paschal II of February 1113, St John refers to St John the Baptist. Historians of the past have occasionally mentioned the existence of two patron-saints of the Order, namely St John the Baptist and St John the Almoner. With regard to earlier patron-saints of the Order, there may be some difficulty in establishing who was and who was not a patron-saint, especially when it comes to St John the Almoner.

According to William, Archbishop of Tyre (d.1184), St John the Almoner was the patron-saint of the hospice for western Christian pilgrims built in the Greek or Christian Quarter of Jerusalem by merchants of Amalfi in the eleventh century, the same institute the man named Gerard took over and developed into what later would become the hospital and the Order of St John.¹ William of Tyre, writing a century or so after the events, had undoubtedly access to sources now lost. In the Christian quarter of Jerusalem, within the complex to the hospital and abbey built by the Amalfitans, he describes an altar dedicated to Byzantine patron-saint St John the Almoner: “*Erexerunt etiam in eodem loco altare in honore beati Joannis Eleymon*” (in addition, they erected in the same place an altar dedicated to Saint John the Almoner),² and “*Erat tamen in*

civitate monasterium Amalfitanorum, quod usque hodie cognominatur Sanctae Mariae de Latina; et juxta illud xenodochium, ubi erat oratorium modicum, in honore beati Joannis Eleymon” (Yet there was the community of the Amalfitan monastery, which up to today is called Holy Mary of the Latins; adjoining to that hospice there was a small oratory dedicated to St John the Almoner.)³

It seems that, according to William of Tyre, St John the Almoner was indeed a patron-saint of the Latin pilgrims’ hospice, a *xenodochium*, and still was at the time of his visit about one hundred years after its foundation. A modern visitor to Jerusalem will search in vain for the remnants of that early hospice or abbey, with the exception of a building which served as the Church of St John the Baptist, because the area was quarried extensively to provide new walls for the city.

On the merits of the work of William of Tyre and those who used him as a source, it was in the past simply accepted that St John the Almoner had been at first a patron-saint of the Order. An example in case is Abbot René de Vertot, chronicler of the Order, who based this part of his influential work on William of Tyre. His history of the Order, dedicated to Grand Master Emanuel de Vilhena in 1728, includes St John the Almoner as patron-saint of the early hospice.⁴

¹ R. Hiestand, ‘Die Anfänge’, p. 39. Already in 1112 Pope Paschal II had bestowed a number of privileges on the hospital and its *institutor* Gerard. By 1154 Gerard’s Hospitaller organisation had acquired the status of a religious order, a *Christianae fidei religio*, by decree of Pope Eugenius III: see Hiestand, ‘Die Anfänge’, pp. 62-64.

² William of Tyre: Guillaume de Tyr *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum*, Bk 5.

translated by E.A. Babcock and A.C.Krey, *History of Deeds Done beyond the Sea*. New York, Columbia, University Press, 1943.

³ William of Tyre: op.cit, Bk 10. Bk 18 describes how the Latins, i.e.the Roman Catholics from the West, settled in Jerusalem and built a number of hospices, both for women and men, dedicated to St Mary Magdalene and St John the Almoner respectively. Bk 18, chapter 4: *Describitur unde habuit ortum et initium domus Hospitali:[...] inter eos autem qui negotiationis obtentu, de Occidentalibus per illa saecula, loca praedicta adire tentaverunt, fuerunt viri de Italia, qui ab urbe quam incolunt dicuntur Amalfitani.[...]*

⁴ R. de Vertot, *The history of the Knights of Malta* (London, 1728; facsimile edition Malta, 1989, 2 vols).

St *J*ohn the Almoner



Mattia Preti: St. John the Almoner - courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts (Heritage Malta)



On the Patronage of the Order

On the contrary, the work of modern and critical researchers such as Rudolf Hiestand on this matter has shown beyond reasonable doubt that there is not any positive documentary evidence to prove that St John the Almoner ever was the patron-saint of the Amalfitan hospice.⁵ The general opinion among researchers is that St John the Baptist always has been the patron-saint of the Hospital and dismisses St John the Almoner as patron-saint altogether. This dismissal is further fuelled by a current popular distrust of the reliability of William of Tyre's work by historians in the field.⁶ Furthermore, it would have been natural for the Amalfitans to dedicate their hospice to St John the Baptist, since their cathedral in Amalfi had the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist as patron-saints.⁷ An early church dedicated to St John the Baptist seemed to have been in existence.



