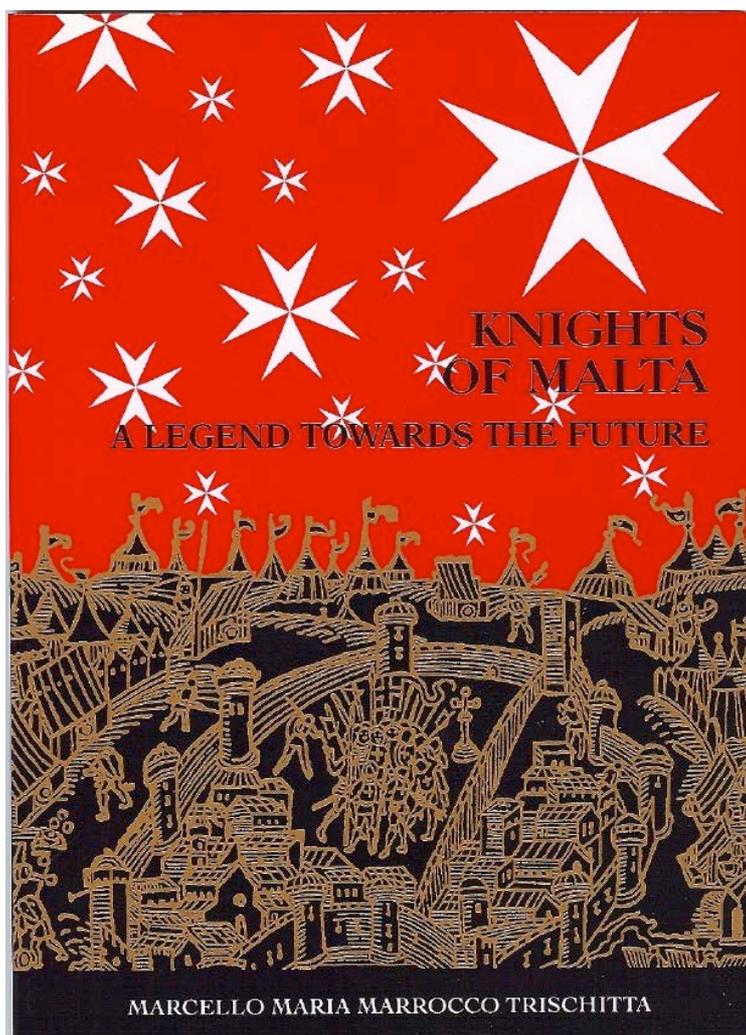


The Knights of Malta

A legend towards the future

by Marcello Maria Marrocco Trischitta



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Preface

*I*t is a pleasure for me to accept the invitation of the Association of the Italian Knights to present this publication written by Baron Marcello Maria Marrocco Trischitta, Knight of Honour and Devotion.

The book in question constitutes a praiseworthy initiative the need of which has long been felt and deserves special attention. It carries a striking tide for a gripping theme: "Knights of Malta, a legend towards the future". Perusing these very readable pages one call relive in brief the vicissitudes of the Order of St. John throughout the first 900 years of its history.

From Palestine to the conquest of Rhodes, from the Siege of Malta to the troubled period following the loss of the island, from the thrilling prospective indicated by the "Future Strategies" to the recent and prestigious goal of Permanent Observer at the United Nations - the reader is called to participate in one of the most fascinating events in Western Christendom.

This is a popular work which links to the memory of a glorious past, programmes which the Order sets out to undertake at the beginning of its second millennium while underlining the vitality and will to remain faithful to its own traditions, "Tuitio fidei et obsequium pauperum": an occasion to reaffirm its royalty to the mission indicated nine centuries ago by the Blessed Gerard. I hope that this book may contribute towards strengthening the fervour and dedication of our Knights and that it may help those aspiring to belong to the Order to appreciate the current relevance of the Order's ideals and make theirs the defence of Christian Principles.

*His Most Eminent Highness, the Prince and Grand Master,
Fra' Andrew Bertie*

Foreword

*A*lmost one thousand years of history, ten centuries of service to humanity. Founded in Jerusalem at the beginning of the middle ages, it is still active today and known all over the world as the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. Faithful to its traditions, it has been able to continue its existence even in the wake of the year 2000 with new strategies and different programmes for the future.

From the heroic deeds in Palestine to the daring incursions in the Mediterranean, from the sieges on land to the battles at sea, its soldiers have filled memorable pages of history in defence of Christianity. For centuries they had been the indomitable protectors of the Faith but, when the valour and courage of soldiers were no longer necessary, they were able to rediscover their old mission which they had never neglected. From the hospital of Jerusalem to the infirmaries of Rhodes and Malta, on the trains that transported thousands of injured people during the world wars, among the victims of natural catastrophes, from Messina to Friuli, from Palestine to Irpinia to the bloodstained jungles of Vietnam and now, in Rwanda too, wherever human beings have suffered, the Order has assisted them.

As was once upon a time in the legendary "domus" in the Holy City, it is the same now in countries destroyed by war, in hospitals, leper colonies and in medical centres where the war against diabetes is still fought today. In the centres and homes for the aged, among the ever-growing crowds of pilgrims and the sick inspired by their faith, hope and devotion towards sanctuaries throughout the world, the men of the "Sacra Milizia" continue their work according to the Rule which has made them, since the 11th century, "Servants of the sick".

People of our times and not out of date and unlikely survivors of an anachronistic and useless world. They join their respect for a legendary past with current commitments and a constant presence and their Cross constitutes the symbol of Christian care and altruism.

The Author

Palestine

When the Crusaders took the city of Jerusalem in July 1099, within the confines of the Holy Shrine they came upon a hospital run by a religious community which lived according to the Rule of St. Benedict. These monks, who took St. John the Baptist as their patron, were dressed in black and wore a white cross similar to that of Amalfi on their breast. It may have been some rich merchants coming from the old maritime republic who had obtained permission from the Caliph of Egypt, some years before, to build a church, a monastero and a hospital where to take care of the pilgrims of all faiths or races in the Latin suburb of the Holy City of Jerusalem. The origin of this institution has been discussed at length but today most people agree that those men were the founders of the Order of St. John.

In the days of the conquest of Palestine the Hospitallers first came into the limelight of history. Exhausted from their difficult march toward Jerusalem and from the long sieges, the Crusaders found care and comfort in the hospital. The period that followed was very difficult for the Christians in the Holy Land. The nobility, coming from Europe to free the Holy Sepulchre, seemed more interested in quenching their thirst to conquer rather than in confirming the real reasons that inspired the Crusades and they often fought among themselves.

After a brief period of dispersion, the Muslims reacted decisively and for this reason it was necessary to have men trained to use arms and ready to handle them at any time. Men who considered war not only a job, but above all a mission. The tales of those who had been assisted with love and care made those monks famous all over Europe and, on 15th February 1113, Pope Paschal II sent a Bull to Fra' Gerard, head of the community, in which he approved and thereby officially recognised the establishment of the Hospital, granting to its members the authority to appoint their own "Masters". The Church of Rome therefore sanctioned the birth of a new religious Order which was soon to become so famous that it was to be called "The Holy Religion".

More or less at the same time other Military Orders were created and they too began to acquire power and authority. The death of Fra' Gerard marks the historic and final turning point for the Hospitallers. He, who some people considered from Amalfi and others from France, was a figure of great interest in the history of the Order which, from its beginning, did not come under the jurisdiction of the Bishops and other Church authorities.

In contrast with his predecessors who had helped merchants and poor people in search of the forgiveness of God, Gerard lived in the days of the Christian victory and met the great western leaders. Following the conquest of Jerusalem, Godfrey de Bouillon made a donation to the Hospital which was followed by others. The tension of the final battle was spent.

Religious sentiment was reborn and many Crusaders sought to become Hospitallers: The ranks and files of what was to become known as the "Sacra Milizia" were beginning to grow.

The successor of Gerard was Fra' Raymond du Puy who styled himself "Master" and entrusted a new task to his confratres: no longer was only care and assistance to be offered to the sick and the pilgrims, but armed defence too.

The new Master definitively adopted the white eight pointed Cross as their emblem: a symbol of the eight Beatitudes in the sermon on the Mount, but while remaining faithful to their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, the men would wear armour and be girded with a sword. The Hospital assumed the connotations of a Military Order but at the same time maintained its religious character. The Order became military but there were substantial differences between this and other similar institutions. Men in search of a meaning to give to their fighting in war and wishing to put their own courage in the service of the Faith would gather under the banners of the Templars and the Teutonic. The Hospitallers were men who had already been touched by the Word of God, were dedicated to charitable works, were devoted to altruism and in the name of this ideal, decided to take up arms.

This difference of a remarkable historical and political importance contributes towards and explains the reason why the Order of St. John, unlike others, was able to overcome many difficulties and reach modern times with all its prerogatives and aura of attraction.

The Crusaders were to stay in Palestine for two hundred years. Two centuries of battles, sieges, treaties, ambushes and diplomatic missions during which time the Christians would enjoy only a few short periods of peace. After an organisational phase they became increasingly important in the events of the Kingdom d'outre-mer as the very chronicles of the Muslims reported and witnessed. The hate that the infidels nurtured for the Knights Hospitaller demonstrates the role that they played in the Holy Land. Here is an example among others: the day following the disastrous Battle of Hattin during which the western armies were crushed by Saladin, Imad ad Din, his assistant, described the scene of the slaughter of the Hospitallers who were unarmed and prisoners. As soon as the Sultan saw the Hospitallers, he ordered that they all be killed thus forgetting his renowned generosity in the past.

In time, the numbers of the Crusaders decreased significantly thus making the defence of the land very difficult. To check the continuous raids from the enemies, fortresses were built, many of which were manned by the Knights of St. John. They were appreciated not only for their courage but also as ambassadors. The Sovereigns of Jerusalem used them for this purpose, in order to solve their difficult controversies. Not only were they men of arms but also wise and shrewd advisers, educated to serve their neighbour, averse from the interests characterizing the activities and behaviour of other Military Orders.