Blessed Gerard: The Founder of the Order

Obviously, the lack of positive evidence does not exclude the possibility, or the probability, of a parallel existence between the patron-saints of the Greek chapel and the hospital, or that St John the Almoner was a secondary patron-saint.

In this paper some suggestions are given why, to the opinion of the current writer, the existence of St John the Almoner as an early a patron-saint within the

Latin compound cannot be dismissed simply because of the lack of positive documentary evidence. Mainly because St John the Almoner is a Byzantine saint, and it were the Byzantines who had at first settled in that same area of Jerusalem centuries before the Latin rite Christians came to settle there too, hence the Greek Quarter.⁸ St John the Almoner (Cyprus c. 560 - c. 619) is also

referred to as *Joannes Eleemosynarius*, *Joannes Eleymon*, *Joannes Misericors* or St John the Almsgiver.⁹ He was one of the very few Byzantine era saints who had gained initially some following in the West. St John the Almoner, as the Patriarch of Alexandria, allegedly spent the income of his patriarchy on amenities for the *humiliores* - the poor and needy, to whom he referred to as his lord and masters. This approach of the poor of course agrees with the aims of the pilgrim hospice at Jerusalem run by its *institutor* Gerard. In the past, the

Order referred to the sick as the "*Signori malati?*" and at present as "*Our Lords the Sick?*". Up to modern day, the creed of the Order is still very much part of its spirituality, namely: *tuitio fidei et obsequium pauperum* (*protection of faith and service to the poor*).

According to more traditional sources, St John the Almoner had sent money and workers to restore the

⁵ R. Hiestand, 'Die Anfänge der Johanniter', in F. Fleckenstein and M. Hellmann (eds), *Die geistlichen Ritterorden Europas* (Sigmaringen, 1980), pp. 31-80.

⁶ H. Nicholson, *The Knights Hospitaller* (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 3.

⁷ Ibid.

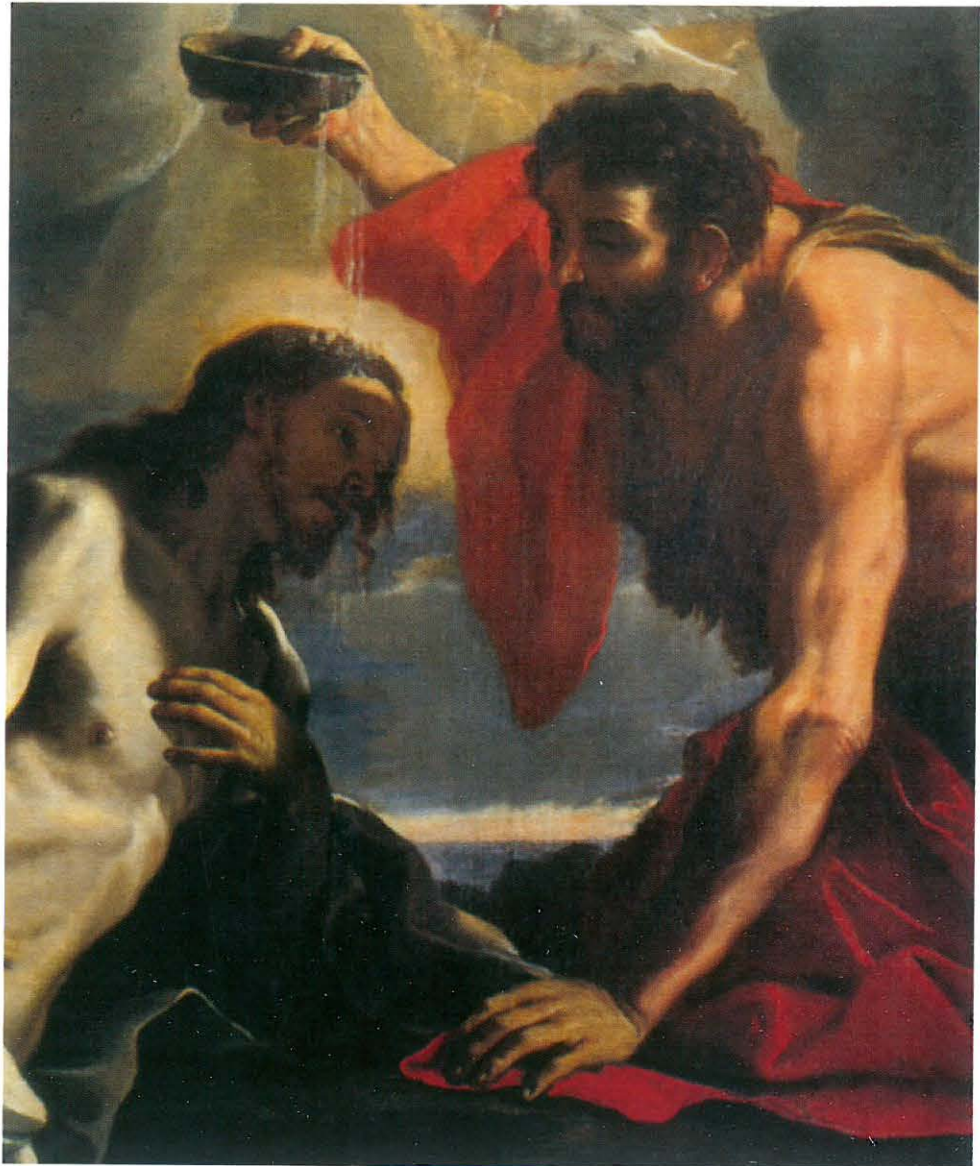
⁸ J.J. Norwich, *Byzantium: The early centuries* (Penguin, 1990), p.68: One of the earliest recorded pilgrimages is of Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine the Great, to Jerusalem in 327. According to Byzantine tradition, Helena, a pious convert, went on a pilgrimage and fact-finding mission to Jerusalem. After witnessing a miraculous healing she identified the True Cross of Christ.

⁹ K. Urwin, *The life of Saint John the Almsgiver* (Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1980).

churches of Jerusalem after the Persians sacked the city in 614 A.D. Among those restored churches was purportedly the church of St John the Baptist within the compound of the pilgrims' hospice and abbey. This church may have been the one referred to by early historical sources. Such generosity and restoration works normally calls for some form of commemoration. Confusion about patronage might then be easier to explain.

Nonetheless, should St John the Almoner have been one of the patron-saints within the compound, there were, after Gerard made his hospital independent in or by 1099, some very good and practical reasons why a change was desirable.

Gerard had done his best, since the 1080's, to become independent in order to serve the pilgrims better, not only by an excellent service but also by tapping funds necessary to carry out his work. Under his command the material and financial base had grown gradually, as well as the legal status of his hospital.¹⁰ Gerard was painfully aware that the origin of the hospital were slightly mundane in comparison with the Benedictines or the Cistercians, or any other order for that matter whose founder was identifiable and renowned. A vague lineage in a crusader world where it was all about lineage and sanguinity would not be very advantageous in attracting finance and landed property, in view of the competition. Having St John the



Mattia Preti: St. John the Baptist, to-day the undisputed Patron of the Order - (Museum of Fine Arts)

Baptist as patron-saint together with papal recognition would certainly help the matter. Recognition for both the patron-saint and the hospice arrived in the form of a papal bull *Pie postulatio voluntatis* issued by Pope Paschal II in 1113, in which the hospice was granted many privileges and rights.

Especially after the Crusaders' victory in the First Crusade, Westerners flocked en masse in pilgrimage to

¹⁰ 10 R. Hiestand, op.cit, p. 49.



On the Patronage of the Order

Jerusalem. Possibly, Gerard thought that it would provide a better supply for the increase in demand than the Benedictine abbey, although for spiritual matters he probably continued to use their services. An increase in demand meant also an increase in income, gifts and landed donations. Independence could also lead to the idea of a total separation with the past and a fresh start. St John the Almoner, quite exceptionally for Western Christian opinion, had become a saint without being a martyr of some sort. Martyrdom had become one of the pillars on which the life and death of a Latin soldier of Christ, a *miles Christi*, was based and it can be argued that his Byzantine identity and lack of martyrdom made him unsuitable for the fraternity of Gerard and the later Order.