It is no easy task to reconstruct the military vicissitudes in the Holy Land. In 1153 the Hospitallers contributed to the conquest of Ascalon, faced the famous leader Nur-El-Din several times, defended Banyas and fought in Egypt led by the Grand Master, Fra' Gilbert d'Assailly. In 1187, at the Battle of Hattin, the Master himself, Fra' Roger des Moulins fell in the battle against Saladin. Hundreds of Hospitallers sacrificed themselves to

defend Jerusalem which the Sultan re-conquered on October 2nd of the same year. However, notwithstanding the losses, the Muslims always found the Christians ready to face them.

Led by Richard the Lion Heart, the Third Crusade seemed to raise the lot of the Christian armies and the Hospitallers rushed to defend Tripoli, Antioch and the Kingdom of Armenia where they were called to protect the garrison and fortress of Seleucia. On July 12th 1191 the English Sovereign succeeded in conquering St. John d'Acre but due to a series of disputes with other crusade leaders he left Palestine in October of the following year. More battles followed and during the Fifth Crusade the Hospitallers took part in the conquest of Damietta which fell on November 5th 1219. An important victory, but it was not sufficient to change the situation in the Holy Land.

In 1229, Frederick II of Swabia obtained Jerusalem pacifically from the Sultan of Egypt but it was only a short truce. In 1246 the Mughals attacked the city, slaughtering its inhabitants and, at Gaza, their enemies were utterly defeated. The desperate resistance of the men of the "Sacra Milizia" whose Master Fra' William de Chateaufort was taken prisoner, was useless.

The expedition of Louis IX, King of France, did not change the fortunes of the kingdom. In 1249 the Crusaders once more attacked and occupied Damietta, but on April 6th 1250 the French Sovereign was put to rout at Mansurah. Courage is insufficient to decree victory, however, and Louis IX was compelled to give the city of Damietta back.

An increasing number of fortresses were entrusted to the Knights of the White Cross. More fighting and conflicts ensued. The Ottomans combined armies to face their enemies together and so the forces on the battlefield became more and more uneven. In 1268, the Sultan of Egypt undertook a massive offensive and Jaffa and Antioch were conquered while the ring of infidels from the north and south closed together. On March 23rd 1271 the Crac des Chevaliers fell: not even the imposing fortress could hold out against the assault of the Sultan Baybars. A few years passed and in 1285 Kalavun, the new Sultan of Egypt occupied Margat, another stronghold of the Hospitallers. No help arrived from the West for the survivors of so many wars. In Europe, the spirit of the Crusades was more or less exhausted and the end of their venture in the Holy Land was considered inevitable.

In 1289 Kalavun besieged Tripoli in Syria and on the walls of that city the Hospitallers fell in great numbers. Acre, the seat of the Hospital was the last to be attacked in the spring of 1291. The Hospitallers were then headed by the Grand Master Jean de Villiers.

Determined to throw the "infidels" out of their land, the Muslims lay siege to the city: the superiority of their army was so large that it was impossible to make any attempt at resistance.

The Hospitallers, however, had no intention to give up. Tolemaide was for them the final bulwark where to bear witness to their allegiance to the Rule and their willingness to make the supreme sacrifice. The tale of those days that has reached us by way of a few reporters is incredible: they worked wonders of valour but it was all in vain.

When the last resistance fell, the few remaining survivors carried the sick onto the ships

together with the Grand Master who was seriously injured.

For the Christian armies the adventure in Palestine was dramatically over. While the history of the Crusades found its epilogue on a blood-stained beach in the Mediterranean, the Hospitallers sailed towards Cyprus: their future was to be at sea.

Rhodes

*A*fter the fall of Acre the Crusading movement lost most of its value as a political design.

When Jerusalem had been conquered by the troops of Saladin in 1187, there had been an immediate psychological and military reaction in all the Christian States. On the contrary in 1291, the conquest of Tolemaide stirred up indignation and pain in the people, but no surprise. The seriousness of the situation had been known for some time. The loss of the Holy Land was very dramatic but everyone knew that it was inevitable. Europe was torn by the rivalries between the various kings and sovereigns and religious fervour was not a good enough reason to go to the East. Only Pope Nicholas IV tried in vain to change the situation because he felt deep sorrow for the defeat.

Though Europe could postpone the solution to the problems of the inherited Kingdom d'outremer, a very uncertain period began for the Military Orders. With the impossibility to develop their own institutional activity, they felt that the reasons for which they had been founded were lacking. The war against the infidels, the original reason for which the Religious Orders had been founded, was failing.



The Hospital of Rhodes, built by Grand Master Fra' Jean de Lastic.

This interesting phenomenon in the history of the Church, the creation and foundation of Military Orders, confirmed how the Church had been able to become part of the war society of the time. The birth of these institutions had shown how the Crusades were born as fortuitous episodes but had acquired the dimensions of a problem involving the Christian conscience not only in its thinking and organisation but also in the disciplinary attitude of the clergy.

Rich and strong, with Commanderies spread throughout the various countries, and with the many problems that the continuous military duties had always created, the Military

Orders appeared like giants looking for a flag to fly and ready to take up side with whomever needed their assistance for a just cause.

They were the new protagonists on the scene of a Christian Europe where the balance was difficult and precarious. The Hospitallers moved the seat of their Convent and Hospital to Cyprus and felt the necessity to reorganise themselves and think about their future. The island on which they, together with the Templars, had found hospitality was too small and restricted for them and they understood that their independence was threatened. The years spent on the island of Cyprus was an interesting period in which to study and reflect. The Hospitallers met twice in Chapter General where they examined the situation, preparing strategies for their future activities. Their properties spread throughout Europe and the riches coming from the various Commanderies began to raise interests and greed which could have led to a dangerous situation. These possessions could be justified only by military and hospitaller activities. It became necessary to get reorganised and to return to fighting.

This occurred in 1306. Vignolo de Vignoli, an adventurer from Genoa who was in the service of the Emperor of Byzantium, Andronic II Paleologus, stipulated a rental agreement with him for the Isles of Cos and Leros. He proposed to Grand Master Fulk de Villaret to conquer together all the isles of the Dodecanese. He would have retained one third of the territory. The Hospitallers realised that this offer was the best solution to solve their problems. The political moment suggested that the Order should make its sovereignty concrete and should begin its activity again as soon as possible.

As the Hospitallers could no longer fight the Muslims on dry land, the sea became the theatre of the military action of the "Religion", as the Order came to be called. Rhodes was the best operative base it was possible to think of. The reason for this was simple: it was the meeting point of the routes from the East and the West and it had natural harbours where ships could be repaired. The climate was also good with favourable winds, necessary for easy navigation in and out of the island. These were the precious characteristics of the island that was to become the headquarters of the army of St. John. The general situation was propitious.

Rhodes was officially a dominion of the Emperor of Byzantium who made it quite clear that he would never oppose a possible occupation of this territory by the Hospitaller Order. In addition, the island had for some time raised the attention of the Muslims and many groups of Saracens were beginning to settle there. Finally, it was the undertaking of an action against the eternal enemy of the Cross who threatened to take possession of an important stronghold.

Fulk de Villaret decided in favour of the great adventure and set forth preparations for a fleet composed of ships of the Order and from Genoa. The expedition was planned in Cyprus but the organisation was carried out in Italy.

The ships took to the sea from Brindisi in Southern Italy, sailing towards the island of Cyprus where they stopped to embark crew and soldiers together with all kinds of baggage, supplies and implements. This operation presented rather complicated logistical problems.

The island not only contained what the Hospitallers had carried away from Palestine but

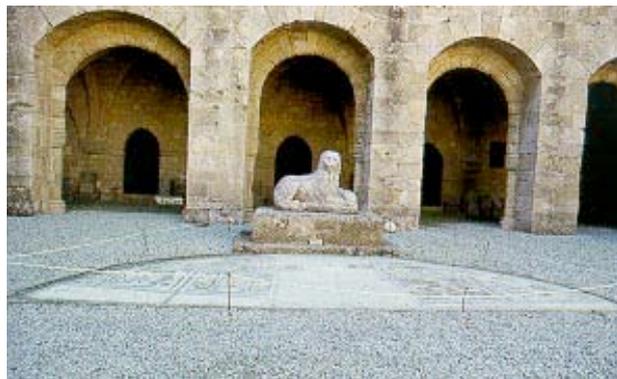
also what they had accumulated during their stay at Cyprus together with all the material that had come to them from their commanderies in Europe following the loss of Palestine.

What was about to begin was an enormous undertaking that would take not only great thought and precision but also time and determination.

At the beginning of the summer the fleet landed at Rhodes and the Knights began their work.

It would take some years before the conquest of the island was complete, but eventually, on August 15th 1310, the red flag of the Order could be seen flying over the whole island. One of the most splendid periods in its history was beginning for the Order of St. John.

The initial moments at Rhodes were difficult but very soon the Knights realised that they had found an ideal home. The warmth and friendliness of the inhabitants and the mild weather and favourable geographical position would facilitate their revival. Very soon the Order began to show qualities it had not been able to fully manifest in Palestine. Also from the cultural point of view, the interests here were very different from the ones cultivated in the Holy Land. The Grand Masters were compelled to defend themselves continuously but at the same time they were able to attract remarkable attention to their new home, always aware of the necessity that the "Sacra Milizia" was to be the genuine expression of a Crusade that not only took up arms to defend principles and ideals. Very soon, Rhodes became a landmark and the centre of two different interests. It was a very strategically positioned military base for the European powers, while for the Church and the Christian world, it was the outpost of a hope; as long as the flag with a White Cross on a red background was seen flying, the dream of one day returning to Palestine would not be futile.



The courtyard of the Hospital, one of the major sanitary structures of its time.

Situated between the East and West, the island of Rhodes represented, from a purely romantic point of view, the ideal setting for heroic deeds. It was the new home for the soldiers of the "Sacra Milizia" who succeeded in updating and developing in depth the political and religious *raison d'être* of the Crusades.

Very soon, the Hospitaller Order became a maritime power but not being able to acquire strength based on a somewhat limited number of ships, it entrusted the secret of its success to the quality of its ships and the courage of its Captains and crew.

Interest in the sea dates back to the period preceding the settlement in Cyprus. In the last years of their stay in the Holy Land the Order had felt it necessary to have some ships of its own, especially after moving the Hospital to Acre which had become a harbour of great strategic and mercantile importance in this period of hostility. We must consider, besides, that the evacuation itself was carried out under difficult conditions and made possible only thanks to the employment of an efficient fleet.

With farsightedness characteristic of their history, the Hospitallers had long since faced the problem of their presence at sea and the earliest news of possession of their own ships dates back to 1230. What was probably the first armed vessel of the Order was called the "Comtesse", which was able to carry up to 1500 men plus cargo. On board, besides the crew and the oarsmen, was foreseen the presence of three Knights: the Captain, the Knight Commander of the ship and a third, whose task it was to look after supplies. The need to dispose of battleships was felt immediately following the move to Limassol on the island of Cyprus. Their wish not to lose contact with Palestine and their hope to return there was, at first, the reason for a decision which would suggest new strategies to the Knights of St. John. In spite of many difficulties, the development of a navy must have been rather rapid if in 1299, a few years after the fall of Acre, we find the charge of "Admiral" mentioned in the regulations. In that year in fact, they speak of a monk, named Fulk de Villaret, who was appointed the "Admiral of the house".

On November 5th 1300, the Chapter General established the first rules regarding the tasks and functions of this position. This same Admiral was elected Grand Master five years later and had a determining role in the new organisation of the Order and in its move.

The Muslims were displeased with the settlement of the Hospitallers in Rhodes and they attacked their ancient enemy without delay presenting themselves with a fleet in the waters around the island in the spring of 1310. The defence of the island was not strong enough to allow the Order to ward off the assault but the intervention of Amadeus V, Count of Savoy, allowed them to confront their enemies who then retreated. Rhodes was safe and work to make a stronghold of the island began.

In the West, meanwhile, the ideal of the crusades seemed to be slowly reawakening and young people wishing to wear the habit of the Order of St. John began to arrive from countries all over Europe. The nobility of France, Spain, Italy, Portugal and England sent their younger sons to serve under the flag of the "Sacra Milizia" and in 1319, during a Chapter General convened at Montpellier by Grand Master Fra' Helione de Villeneuve, it was decided to gather the Hospitallers into groups according to their countries of origin. These groups were named "Langues" and were led by a "Pilier" who, by right became a member of the Chapter.

Originally, the Langues were seven, namely Provence, Auvergne, France, Italy, Aragon, England (with Scotland and Ireland) and Germany. Later, in 1462, Castille and Portugal split from Aragon to form the eighth Langue. Each Langue consisted of Pories or Grand

Priories, Bailiwicks and Commanderies.

As the Order was becoming stronger and stronger day by day, the Ottomans attacked repeatedly in order to drive their enemy out of the Mediterranean. In 1312, an entire fleet conquered Amorgo, an island from where the Muslims could easily threaten the Knights. The Grand Master, Fulk de Villaret led the attack and drove away the enemy.

In 1318, quite by surprise, they assaulted Kos, which had been fortified a short time before. They were very near to Rhodes but the commander of the galleys, Fra' Alfred III of Schwarburg, in a rapid move compelled the adversaries to abandon their occupied position.

The Turkish ships attacked Chio in 1319 and Rhodes in 1320. In both cases the forces of St. John were inferior, but the enemy was rejected and most of their ships were captured.

In spite of their numerous failures the Muslims did not give up and their presence in the Mediterranean became more and more menacing. During the XIV century, the general situation became more complex. The small Christian states of Syria were eliminated by the attacks of the Mamaluke Kings of Egypt and only Cyprus and Rhodes remained in the hands of the western people while the Turks turned their attention to Europe.



*The Siege of Rhodes: Fra' Pierre d'Aubusson pays homage
to Our Lady of Philermo, Protector of the Order.*

On the island the Knights worked incessantly in order to build bastions and towers, churches and splendid houses. Rhodes became a fortified but elegant and comfortable city. In the meantime, the speedy galleys carried out continuous raids. They laid traps for the ships of the Crescent on their commercial routes and often made rapid incursions on the villages of the Turkish coasts.

These were years of great fervour, during which the Hospital strengthened its organizing

structures. From 1396 to 1437 the Grand Masters, Philibert de Naillac and Antoine Fluvian de la Riviere dedicated their means and energies towards increasing the defensive capacity of their stronghold, believing that very soon Rhodes would face even more aggressive attacks than it had already. Grand Master Antoine Fluvian de la Riviere offered his own personal wealth towards this programme. It was to be thanks to his inheritance that churches were erected and a new hospital was built.

The enemy, however, did not wait. In 1440 the Egyptians launched a violent attack but, led on by Grand Master Jean de Lastic who had arrived just in time from Europe, the Knights succeeded in warding off the attackers in a bloody battle after which they chased the enemy ships as far as the coast of Anatolia. In 1444, the Turks also risked a similar undertaking but their attempt failed too.

It was, indeed, a period of uninterrupted military activity. We must bear in mind that the vessels of the Order also took part in all the expeditions that the Catholic Countries, urged by the various Popes, organised now and then against Islam. In 1453, Mohammed II conquered Constantinople and the terrified Christians looked East where, in a few years, the Turkish Sultan occupied the Peloponnese, Trebizond, Mytilene, Euboea, part of Albania, the Genoese colonies in the Crimea, defeated Serbia and imposed levies upon many countries. There was only one island to stop the Muslims from advancing upon Europe. A small obstacle that could easily be overcome and Mohammed II therefore declared that he would teach a lesson to the enemy who had dared to challenge the power of the Crescent, a solemn lesson that would be a warning to all the West. He carried out his threat without delay. On the dawn of May 23rd 1480, one hundred and sixty ships appeared on the horizon off the island of Rhodes and one hundred thousand men came ashore carrying a number of cannons such as had never been seen before. One of the biggest sieges in history was about to take place.

The movements of the enemy had been foreseen by Grand Master Fra' Pierre d'Aubusson who had already ordered the mobilization of all the forces at his disposal. He had sent messages to European Princes requesting both men and means but only received promises or evasive answers. His only help came from an Italian, Benedetto della Scala, leader of a group of men armed at his own expense. The brother of the Grand Master, Antoine d'Aubusson was also with him.

The Turks did not waste time and in an attempt to demoralise the people of Rhodes they bombarded the inhabited parts of the island.

Adequate shelters had, however, been set up in time for children together with the elderly and sick. On May 24th, at the end of a massive bombing attack, the Commanders ordered their first assault. They were sure to get the better of the besieged but the tenacity of the Christians belied the easy forecasts of the Sultan and the siege lasted two months. On July 27th, the Muslims launched what, in their plans, should have been the final attack. More than 3,500 balls from their cannons fell on the city during the bombardment which lasted weeks and reduced the walls surrounding the city to a heap of rubble.

Through the breaches in the wall, the commander of the infantry, the renegade Misac Paleologus Pasha made use of his best troops: 2500 Janissaries and thousands of other soldiers surrounded the Tower of Italy and planted the banners of the prophet on the

ramparts. All seemed lost but the Knights reacted immediately. Led by the Grand Master and fighting man to man they faced the enemy who, in the end, were compelled to retreat. In spite of his serious injuries Fra' Pierre d'Aubusson went on exhorting his men to repel the adversaries who charged again and again. It was a bloody day whose result, together with the news of the imminent arrival of reinforcements, convinced Misac Paleologus to give up his military action. The Muslim arrogance had been shattered by the little island and Europe could look on the "Sacra Milizia" with renewed hope as the only bastion against Islam. Mohammed II had to admit bitterly that a handful of men had succeeded in beating the Osmali Empire, a defeat he would never resign himself to. He wished to be remembered on his tomb with the words "I intended to conquer Rhodes and to subdue Italy". The day after the victory the Knights were again at work, rebuilding the city and the walls destroyed by the artillery. Their mission was to fight the infidels and they knew that opportunities would not be lacking.

At the command of Pope Alexander VI, between 1499 and 1503 an Alliance was established, made up of France, Spain, Portugal and Venice. The Order placed its galleys at the disposal of the Christian Armada. They had big projects and great intentions but the results were poor. In the end, the Order was left alone to face its eternal enemies. The Turks, sure to take the Hospitallers by surprise, tried again in 1503. They hoped to exploit their advantage but the immediate retaliation compelled them to retreat with serious losses. In the meantime, there were continuous wars among the various nations in Europe that persuaded some States to reconsider their position with regards to Islam. On occasions Christian France made pacts with the Turks. Venice was also concerned about its commerce and was on friendly terms with Constantinople. They blamed the obstinacy of the Knights in their opposition to Muslim power in the Mediterranean and considered their worries about a possible offensive against the West to be excessive.

Sultan Suleiman II ascended the Osmali throne in 1520. He was a young, bright and ambitious man: in Europe he was called the "Magnificent" and in Islam the "Lawmaker", but for the Hospitallers he was a merciless enemy. He had clear ideas and his first was the conquest of Belgrade. As master of Hungary he could easily threaten Europe over land. The other Christian bastion was on the sea. The Knights of St. John would never allow him to consolidate the supremacy of his fleet and therefore they would have to be eliminated. The destiny of the Hospital was decided: Suleiman ordered his generals to attack.

This news did not surprise Grand Master Fra' Philippe de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. He had at his disposal six hundred brethren and five thousand men. Foreseeing danger, he had requested help from all the other Catholic Sovereigns but nobody was willing to help with troops and this meant that the Order was alone to battle against the Turkish Empire. Adrian VI urged the princes to bring help to the Hospitallers but his appeals were not heard. Meanwhile, a storm was brewing in the last Christian stronghold.

On the morning of June 6th 1522, the men on the look-out from the towers felt their hearts missing a beat as they watched the fleet looming on the horizon. Hundreds of ships loaded with armed soldiers were slowly approaching. The Grand Master gathered the Knights together and reminded them in a few words of the commitment they undertook when they wore the habit of the Order: they had to show themselves worthy of the

privilege of belonging to the "Sacra Milizia" and were to fight the infidels even at the cost of their own lives.

Even those who attacked, however, must have been concerned at the sight of the fortifications silhouetted against the skyline. A double row of walls surrounded the city, firmly joined with the natural rock perpendicular to the sea, and to make it stronger there was a moat between sixty and one hundred and forty feet deep. The city walls included thirteen towers and the city itself was dominated by the high bell tower of the church of St. John. Everywhere there were cannons ready to fire.

The Grand Master, Philippe de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, gave an immediate demonstration of his determination. He ordered to set fire immediately to the villas and summer residences to prevent the enemy from easily finding hiding places in the luxurious and huge gardens. As an example, he ordered that his own splendid villa be the first to be destroyed. In fact everything was to be burned down, even within the walls.

The noose seemed meanwhile to be tightening. Thousands of slaves landed from artillery ships of all sizes while the surrounding hills were covered with banners and multicoloured tents. When the Turks opened fire the entire island appeared to be alight. The Knights' cannons fired back and as an historian relates, the towers seemed to emerge from a cloud of smoke. The Ottomans had to their advantage, a larger number of men, greater power, formidable military organization and fanatical contempt for their own and others' life. The Knights of St. John had the joyful courage born of Faith and the genius of a Knight, Gabriele Martinengo, the most famous military engineer of the time. He had left Candia where he was in the service of the "Serenissima", to join his brothers-in-arms and place all the stratagems that his genius and technological capacities suggested at the disposal of the Order.

The duel between the artilleries went on for days and days without interruption. On the 26th of June, the Ottoman troops prepared themselves for the first assault. Along the walls, the Knights of the Order waited for the attack. They wore battle surcoat over their armour: a red tunic with a large White Cross. They were conspicuous among the crowd and could easily be seen from a distance. Their very presence and the sight of their uniforms sufficed to make the Ottomans furious. Before taking their places on the walls they attended Mass in the Cathedral of St. John. Like any other day, this one started with the celebration of the Divine Rite, but on this morning all the inhabitants of Rhodes were there with them. Fishermen, farmers and simple people were around those men they had learned to respect and who, for so long, had defended their freedom and their homes. Men who had turned their island into a respected and feared land.

On the Turkish front, they were convinced that the long bombardment had weakened the resistance of the besieged and they thought that this would have been the final day. Preceded by deafening drum rolls and by their Commanders shouting orders, thousands of Turks marched towards the walls but after a few hundred metres the human mass seemed to falter under the rain of artillery fire which harassed the Turkish ranks. In spite of the avalanche of fire and stones from on high, the swarming stream of men reached the bastions and attempted to climb them. It was a massacre. Although the Commanders exhorted and threatened, the army retreated. Thousands of men were left dead on the ground and with them, the hope of a triumphant end of the siege. It had been an epic day

for the Knights at the end of which they thanked the Virgin Mary of Philermo, their patron, in the Cathedral of St. John. Along the streets of the city, the Rhodians celebrated the victory but the siege had just begun, and the Ottomans would return.

The attacks of the two hundred thousand men surrounding Rhodes were numerous but all attempts were in vain. As time passed the Turkish troops began to refuse to fight but they were obliged to continue as the prestige of Islam was at stake. Suleiman, hearing of the situation, decided to take command personally. On August 28th he arrived on the scene with a new fleet, accompanied by more soldiers and artillery representing a power which, until then, had been unknown.

In spite of all this Rhodes held out. On September 4th, the besiegers succeeded in exploding a mine which destroyed part of the bastion of the Langue of England. Around the breach the fighting was intense and the enemy was forced to retreat, but only at the cost of great sacrifice on the part of the Knights. The enemy returned again on September 24th. It was one of the most dramatic days with the death toll of the Turks totalling 15,000 men. According to the chronicles of the time it had been a real slaughter.

Within the city the situation became more and more serious. Supplies were beginning to run short and the people were exhausted while, on the other hand, new reinforcements continued to arrive from Constantinople. Difficult days would follow for the besieged and at sunrise on December 17th Suleiman launched his final attack. After many hours of desperate fighting the Janissaries managed to climb the surrounding wall but with the last remaining bit of strength the Grand Master and his brethren succeeded in repelling the invaders. It was hopeless to continue to fight and the Rhodians asked to make a truce with Suleiman. Even though they were reduced in number to little more than one hundred, the Knights rejected their plea. Fra' Philippe de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, however, knew of the atrocious destiny that the conquerors would reserve for the civilians had they continued to resist. Deeply impressed by the courage of his adversaries, the Sultan received the Grand Master with great respect. He knew that Rhodes was at its extreme limit but his army had also suffered and the fight could go on for several days. Suleiman accepted the proposed conditions: the city and the population would be saved. The Knights would be permitted to take all their possessions and depart with all the honours of war. The Rhodians would also be able to follow them into exile, should they wish.

On December 24th, following six months of fighting, the Turks took possession of the island of Rhodes. At sunrise on January 10th (according to some chronicles the departure took place on January 2nd), the Order of the Hospital left the land that had been its home for more than two centuries. As the ships slowly withdrew from the island, the red flag of the Religious Order was not to be seen but in its place was a white cloth on which the image of the Virgin Mary was embroidered in gold with the words "Afflictis Tu spes unica". The change of flag was due to the deep devotion of the soldiers to the Mother of the Saviour but at the same time it was an accusation against Christianity who had abandoned her children at their extreme hour of need.

Homeless

*A*fter many difficulties the fleet of the Order landed at Civitavecchia at the end of July. Adrian VI was alone in offering them refuge and protection. A triumphant welcome awaited the defenders of Rhodes. The naval squadron of the Pope formed a guard of honour for their arrival at the dock. The Pope put the entire city at the disposal of the Grand Master in order to allow the Knights a provisional home. This was a generous and unexpected gesture on the part of the Order's host which gave great hope for the future. Fra' Philippe de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam established the Convent and Hospital at Civitavecchia and the Papal naval base became the first residence of the "Sacra Milizia" after the loss of Rhodes.

In spite of the helpfulness of the Holy See, the Grand Master did not lose time in evaluating the various possibilities of a new and adequate home for his Knights, even though his hope was one day to return to Rhodes. Among the options was the port of Sued on the northern coast of Crete, or Cerigo the most southern of the Ionic Islands. A project that received immediate objection from Venice: the "Serenissima" feared the close proximity of the belligerent "children" of St. John because of Venetian commercial and political relations with Constantinople. Other sites were also taken into consideration: Elba, Minorca, Ibiza, Ischia and Malta. The best solution appeared to be Malta: it belonged to the Spanish crown and it was Charles V himself who held the power to make such a concession.

On September 1st Pope Adrian VI died thereby causing the loss of a precious ally for the Knights of St. John. On October 8th 1523, while the Cardinals were already in Conclave, the Order's Ambassadors left for Spain on a diplomatic mission. They were led by the Prior of Castille, Fra' Don Diego de Toledo and Fra' Gabriele Martinengo, the military engineer who had won so much glory in Rhodes where he was seriously injured. A few weeks later Rome and the Christian world greeted a new Pope, Giulio de' Medici who ascended the throne of Peter with the name of Clement VII. The work of the Ambassadors began to give results and the Emperor of Spain, Charles V, proposed Minorca, Ischia, Elba, Ibiza, Heres and Ponza as possible future homes, but none of these islands seemed to answer their needs as well as Malta, which was also being considered.

The geographical position of Malta made it a natural bastion from where the Knights could monitor all the movements of the Turkish fleet which was becoming increasingly aggressive and sailed the seas undisturbed. The Spanish Sovereign took this matter into account and towards the middle of April one of the Order's envoys, Antonio Bosio, arrived at Viterbo, where the Convent had meanwhile been moved to, with the first proposals. The Emperor intended to grant them Malta, Gozo and the base of Tripoli but made heavy demands in return. The two islands would be assigned as a perpetual fief by Charles in his own name and in that of his successors, but the Grand Master would have to swear allegiance to the Sovereign. The Knights could not accept such a proposal because it was contrary to their Rule which imposed strict neutrality in wars between

Christian States and contrasted with the principals and the supranational nature of the Order.

The first reaction to the proposal was negative but following two somewhat heated meetings the Chapter decided to negotiate with the Sovereign and declared that the Order would accept Malta and Gozo on condition that there would be no bonds attached to the grant. The only commitment was that a Mass would be celebrated once a year as a thanksgiving for all the benefits received or that a falcon would be given as a gift to the Viceroy of Sicily on the feast of All the Saints.

It was an audacious answer that risked provoking the Emperor's anger but he did not rise to the occasion and granted that a delegation visit the island. Eight Knights, one for each Langue, arrived in Malta and studied the island in detail. The results of this visit allowed the Chapter to obtain detailed information regarding the conditions of its defences and the local resources. Despite the urgency, the representatives of the Order were not prepared to rush into a decision. They knew that Islam would not give them a moment's respite and, as soon as they were in their new home, they would be attacked by the armies of Suleiman. This was a commitment of historical importance vis a vis the whole of Christianity and they needed to know the dimension and the consistency of the economic problems they would have to face there.

The first approach disappointed them. Malta was large, rocky and unfriendly and could not be compared in any way with Rhodes either for its natural beauties or for its climate. The Knights who were expert soldiers were immediately aware of the difficulties they would have in defending it. To fortify the island they would have to spend terrific sums of money and the goings on in Europe were already seriously affecting the Order's economy. In just a few years they had lost their possessions in both Germany and England and the Reformation and Schism was causing grave problems for the Common Treasury.

In the meantime the plague had compelled them to leave Viterbo. On June 15th 1527 they reached Corneto, a small town not far away but also this new refuge appeared unsafe. On November 14th the fleet weighed anchor in the port of Nice, welcomed by Duke Charles III of Savoy. It was the third residence following Rhodes and the Knights stayed there for nearly two years waiting for something to happen.

The Ambassadors, meanwhile, continued their work and in 1528 Fra' Antonio Bosio finally gave the Grand Master the good news that Emperor Charles V had decided to accept the requests the Chapter General had made in May 1524: the Emperor granted Malta to the Order free from any feudal ties, but insisted on including the Fortress of Tripoli. This last was a gift that the Order would willingly have done without. Finally on March 23rd 1530, one month following his solemn coronation in St. Petronio's in Bologna, during a stop at Castelfranco Emilia, the Emperor signed a Bull by which he conceded the island to the "Sacra Milizia". The Emperor accepted the conditions and between the Mass and the falcon he chose the latter.

Some months later, on October 26th, the Grand Master reached Malta and solemnly took possession of the Island. Seven years had passed since that grey winter morning when the Knights Hospitallers had left Rhodes. For the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and, from this moment on, also of Malta, another important stage of history was just beginning ...

Malta

*D*ry, rocky and almost without vegetation, Malta was initially very hard to swallow! The tenacity and the spirit of sacrifice of the new owners was really put to the test. The natural resources were modest and the conditions of defence were mediocre. The first impressions report that the Hospitallers found their new land disheartening, but during the two centuries spent in Rhodes they had acquired a maritime mentality and their long experience did not fail to offer solutions to the numerous problems.

The only positive element was the condition of the coast: two very large and deep inlets could host numerous ships of notable tonnage and size. The two ports could be used immediately to offer more than adequate refuge for the fleet, allowing also to manoeuvre with ease. The problem regarding the installation of the war fleet was a decisive factor especially if we consider that the defence of the island was initially to be entrusted to the fleet in case of attack, as the fortifications on the island did not constitute any sort of obstacle.

The ventures undertaken in the following years were numerous. It was a period during which the Order seemed to be acquiring a deeper and deeper conscience of the role it was called to carry out. The military actions of its Captains would make history richer, not only for the importance of the single episodes but because they would bear witness to how constant was the commitment of all the Order's members in performing their institutional tasks.

From the first months of their stay they worked incessantly and even though, from a strategic point of view, the island had a position of great value, however much effort they exerted they could not fortify it completely.

The amazing thing was that the Turks had not already utilised it themselves as a stronghold and the only possible answer to such a consideration was in the total conviction of the Crescent not to have any rivals in the Mediterranean. It would therefore have been useless for them to start such a complex and expensive undertaking as the one the Knights were beginning.

On July 21st 1547, while the ships were engaged on a mission, the corsair Dragut, one of the cleverest and most dangerous Turkish Captains, was so bold as to land on the island with a group of soldiers and capture three hundred of its inhabitants. It is difficult to establish whether this was an act of courage or a demonstrative action. The venture of Dragut showed, however, that Islam, even though engaged in the conquest of Eastern Europe, continued to consider itself master of the Mediterranean and warned its eternal enemies that it would soon be putting the Knights on their mettle.

Suleiman and his Admirals made it quite clear that they also had plans to conquer Italy. In 1550 Massa and Sorrento were sacked and many times during the following years Muslim ships sailed up the Tiber, pushing themselves as far as the doors of Rome. In the first months of 1564 news came from Constantinople that Suleiman intended to launch

his armies on a new and huge undertaking. The old Sultan was the ruler of an immense empire but he still had one ambition to realise: the conquest of Rome, the capital of Christianity. A dream that he dared not to confess to himself but that had been obsessing him for a long time.

Between the Red Apple, as the Turks called Rome, and his scimitar, there was only the island of the Knights: a stronghold from where they could launch their ships on speedy and deadly missions. An army, whose objective was Italy, could not tolerate having such a military base behind its back without running the risk of seeing its supplies cut off. Malta was a fortress to be conquered and this was an occasion to eliminate the Hospitaller Knights forever.

The Christian powers were unable to reach an agreement, eternally divided as they were by interests and jealousies of various kinds. They did not heed the warnings of Pope Pius IV who expressed his concern for the imminent danger many times and with energy. The organisational effort that the Turkish Empire was facing was exceptional and showed that Constantinople was preparing for a long and difficult war. In many parts of the Empire massive recruitment of men was carried out and the number of ships being prepared was impressive.

The hypothesis of some observers who held that Malta was an unlikely goal and that the real objective of the Muslim army was Italy, appeared quite plausible. Whatever might have been the immediate intentions of Suleiman, what was certain was that after the fall of the Island of St. John he would turn his eyes to the Italian peninsula. The appeals from the Pope were unheard. In the Consistory held on February 23rd 1565, the Pope addressed the Ambassadors with sorrowful words, in order that they could express the gravity of the situation to their respective Sovereigns. This solemn and official exhortation did not give any result and the events precipitated.

A few days later, on the morning of March 22nd, in the main dock of the Golden Horn, Suleiman the Magnificent received homage from the greatest army he had ever put together in his long career as a leader. Before embarking, thousands of men swore royalty until death and in the European capitals some finally began to realize they had underestimated the threat that came from the East.

The details of the imminent attack had been known by Jean Parisot de la Vallette, the 49th Grand Master of the Order, for a long time, though the governments of the Christian powers appeared not to be concerned about the problem. Born in Toulouse in 1494, of an ancient and noble family of Provence, this brave soldier had devoted his life to the ideals of the Order of St. John and was a protagonist of some of the Order's most important events. A very experienced leader, he was considered one of the bravest Captains of his time. He was an attentive and astute politician and had continuous relations with all the European Sovereigns. He did not believe, however, that the project of an alliance among the Christian States against the common enemy, as a radical solution, could ever be possible even though it had been discussed many times. Neither did he believe that anyone would come and help him and his brethren at the moment of danger. He was only 28 years of age when he had lived the dramatic experience of the siege of Rhodes. He believed, at the time, that reinforcements would come from Europe to help the Knights engaged in a battle fought in the name of Christianity, but time passed and no sails

appeared on the horizon. Day by day, he saw his brethren dying, a sight that would have a lasting effect upon him. The indifference of the West had mortified his knightly spirit and made him suspicious of promises. This was the man facing Suleiman.

As he scanned the horizon from Fort St. Elmo the old Grand Master remembered the suffering and the humility, but the victories too, all in the name of the "Sacra Milizia".

He knew that the battle at which he would spend all his remaining energy would be his last. This belief made him invincible. He had not had time to change Malta into an invincible fortress but he had taken all the necessary precaution to make the conquest of the island as difficult as possible.

Jean Parisot de la Vallette may have had some regrets about the state of the military defence but he was satisfied with his information service.

A long time in advance he had sent some Knights to Constantinople with the task of furnishing him with continuous reports about Suleiman's decisions and movements. They were real secret agents and had demonstrated their worth not only by obtaining information but also by carrying out surprise attacks.

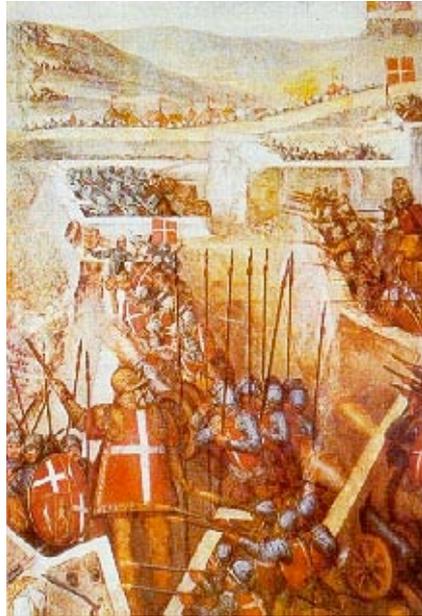
On January 19th 1565 La Vallette received a dispatch informing him of an attack against the island in the following spring. The long awaited hour was arriving and he ordered the Grand Priors to mobilise all the brethren who were able to fight. He knew he would not receive help and that he had to rely only on his own people. On the morning of May 18th a cannon fired a shot from Fort St. Elmo announcing the arrival of the enemy fleet. On the walls protecting the island there were four hundred and seventy Knights, one thousand six hundred Spanish and Italian mercenaries, five thousand soldiers of the Maltese Militia, one hundred and twenty artillery men and sixty-seven assistants. On the opposite side were, five hundred ships and forty thousand men. Mustapha Pasha led the land forces while admiral Piali Pasha commanded the fleet. The two did not get on well and their disagreement resulted in various advantages for the besieged.

The Turks appeared not to want to waste time. Following a few raids on various parts of the fortifications, they decided to attack St. Elmo. They had thought that with the fall of that stronghold, they would gain possession of the whole island. This was a grave strategic error on their part and they suffered heavy losses. Besides, the fall of St. Elmo would not compromise the Order's defence system as the infidels had imagined it would. From the beginning of the Siege it had been clear that the Muslims relied heavily on their numbers and the destructive force of their artillery. The bombardment of Fort St. Elmo lasted twenty six days: a continuous rain of fire, interrupted now and then by useless and bloody attempts to scale the walls.

The general assault, fixed for the morning of June 16th, went on for seven hours. Thousands of Janisseries attempted to overcome the handful of men opposing their fury but they were repelled twice by the Knights, who each time compelled them to retreat, leaving more than one thousand dead. The Knights of St. John were also at their extreme limit.

More days of bombardment followed and, on June 22nd the enemy tried again. In a desperate attempt to scale the top of the walls, the Turks employed hundreds of long ladders up which they climbed, spurred on by the drum rolls and by the shouting of their

leaders. The defenders, although exhausted by the heat, thirst and injuries, managed to drive back the enemy assailing them with an avalanche of stones and fire. A soldier, who had managed to swim across the harbour, informed the Grand Master "There is no more ammunition and no Knight of St. John unwounded"!



Grand Master Fra' Jean de La Vallette exhorting his Knights on the ramparts of Malta

June 23rd, the eve of the feast of St. John, patron of the Order, was the day a new offensive would be launched. The few remaining survivors among the Hospitallers went to confession and received Holy Communion. They knew their destiny: no one would come to their aid and it was useless to hope in the mercy of the enemy. The final battle took place at the doorway of the chapel and lasted just a few minutes. Having slaughtered the last of their adversaries, the Ottomans planted the standard of the Crescent on the ruins of the fort. The most fortified bastion on the whole island was in their hands. But at what a price! It took thirty days of fighting, eighteen thousand rounds of ammunition and the lives of seven thousand Janisseries. The loss had been heavy for the Christians too: one hundred and seven Knights and one thousand five hundred soldiers were killed.

The island had yet to be conquered, however, and the heroism of the defenders of St. Elmo had roused the other soldiers of the Cross. On June 30th six hundred men, including forty four Knights, arrived from Sicily. Nothing compared with the numbers of the enemy but their arrival helped to raise the morale of the besieged.

It would take too long to list the innumerable acts of heroism of the Hospitallers and Maltese during the endless months of siege. Their determination and courage contributed towards saving Christianity and western civilisation. Men coming from different nations, gave an example of how important faith, together with a common ideal, was to a divided and uncertain Europe. The Siege of Malta was not just another of the many battles fought between Muslims and Christians. The military prestige of the two sides was at stake in this decisive duel between the Cross and the Crescent.



View of Fort St. Angelo, centre of Malta's defensive system.

On July 15th Mustapha launched another huge attack in which he hoped that the will of his enemies could be weakened by endless bombardments. On this occasion he counted yet again on the numerical superiority of his troops.

The soldiers of the "Sacra Milizia", however, managed to resist, while, day by day the Turks seemed to be losing their usual aggressiveness and their certainty to return home winners.

They made other attempts to bend the besieged on August 2nd and 7th but, in spite of the losses, the Christians, supported by the words and the example of their untiring Grand Master, yet once again got the better of their enemy. Mustapha could not resign himself to losing and his men threw a hail of artillery fire against the enemy positions and the best Turkish foot soldiers were massacred, but all in vain. Furious and desperate, the Commander of the Ottoman army played his last card. His people were already demoralised and exhausted and when news of an imminent arrival of reinforcements for the besieged arrived from Sicily, the weather happened to change for the worse. Admiral Piali realised that summer was coming to an end and that a sudden storm could surprise the fleet in a sea full of hidden rocks.

On August 23rd and 30th the last attempts to conquer the heart of that island, on whose beaches Mustapha was sure to conclude his career as a triumphant Commander, were made but every effort was in vain. His army embarked, humiliated and disheartened, and the Commanders gave the order to set sail towards Constantinople where the anger and revenge of the Sultan awaited them.

It was September 8th, the feast of the nativity of the Virgin Mary, and the ships of what would be remembered as the "Gran Soccorso" were reaching the waters of Malta.



Palace from where Fra' Jean de La Vallette conducted the various phases of the long Siege.

On the walls reduced to a heap of ruins, the banners of the Holy Religion were flying. This was the conclusion of one of the most glorious pages in the history of the Christian West. The Knights of St. John of Rhodes and Malta, not only defeated the army of Islam, but humiliated the fanatic certainty of the superiority of an Empire.

Some days later Jean de la Vallette marked another score against Suleiman. His secret agents, the same men who had constantly informed him on the movements of the adversary, burnt down the arsenal of Constantinople. This was a venture which deeply demoralised the old Sultan who, for the first time, felt himself being threatened within the capital of his kingdom.

But the victory did not distract the Grand Master and the Chapter away from their duties. The Siege had shown that the defences were weak and it was necessary to reinforce them in time. It was useless to deceive themselves: sooner or later the Turks would come back to seek revenge for the stinging defeat they had suffered and it was necessary to get ready.

Ever since his arrival in Malta, Jean de le Vallette had toyed with the idea of building a large city on the highland which dominated the country. This was an idea that he could now finally realise. The task of drawing the plans for the project was given to an architect Francesco Laparelli from Cortona, and the Grand Master gave him very short time to complete the work. The old soldier was in hurry to put his island in a condition to resist against a return of the enemy. He infected his assistants with his enthusiasm and only months later, on March 28th 1566, during a solemn ceremony the Grand Master placed the first stone of the city that was to be named after him, Valletta. Francesco Laparelli helped by his Maltese assistant, Gerolamo Cassar, made of this capital an example of architectural style.

New and marvellous Auberges (buildings where junior Knights lived), palaces and

churches rose, and in the midst of them, St. John's Conventual Church. The face of Malta changed. It was no longer only the stronghold of the Knights, but now also a splendid monument to art and faith. The care of the Hospitallers changed the dry and inhospitable island into a jewel that is still admired today. The building of Valletta was followed by the re-organization of the port and the creation of new gardens and other strong and elegant fortifications. It was a work of embellishment carried out over two centuries which witnessed the continuity of ideals and intent among the different heads of the Order who followed one another.

Between 1657 and 1660 Grand Master, Fra' Martin de Redin strengthened the defence system by building fourteen coastal towers and between 1660 and 1680 Grand Masters Raphael and Nicolas Cottoner erected a huge fortified complex which would be called the 'Cotonera Lines'. The great Arsenal of Italy was built thanks to Admiral Girolamo Salvago and all the Langues contributed towards the decoration and embellishment of their own Auberge and towards enriching their Chapel in the Conventual Church of St. John, upon whose floor are laid out the tombstones of the European nobility making it a work of very high artistic value.

Jean de la Vallette, the heroic victor of Suleiman, died on August 21st 1568. The work yards closed for two days in sign of mourning, just enough time to elect the new Grand Master, Fra' Pietro Del Monte, Pilier of the Langue of Italy. He immediately ordered that the building of the city be resumed with new enthusiasm.

While Malta was buzzing with activity, the Knights continued to fight at sea. In the meantime, the Turks soon reacquired their boldness and occupied Cyprus from where they could more easily threaten all the States situated along the coasts.

A new threat gave Pope Pius V the opportunity to convince the King of Spain that the time had come for them to act resolutely against the Ottoman Empire. An alliance was established and included besides Spain, Venice, the Holy See, the Duke of Savoy, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Genoa, the Kingdom of Sicily and the Order of St. John. The battle took place in the waters of Lepanto on October 17th 1571 and the Knights were led by the Prior of Messina, Fra' Pietro Giustiniani. The Hospitallers were there with only three galleys but numerous Knights fought on the Spanish, Sicilian, Pontifical and Tuscan ships. Don John of Austria, the brother of the Emperor of Spain, led the armada.

Marcantonio Colonna led the ships of the Pope; Sebastian Veniero and Agostino Barbarigo those of Venice and Gianandrea Doria was the Admiral of the Genoese ships. A fleet named the 'Squadron of Adventurers' and armed at the personal expense of a few gentlemen who wished to take part in the undertaking joined the Christian forces. Don John of Austria entrusted this squadron to Count Don Vincenzo Marullo, a patrician from Messina, known for his valour and skill at sea, who also happened to be the owner of one of the best armed galleys.

It was a bitter struggle with the Christian front relying upon 243 galleys while the Turks had 280. Admiral Ali and the Viceroy of Algeria, Uluch Ali, were at the command of the Turkish fleet.

The Christian fleet surprised the enemy at sunrise and advanced according to the traditional order of battle: a long front, whose centre was led by John of Austria, the left

wing led by Sebastiano Veniero and Barbarigo and the right one by Doria. In the centre as a reserve, was the squadron of the Marquis de Santa Cruz. Eight large galleys preceded the front and had the task of bearing the first assault.

The Turkish fleet moved in only one line with neither reserve nor vanguard. The first stages of the battle were favourable for the Christian army but a mistake made by Doria risked compromising the final result of the battle.

Fearing to be encircled by the galleys of Uluch Ali, the Genoese leader sailed out to open sea leaving the entire left wing unguarded, thereby creating an opening through which the Turkish Admiral and his fleet penetrated, investing the Christian centre defence which was already heavily engaged. The galleys of the Order succeeded in stopping them until the arrival of the reserves led by the Marquis de Santa Cruz, but only at the cost of heavy losses and the risk of being captured or sunk.

The extent of the Muslim defeat was impressive: one hundred ships were captured and one hundred and thirty burnt or sunk. Twenty-five thousand men were killed and eight thousand captured and taken prisoner while ten thousand Christian slaves were set free. Fra' Pietro Giustiniani, Prior of Messina, returned to Malta on November 3rd, having been injured by five arrows and his ships marked by the heavy battle. He carried two ships with him as spoils of war as well as the joy of having contributed, on behalf of the Order of St. John, to another victorious day for the Christian Army.

Europe exulted, but because of futile jealousies the alliance did not succeed in exploiting its success and shortly after it was dissolved. Cyprus remained in the hands of the Turks: this was a mistake that Venice and the Knights would later pay a high price for.

Hospitaller Civilisation

*T*he history of the Order of St. John was not only a succession of battles. For more than two centuries following the battle of Lepanto, its ships continued to plough the seas. Then, towards the middle of the eighteenth century, the decadence of Muslim power made its military engagement less pressing. Malta, in the meantime, became more and more a State which dealt at par with the greatest European powers and assumed, as time passed, a prestigious and strong position which was the reason for disagreements and more or less serious conflicts with the Holy See itself.

The Order also had many occasions to enlarge its territories. In 1652, in order to take possession of some property in the Antilles which had been administered by a Knight on behalf of the King of France, the Knights bought the islands of St. Christopher, St. Martin, St. Bartholomew and Santa Cruz. Fra' Charles de Galles was sent there to govern them but soon the Order decided to give up these properties because of the moral and political embarrassment they may have caused to the ancient Order of Chivalry.

The endless series of military ventures and the continuous danger of being attached on their own island had not turned the Knights away from their other institutional duty. Even in the most difficult times they never forgot their hospitaller activities and continued to establish and administer hospitals as they had in, Jerusalem, in Tolemaides, Cyprus, Rhodes and in the other homes they had been compelled to move to, following the loss of the Holy Land.

In Rhodes, it is still possible to admire the ruins of the Great Infirmary and in Malta, the modernity of the building where their "lords the sick" were hosted, to this day arouses admiration and amazement, both for its size and avant-garde characteristics. Not only did they build hospitals in the countries in which they settled, but also ensured that every Commandery should include a hospice where pilgrims and passers-by could find refuge and assistance. Each hospice had its own economic fund and was administered by a group of Knights under the guidance of a Preceptor or a Knight Commander. A certain number of Commanderies were grouped together to constitute a Bailiwick which came under the jurisdiction of a Bailiff, while the various Commanderies and Bailiwicks made up a Priory or Grand Priory.

The Holy Religion consisted of as many as twenty two Pories in Europe and this permitted them to run a network of hospices from England to Sicily and from France to Austria. A vast and complex organisation that absorbed a good part of the economic resources of the Order and was monitored by the Hospitaller, one of the most important positions that for a long time had been entrusted to the Pilier of the Langue of France.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, in the Hospital in Malta were three supervisory doctors, three surgeons and various doctors and nurses. The assistance of the sick was, for the most part, the responsibility of the Knights themselves who, above all during their novitiate, were entrusted in shifts with this duty. In an age when sanitary

conditions were somewhat neglected, particularly at sea, the ships of the Order were a good example of hygiene and cleanliness. It was inevitable that the Order would end up not only in the field of healthcare but in scientific research too.

In 1664 Grand Master Fra' Nicolas Cotoner founded a medical school in the "Sacra Infermeria" and called upon Giuseppe Zammit, a great intellectual leader of his time, to direct it, while Fra' Antonio Zondadari, Grand Master from 1720 to 1722 allowed corpses to be used for the first time during lessons. In 1769 Grand Master Fra' Manuel Pinto de Fonseca founded the University and many illustrious European medical doctors were called to teach there. It was a Grand Master, in the middle of the eighteenth century, who would confer the first degree in medicine on a woman and permit her to perform surgery.

Good sailors that they were, the Knights paid particular attention to eye treatment. It was a doctor and scientist from Malta, Joseph Bart, who founded in Vienna in 1765 the first Chair of Ophthalmology in the world. Besides studies in medicine, the Knights gave a great impulse to pharmacology and the galleys of St. John were the first to have both a doctor and chemist on board.

The changing times imposed new strategies and in 1775, Fra' Emmanuel de Rohan Polduc, a Frenchman, was elected Grand Master.

He was an attentive administrator and politician as well as a brilliant legislator. He was the compiler of a Code which bears his name, which is, still today, a precious and fundamental source of Order of Malta law. Rohan re-organized the fleet and established a Chair of Navigation and Mathematics at the University. For a long time Malta had been the destination of young aristocrats from all over Europe who wanted to become naval officers.

The school of the Knights became a kind of Academy where the best Commanders and future Admirals came from. Above all, France relied on the Knights for the training of her naval officers.

The wind of the Enlightenment and the revolutionary storm that upset France compelled the Hospitallers to give up the neutral policy which had always kept them safe from repercussions arising out of different European events. In 1794 the United States proposed an offer of protection assuring them of new territory in America but it remained just a project. Russia, France and England were all interested in the Island of the Knights, even if the reason for their particular attention was in their own interest. New international balances of power made the island very important from a strategic point of view.

The Government of the Order did not ignore the dangers they could meet by entering into the sphere of influence of a specific nation but a decision had to be taken and Tsar Paul I of Russia entered into secret negotiations with Grand Master Rohan to reach a concordat that would put the Knights and their territory under the protection of Russia.

The treaty, signed at St. Petersburg in January 1797, sanctioned a series of connections that had existed for some time: in fact, both Peter the Great and the Catherine the Great had tried to approach the Knights. Following the stipulation of the agreement, the Sovereign expected the creation of a great Russian Priory and this was the price of the

alliance which the Grand Master was compelled to pay.

Fra' Ferdinand von Hompesch, a Knight of German origin, succeeded Emmanuel de Rohan in 1797 as Grand Master. His election gave the Order hope of greater protection from Austria but the French began to suspect that there might be Austrian influence on the Order. In the end, neither Russia nor Austria succeeded in saving Malta from Napoleon.

The future French Emperor could not allow other powers to possess a naval base of such importance and decided to seize it by using force. Good fortune was on Napoleon's side. The ship that carried the envelope containing despatches from the Emperor of Russia with the terms of the secret agreement was captured by a French vessel near Ancona and the documents ended up in the hands of the General. He was infuriated by this, accused the Order of connivance with Russia and complained that a coalition was being formed against him.

Determined to take possession of the Island he ordered Admiral Francis Paul de Bruyes, who was leading the requisitioned vessels of the Republic of Venice from Corfu to Toulon, to occupy the port of Valletta, but the Grand Master acted resolutely and prevented the realization of Napoleon's plan. On June 10th the French fleet, on its way to Egypt, appeared in front of Malta. Napoleon asked the Grand Master to be allowed to enter the port in order to supply the ships with fresh water. The answer of Hompesch was immediate. He expected the French to respect the neutrality of the Order and replied that according to the treaty of Utrecht, in time of war among the Christian States, only four ships at a time could enter the port of Malta. Napoleon was not impressed and announced his intentions to his troops. He said, "the Grand Master has refused us the water we need and so tomorrow at dawn the army will land on the coast and take it".

These were dramatic hours for the Knights. On the battlements were one thousand four hundred pieces of artillery and the Grand Master commanded three hundred and thirty two Knights. He also had at his disposal one thousand two hundred men of the Regiment of Malta, three hundred men from the landing force of the galleys, four hundred from the Order's vessels and the Maltese Militia which could place twelve thousand men on the field. A successful defence could be attempted, but it was a decision that was contrary to the rule of the Order to raise arms against other Christians.

It has been said that Grand Master Hompesch was incapable and weak. Some have also hinted that the French Knights who were present on the Island at that moment had betrayed him but it is difficult to express a definite opinion about such a complex situation and there are very few elements to support either hypothesis. From an optimistic point of view, the appearance of Napoleon Bonaparte on the European scene could be considered as providential. The Sovereign Military Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and Malta, had already exhausted its military mission and, in an age of furious nationalism, disputes and misunderstandings among the members of the different Langues began to appear.

The changing times and a certain immobility were already misting the ancient splendour of the Holy Religion. Ferdinand von Hompesch ordered his men not to react and as a result the French soldiers sacked the island.

The destiny of the Order was sealed on the morning of June 12th 1798, the 24th day of Messidor of the sixth year of the French Republic. On board the French vessel "Orient" a committee of seven Knights dealt with the terms of surrender with Napoleon, signing a convention composed of seven items: a document with a few words to end 268 years of history. So many years had passed since that October 26th 1530 when Fra' Philippe de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam had taken possession of the "island of honey". Two and a half centuries during which the Knights had given so many examples of abnegation, helping men and nations, princes and cities and offering a very high tribute of blood for the cause of Christianity. Beyond the formal and useless claims of various governments, nobody appeared worried about what was happening. Europe, ungrateful as ever, was concerned only with establishing who the new owners of that rock, placed in the middle of the Mediterranean, would be.

In Exile

*T*he provisional seat of the Hospitallers in exile was established in Trieste under the protection of the Emperor of Austria. Fra' Ferdinand von Hompesch sent a letter of protest to the great powers of Europe, complaining of the betrayal of Napoleon. The General had openly violated the neutrality of Malta and the Grand Master claimed that his sovereignty over the island, taken from him by using force, was still valid. The King of Naples and Sicily also protested against the abuse of power by the French but nothing changed. The behaviour of the French obliged the people of Malta to rebel and consequently allowed the European powers to intervene. The command of the operations was assumed by the English who finished off by occupying the island and taking possession of it.

In the meantime, as was easy to foresee, the loss of Malta had grave consequences upon the members of the Order. The Knights of the Grand Phory of Russia and those of Poland deposed von Hompesch and on November 6th 1798 elected Tsar Paul I as the new Grand Master. This situation put the Holy See in great difficulties. The Pope could not tolerate that a single Grand Priory could, contrary to any norm in Canon Law, depose from office the head of the Order of St. John without his having abdicated. Besides there was the fact that Paul I was not Catholic and was married. Pope Pius VI refused categorically to recognise the Sovereign as Grand Master even though, under threat from Napoleon, he saw a possible alliance with the Russian Empire.

In the meantime in July 1799 Hompesch abdicated upon the suggestion of the court of Vienna which needed Russia's assistance.

This was very important: Paul I was to become Grand Master "de facto" but not "de iure".

Although Orthodox, the Tsar respected the Catholicism of the Order under all aspects. In the confused and difficult historical moment, caused by the Napoleonic wars, it was he who saved the historical continuity of the Order of St. John. In the night between March 11th and 12th 1801 Tsar Paul I was killed in the castle of Michajlovskij in St. Petersburg. His son, Alexander I, did not claim the Grand Mastership by right of succession for himself although he assured the Order of his protection. For the successor of his father, he suggested that every Langue should choose its own candidate to be submitted to the Pope, who would himself appoint the new Grand Master. In this way Alexander I acknowledged the right of the Supreme Pontiff to nominate the Grand Master. An unusual practice which, under the circumstances of the time, was also accepted by the signatories of the Treaty of Amiens (1802) which, in the meantime, had decreed the restitution of Malta to the Knights.

On February 9th 1803 Pope Pius VII appointed Fra' Giovan Battista Tommasi as Grand Master.

From St. Petersburg the Tsar sent him the insignia that had belonged to his father.

The Grand Master settled in Messina and his first act was to entrust his Lieutenant to establish the procedure for the restitution of the island of Malta with the representatives of the European powers.

The hope of the Knights to return to their old home would very soon reveal itself to be futile. With the Treaty of Paris on May 30th 1814, Malta was assigned definitively to Great Britain and therefore the claims and protests made by the Delegates of the Order at the Congresses of Vienna and Aquisgrana were useless. Attempts made to obtain some other island at the congress of Verona were also in vain.

In 1805, following the transfer of the Convent to Catania, Grand Master Tommasi died. Owing to the war, the representatives of the different Langues were unable to meet and the Pope authorised the Council Complete of State to elect, in accordance with the Constitutional Charter, a Lieutenant of the Grand Magistracy.

Difficult years followed with the Order constantly in search of suitable accommodation. Finally, following a short stay in Ferrara, in 1834 the Lieutenant Fra' Carlo Candida chose, as seat, the ancient Palazzo di Malta in Rome, which had been then residence of the representative of the Hospitallers accredited to the Holy Father.

After having wandered far and wide, the Knights finally landed in the capital of Christianity, thereby finding the most logical solution to their problems.

Most of the Priories no longer existed and hundreds of Knights were dispersed throughout various nations with no one to guide them. It was necessary to get re-organised as soon as possible and demonstrate the vitality of an institution which, though no longer having its own territory, continue to be recognised as a Sovereign Entity by the European powers. A long and complex period of reconstruction was awaiting the Knights of the eight-pointed Cross, who would yet again have to face up to years of hard work and commitment. As in Rhodes and Malta, so too, in the Eternal City, the Knights of St. John would be able to hoist the glorious flag of the "Sacra Milizia" and continue on their path in history.

Rome

*T*he reconstruction of the Order in Rome began uneasily owing to difficult contacts with Knights, who, for whatever reasons, had interrupted their relationship with the Grand Magistracy. A first chance for a return to normality occurred in 1816 with the revival of the Grand Priory of Rome: Italy was already the nation chosen to house the residence of the Order and it was opportune to restore the Order's organisations in this country. In 1830 the Grand Priory of Lombardy and Venice was re-established with the help of Austria, which had never ceased to recognise the sovereignty of the Order and had always been willing to operate in its defence. The Grand Priory was able to recover its properties in the Veneto region but an analogous operation in Lombardy was impossible as the properties had been sold by Napoleon. At the same time, the Grand Priory of Naples and Sicily resumed its activities.

Good results were also achieved in other European countries with respect to re-organization. All the ancient Langues were abolished in an attempt to renew the Order's peripheral structures and the National Associations of Knights were created. The first to be founded was the German one in 1859, followed in 1875 and 1877 by the British and Italian ones respectively. The will and commitment of the Order, shown at times in which ideals of chivalry were no longer particularly popular, led the Pope, Leo XIII, to satisfy the desire of the Knights of St. John to choose their own Grand Master, a charge which had been vacant since 1805. On March 28th, 1879 the Pope signed a Bull authorising the election and the then reigning Lieutenant Fra' Giovanni Battista Ceschi a Santa Croce was called to this highest position within the Order.

Other National Associations soon started their own activities and contributed further to the Order's good works. In 1886 the Spanish Association was born followed in 1891 by the French Association and in 1899 by the Portuguese one. In time, all countries having groups, of Knights gave life to their own Associations, of which there are fifty-six at present. In accordance with the legal system of the territory concerned the Associations are accorded treatment based upon the type of relationship existing between the State itself and the Government of the Order.

The Association of Italian Knights (ACISMOM) has, since its foundation, achieved very important recognition which mirrors Italy's relationship with the Order. The Italian Association of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta carries out its traditional activities in the field of charity and welfare through the creation, organisation and administration of hospitals, nursing homes, hospitals for the chronically ill, sanitary departments, surgeries, anti-diabetic centres, and laboratories of analysis. Faithful to its hospitaller vocation but never forgetting the past, at the moment of its foundation the Association gave life, through many conventions and agreements with the Ministry of Works and later with the Ministry of Defence, to a Military Corps, to be employed in relief operations in case of war or natural calamity.

Occasions during which the Knights could demonstrate the efficiency of this organisation

were not lacking. In 1908 the earthquake in Messina for the first time engaged the Military Corps which intervened with very considerable employment of men and machinery.

In 1911, during the war between Italy and Turkey, ACISMOM mobilised the Military Corps and in a short time prepared and equipped the hospital ship "Regina Margherita" which, during seven voyages, reached the Ports of Tripoli, Derna, Benghazi and Tobruk, and brought home 1162 wounded and sick soldiers. The first World War witnessed the Corps on the front line. From the start of military operations four trains, each with 306 beds, evacuated the hospitals in the war zone. The four trains gave assistance to the French and British expeditionary forces in Italy and to the Italian expeditionary force in France. During 641 voyages, the trains ran 483,948 km carrying 85,784 wounded and 62,232 sick. For more than forty months, eight first aid stations on the front line were the basis of medical assistance that, by the end of the hostilities would have dealt with 87,390 visits.

These figures speak for themselves especially when taking into account that ACISMOM had organised and was managing two hospitals at that same time. In 1940 the Association of Italian Knights mobilised all its sanitary services and put two hospitals, some first aid stations and three hospital trains at the disposal of the Italian army. The trains carried out 79 voyages in Italy, Croatia, Germany and Poland and 23,187 wounded were transported. A fourth train, organised for the Italian expeditionary forces in Russia, brought back 2,552 sick and wounded soldiers. Nine hundred soldiers who were retreating in a heavy snow storm were taken on board to safety during one of the last voyages.

The Armistice, signed on September 8th 1943, obliged ACISMOM and the Military Corps to intervene not only in the operation zones but also in the national territory devastated by civil war and in the liberation zones. They strengthened the hospitals already existing in Rome and Naples and the same happened in Turin and Milan.

The centres of assistance that were set up during those dramatic days were countless. In the city of Rome alone there were 34, and to deal with such a vast organisation the Military Corps enrolled, thanks to its particular prerogatives, hundreds and hundreds of young men who in that way escaped capture or forced labour camps. While Italy was being liberated, they ran hospitals for the wounded, ex-servicemen and ex-prisoners of war.

The Banner of the Italian Association has been awarded a gold Medal of Merit for health services, a silver one for military service, two bronze Medals and numerous recognitions.

ACISMOM has been undergoing a renewal phase since 1986 thanks, initially, to Grand Master, Fra' Angelo de Mojana. Today the Italian Association has numerous medical centres, the most important of which is the Hospital of San Giovanni Battista alla Magliana on the outskirts of Rome, a national point of reference for neurorehabilitation and stroke victims. A highly specialized hospital and one of the few existing in Italy intended for the treatment of patients and research in the sector. The development of this complex has been the constant concern of the Office of the Receiver of the Common Treasure at the Grand Magistracy, which has assisted the Commissioners responsible over the years by promoting investments totalling around eight billion Italian Liras from the

Pergami Belluzzi Baldi Foundation. This Foundation is more than ever present today at the hospital at the Magliana, where the recently inaugurated laboratories of analysis and department of radiology are dedicated to its good name.



Wing of the St. John the Baptist Hospital at Magliana (Rome).

The Italian Association of Knights runs several anti-diabetic centres and, in Rome, the medical centre in Via Bocca di Leone within the same block as the Magistral Palace. For a long time, the Grand Priory of Rome has had several centres dedicated to the collection of medicines and assistance for the elderly. Recently, the Grand Priory has increased its activity in the area, in favour of needy people.

To return to operations accomplished during wars and natural calamities, Italian Knights, together with Knights from other European nations, rushed to Hungary in 1956 during the revolution and the following Soviet occupation. Help was given to Polesine during the floods and to Belice, Friuli and Irpinia where they assisted, with very good results, the Order of Malta Italian Aid Corps (CISOM), a First Aid Organisation which several other Associations had also previously constituted. CISOM is integrated into the Italian Civil Defence System.

The Association of German Knights set up field hospitals in Vietnam and the long and bloody battle did not spare some of the men carrying the White eight pointed Cross who there lost their lives.

The present organisation of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta is not very different from that during the Order's early centuries. The sovereignty of the Order is exercised by the Prince and Grand Master who governs, together with the Sovereign Council which is composed of four high charges: the Grand Commander, the Grand Chancellor, the Hospitaller and the Receiver of the Common Treasure, together with six councillors elected by Chapter General, the Supreme Assembly of Knights normally summoned every five years. The Council Complete of State, on the summoned exclusively for the election of the Grand Master. The two Assemblies are composed of the representatives of the Grand Pries, the SubPries and the National Associations.

The Grand Master carries the title of both Eminence and Highness or Eminent Highness and is universally recognised as a Head of State to whom all honours of a Sovereign are due.

The Supreme Pontiff appoints as his representative a Cardinal to whom is given the name "Cardinalis Patronus" who is assisted by the Prelate of the Order who is likewise appointed by the Holy Father. The Prelate is the Ecclesiastical Superior of the Clergy of the Order and assists the Grand Master in matters regarding spirituality.

The life and activities of the Order are regulated by the Constitutional Charter and the Code while particularly important juridical problems are submitted to the Juridical Council. For any controversies not regarding Canon Law and the Ecclesiastical Court, the Order has its own Court of the First Instance and Court of Appeal whose magistrates are appointed directly by the Grand Master and the Sovereign Council. A Board of Auditors controls financial and economic matters.

The Order has bilateral diplomatic relations with 94 countries, many of which are non-Catholic. Six are the missions to major European countries, as well as 18 permanent observers or official representations to international organizations, such as the United Nations or the European Union.

The great tradition of the Order of Malta's charity work is renewed daily in its hospitals, clinics and welfare centres in over 120 countries; through the commitment of its 12 thousand members, 80 permanent volunteers, 11 thousand doctors and paramedics; through the initiatives of its 10 Pories and 46 National Associations. And again, with the work of Malteser International, the relief corps which for half a century has been addressing great emergencies: natural disasters, epidemics or armed conflicts. Routine or extraordinary, the mission never changes. Nor do its beneficiaries: the aged, the disabled, refugees, the homeless, the terminally ill, lepers, children, or drug addicts.