After the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099 as a result of the First Crusade, the city would remain for 88 years in Christian hands. Profound changes took place whereby no other religions were tolerated. The Crusaders turned the Holy City into a purely Latin Christian city of their medieval European taste and expelled all other forms of Christianity.¹¹ The ecclesiastical hierarchy transformed Jerusalem into an exclusively Latin domain where even the Benedictines at Sancta Maria ad Latinos lost much of their influence. Moreover, all sympathy for Byzantine Eastern Christians and their norms and values had disappeared in Jerusalem, also in view of the already existing schism between Eastern and Western Christianity. Gerard and his successors followed the Western opinion and had taken distance from Byzantium. The latter had fallen short of Western Christian expectation since they

not actively partake in the Crusades and their sense of honour was incompatible with those of the Crusaders.¹² In this light we must also return to the goal of pilgrimages. In the Christian sense, pilgrimage to Jerusalem, especially to those places where Christ and his Precursor had been, was deemed an act of devotion. Therefore claiming the patronage of such an important and indisputable saint as St John the Baptist is certainly an intelligent move, as the Byzantine St John the Almoner might not be so indisputable in pure Latin circumstances of Jerusalem in the time of the First Crusade. There was much to be gained by choosing St John the Baptist as the sole male patron-saint and it is very understandable that he had become the more sensible choice. St John the Baptist is presented in the New Testament as the last of the Old Testament prophets and as the Precursor of the Messiah in the New Testament. He therefore represents both the past and heralds a new era. It symbolises, in my opinion, very neatly the independence of Gerard's hospital. In the New Testament, St John baptised Christ, lived an austere life and went against the Pharisees and Sadducees. He was also in favour of legitimacy of military life and of war. This could be interpreted as a justification for the militarisation of the Order of St John, in essence a hospice movement, to the example of the Templar Knights. In other words, a hard soldier's life in Crusaders' times fighting against Muslims and Islam, or any other enemy of the Faith. Finally, St John the Baptist was killed by King Herod over a matter of principle and earned the status of a martyr. More biblical justification was found in the archangel Gabriel, who had attributed healing power to St John. His father Zachary was instantly cured

¹¹ T. Jones and A. Ereira, *Crusades* (London: Penguin 1996), p.54. Other Christians were the Orthodox Greek, Georgian, Armenian, Jacobite and Coptic Christians. As nearly the entire Muslim population was killed in the storming of Jerusalem, there was no need of prohibiting the Muslim religion.

¹² M. Carrier, *Perfidious and Effeminate Greeks: the Representation of Byzantine Ceremonial in the Western Chronicles of the Crusades (1096-1204)* (Annuario dell'Istituto Romeno di Cultura e Ricerca Umanistica Venezia, 2002), pp. 47ff. To the notion of the Crusaders, the Byzantines were perfidious and effeminate, just like the Greeks of Antiquity, and could therefore not be trusted. The affair with the Trojan Horse went a long way. The Westerners found it also dishonourable that the Byzantines employed so many mercenaries, for them a sign that the Byzantines were short of courage. This shortage of courage was linked to the perceived Byzantine lack of masculinity, which reflected the Latin disgust of the large number of eunuchs at the Byzantine Imperial Court, at times estimated as more than twenty thousand. Western Christian chivalry was incompatible with the Eastern and Byzantine concept of allowed deceit in battle, and this difference in opinion, or naivety for that matter, would lead to many military disasters during the Crusades and the Western presence in the Holy Land. Deceit in battle was an honoured concept of Oriental origin, practiced by the Arabs and Byzantines alike. Western chivalry was measured by knightly values such as martial honor, courage, loyalty and manliness. Arabs and Byzantines did not necessarily share these ideals. Their sense of honour was not based on Germanic tradition, but was based on an Oriental design. The Orientals considered that it was just as honorable to defeat an enemy through wisdom and deceit as it was through force of arms. For the Crusader knights, battle and man-to-man fights were the benchmark of measuring one's honour. The Greeks normally avoided man-to-man fights and used arrows to maintain a distance.

when John was born, an ingredient which suited very well the pilgrim's hospital situated in the middle of the most holy place of Christendom. Furthermore, in accordance with the culture of chivalry, the most effective way to start a dynasty on a sound foundation was to find a claim to an indisputable Lordship. In the past, people claimed kinship from Arthur to Charlemagne, and even before that, Virgil had claimed ancestry of Aeneas for Emperor Augustus. St Augustine had claimed that "Christ our Lord, who was made of the seed of David according to the flesh."¹³ Lineage and dynasty were extremely important factors for the aristocracy in Europe and still play, albeit strongly diminished, a role in modern Western society. The choice of St John the Baptist as patron-saint could, to my view, support all claims to an indisputable Lordship. As the Order always worked carefully on its public image and collective identity, Saint John the Baptist as patron-saint could only be beneficial to its standing and reputation and was a safe choice in terms of contemporaneous political correctness.

In the corpus of inscribed texts at St John's Co-Cathedral at Valletta, Malta, many sepulchral slabs bear references to the lineage of the knight commemorated there and a claim to indisputable lineage had become standard repertoire. Some members of the Order in Malta not only took their claims to ancient and indisputable noble ancestry to the extreme, they also added their own glory to it. Carlo Carafa was a nephew of Grand Master Carafa and his tombstone reads *EIUS SANGUINIS SPLENDOREM SI IGNORAS, / LOCORUM NEAPOLI PRINCIPES QUI SINT INQUIRE, / HEROUM SOBOLES, MAGNI PARENS MAGISTRI, / PARENTUM MERITA AUXIT, HONORIBUS, VIRTUTIBUS ETERNAVIT* (*If you are ignorant of the splendour of his blood-lineage, ask who the princes of the Locri at Naples are: They are the ancestors of heroes, parents of a Grand Master. [Carlo Carafa] increased the merits of his ancestors, immortalizing [them] with honours and virtues.*¹⁴

During a considerable time the search for respectable roots turned into myth-making before it returned to

earth. Much grander origins were invented, going deep into the mist of times, not necessarily by the hospital itself but rather by a large number of staunch supporters. By 1160 the provost of Reicherberg, Gerhoh, claimed that the hospice had been in existence since Apostolic times and by 1180 the local province of the Order of St John in England wrote in its Rule that the hospital's founders were Bishop Melchiazar and King Antiochus of Jerusalem, although the latter lived in the third century B.C. Zacharias and Elisabeth, the parents of St John were reportedly working at the hospital, serving the poor and the sick, while later on Christ himself frequently visited the hospital to perform miracles and the Virgin Mary had ascended into Heaven from the very place.¹⁵ High placed people repeated such legends and they increased in strength, finally to collapse under their own weight in the mid thirteenth century.

Gerard, the Order's founder, solved the problem by replacing myth by reality through his own work and existence. Partly solved that is, as his origins are vaguer than most of the legendary founders and visitors of the hospice, but Gerard is now the Blessed Gerard and has given the Order of Malta enormous - and well-deserved - prestige. Apparent is that he was a man with vision, driven by piety and a sense of caring for people. His piety was one of the more practical kind and nothing could deter him from carrying out his mission in life. In this sense he was exemplary in combining the worldly and spiritual needs of hospice. Networking might be seen as a modern thing, but the Blessed Gerard had understood this principle already in the eleventh century.

He created a network on a then global scale, of land and sea transport for mass pilgrimages, inns and pilgrims' hospitals all along the way from Europe to Jerusalem, moulding an organisation which still functions in the original spirit of caring for the sick and poor for a solid nine hundred years. In itself a greater miracle than people could have imagined in the past, certainly worthy of sainthood.¹⁶

¹³ St Augustine, *City of God*, Bk 17, Ch. 8.

¹⁴ D. Munro, *Memento Mori, a companion to the most beautiful floor in the world* (Malta: MJ Publications, 2005), Vol. I, p. 66, no. 47, ll. 8-11.

¹⁵ H. Nicholson, *op.cit.*, pp. 3-5.

¹⁶ His body was preserved and transported in 1283 to Provence and placed near a shrine in the city of Manosque, the most important commandery of Provence. This may confirm that Gerard was from Provence and not from Amalfi as an inscription there reads. His skull was brought over to Malta and is now a much venerated relic at the Church of the Sisters of St. Ursula in Valletta.

On the Patronage of the Order



Relic of Blessed Gerard at the Monastery of St Ursula, Valletta



Young St John the Baptist (courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts)