Relic or relevant? The Knights of Saint John.

Introduction

The Order of Saint John, or more properly, the Sovereign Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta, is the last surviving medieval military religious order and remarkably, its historical governance structure, ethos, and mission are largely intact.

Its origins date back to about 1070, when a hospice for pilgrims run by the religious community of Saint Mary of the Latins was established. The chronicler William of Tyre explained the need for the hospice: “there was no one to offer a roof to our unfortunate people, ground down and ill to the limits of their endurance.”

In this paper I trace the history of the Order from its humble beginnings in Jerusalem, to the worldwide relief efforts of the present day, and consider reasons for its success and longevity. I argue that the longevity of the Hospitallers is largely due to the adaptation of the Order’s mission from hospitaler works, to fighting, to hospitaler works again, in step with changing political requirements and moral priorities. I also argue that survival was largely due to its consistent appeal to the nobility and its aspirants as donors, promoters and members. Some of whom found the Order an exclusive club which confirmed social status, some a means by which to achieve it, and all, a vehicle through which they could undertake the charitable works lauded by their Christian faith.

Origins

The establishment of a hospitaler confraternity in Jerusalem was an expression of the religious revival in Europe which postulated to “infuse secular life with monastic

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values.” The reforms put forward at that time produced a reinvigorated papacy and new monastic orders, which promoted the idea of the laity being involved in benevolent actions to support those less fortunate. This enabled the adaptation of religious life to the demands of the world, with emphasis placed on service to others.

The Jerusalem confraternity serving the “poor of Christ” became independent of its founding house and more prominent after the First Crusade, and adopted Saint John the Baptist as its heavenly patron. Taking inspiration from the Gospel’s “the last shall be first, and the first last” (Matt 19:30) the community called on its members to welcome Christ through serving the poor, the sick, and exhausted pilgrims. The Hospitallers’ practical service was as innovative as it was radical. The confraternity served the poor and sick not only to secure their salvation, but because it benefited the person cared for. To them, the person cared for represented the person of Christ. In their reverence for the unfortunate, the Hospitallers foreshadowed the ideas of Saint Francis a century later.

The establishment of Latin rule in Jerusalem in 1099 brought an increase in pilgrims to the Holy City, and the Hospital expanded largely through the support of donations received from grateful recipients of the Hospitallers’ care. The Hospital was at that time part of network of religious communities located in Jerusalem around the Holy Sepulchre. In time these were to evolve into the Canons of the Holy Sepulchre, and the Knights Templar.
The growth of the Hospital of Saint John was overseen by its first leader, and possibly its founder, Gerard (d. 1120). The work of the Hospital was recognised by Pope Paschal II when in 1113 the confraternity of the Hospital of Saint John was accorded the status of religious order. The Pope allowed its members to elect their own leader, and placed the Order of the Hospital directly under the protection of the Holy See. Successive papal privileges confirmed the underlying objectives of the future Order: obsequium pauperum - service to the poor and tuitio fidei - defence of the Faith.

Hospital in Jerusalem

The practices, medical care, and diet of the hospital maintained by the Order in Jerusalem utilised the medical practices of the East. It is known that it took care of the poor, whatever their religion, nationality or sex. There were separate wards for men and women, with one ward devoted to obstetrics. At a time when only the richest in Europe had their own beds, the sick had separate beds and babies, cots. The beds had feather mattresses and coverlets. The bedclothes were changed every fortnight and twice a week barbers washed the feet of the sick with hot water and dried their feet with soft towels.

Astonished pilgrims reported the success of the Hospital and praised its works. John of Würzburg commented that annexed to the church of Saint John the Baptist there was:

a hospital, wherein in various rooms is collected together an enormous multitude of sick people. Both men and women. Who are tended and restored to health daily… the whole number of these sick people amounted to two thousand...

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8 Gerard is venerated by the Order of Malta as blessed but has never been recognised by the Catholic Church as such: Anthony Luttrell, The Order's Early Legacy in Malta, ed. John Azzopardi (Valletta: Said International, 1989), 45.
11 Ibid., 21. Justification for this was found directly in the Gospels: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” (Lk 23:34); “Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.” (Lk 6:35).
12 Ibid., 19–30.
After the fall of Jerusalem in 1187 and the expulsion of the Hospitallers, the Order continued its hospitaller function at each location the Order settled; a hospital was established in Acre, in Limassol on Cyprus, and later in Rhodes and Malta.\(^\text{14}\) As in Jerusalem, these hospitals brought a high standard of care relative to their era and served their local populations and pilgrims.

**Defence of Christendom**

The constant threat of violence diverted the brethren of the Hospital to the task of military protection for pilgrims travelling through the Holy Land.\(^\text{15}\) The emergence of the military aspect of the Order had a profound impact on its ethos and brought acclaim and criticism (similar to the response given to the formation of the Knights Templar). Critics included the Pope, who in 1178 reminded the Hospital of its pacific purpose.\(^\text{16}\) The constant threat to the safety of pilgrims however, soon quietened official disapproval, and from the middle of the twelfth century military activities overshadowed hospitaller work.\(^\text{17}\)

Specialisation among the brethren of the Hospital took place in order to better facilitate the dual functions of hospitaller care and bearing arms.\(^\text{18}\) Separate classes of knight-brothers, serving brothers and chaplains were instituted, and aristocratic structures developed of which the knight-brothers dominated.\(^\text{19}\) The knight-brothers, whilst being military men, took the religious vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty.\(^\text{20}\) It was also at this time that the white octagonal cross (symbol of the eight

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Beatitudes) was adopted as the Order’s emblem, today widely recognised as the Maltese cross.21

The effectiveness and prowess of the Order’s knights brought considerable renown to the Hospitallers. Powerful crusader patrons such as Godfrey of Bouillon and King Baldwin I of Jerusalem made substantial donations, and across Europe, from Spain to Poland, the Order received a variety of benefices. These became essential to the operation of the Order as it derived its manpower and income from the estates in continental Europe, and by the thirteenth century it was dependent on the donations tenable through the patronage of powerful families.

**Structure**

From its first decades it is likely that the Order had an international structure, which at first was a network of scattered convents answerable to Jerusalem.22 By the fourteenth century the Order had become a supranational organisation and the knights were grouped according to the languages they spoke. There were seven Tongues, each composed of Grand Priories or Priories, Bailiwicks, and Commanderies. These administrative units were responsible for the recruitment and training of knights, management of the Order’s estates in Europe, and performed local hospitaller responsibilities. At the peak of the organisation was the Grand Master, elected for life from the professed knight-brothers, and bound by the Rule and Statutes of the Order.23 He was advised by the Council, composed of high officers drawn from the different Tongues.

The knight-brothers increasingly distanced themselves from others in the Order and the community tasks they performed, and from about the fourteenth century a candidate who was to be admitted as a knight-brother was required to prove his noble

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21 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:3-10)

22 Riley-Smith, Hospitallers: the History of the Order of Saint John, 60.

ancestry. It was at this time that the Order consolidated its reputation as a prestigious institution for which membership carried considerable cache. In earlier generations knight-brothers helped facilitate the rise in social standing of their family, from the fourteenth century, membership of the Order declared established noble status, as the legion of grand portraits featuring the Order’s insignia attest.  

The knights-brothers were considered particularly reliable and trustworthy because of the duality of their vocation (military and religious) and thus played an important role in the service of popes and kings, who employed them in treasury, military and diplomatic services. The presence of knights at European courts reinforced the prestige of the Order and secured and extended their economic privileges. The Order also provided courtiers, minor nobility and younger sons with an attractive career path. The military apprenticeship on Rhodes and later on Malta was highly valued by those seeking to enter the knightly profession.

The Hospitaller convents for women in Spain, France and Italy were later also considered highly prestigious due to their insistence on proofs of noble ancestry. Women had been admitted to the Order since its inception and the first hospice in Jerusalem included sisters, probably elderly widows. In 1338, of the 116 Hospitallers in England, almost half were women. Women’s roles were limited to those ascribed by churchmen of the day, namely retreat and prayer, however, they also managed the Order’s estates.

After the end of the Latin East: Rhodes and Malta

After the fall of Acre in 1291, the Hospitallers retreated to Cyprus and between 1306 and 1309 successfully invaded the nominally Byzantine island of Rhodes, and established an independent state there.

26 One of the many examples of a courtier, general and politician is Juan Fernandez de Heredia, who rose through the ranks of the Hospitallers, and courts of Europe, to become Grand Master in 1377. Ibid., 107.
27 Ibid., 84.
28 Luttrell, “From Jerusalem to Malta: the Hospital’s Character and Evolution.” There sources and literature.
29 Nicholson, The Knights Hospitaller, 84.
The Order survived a major crisis in 1322 when European monarchs withdrew support for international military religious orders and the Order of the Temple was dissolved. Coinciding with the establishment of sovereign rule on Rhodes, and at a time of real threat from Muslim expansion, the Order renewed its commitment to its military vocation and adopted a new military strategy centred on a strong navy. The Order’s success at keeping Muslim and corsair forces in check over the next two centuries is well recognised, and was a key factor in keeping the Mediterranean and its trade routes under the control of Christian Europe. The Order therefore played an important role in the era of burgeoning trade facilitated by the Italian city-states, both as military protector of Christian interests and harrier of Muslim ones, and also as a banker and trading post.\(^{30}\) The Order began to mint its own money, to maintain diplomatic relations with other states, and to raise taxes, thus assuming the vestiges of sovereignty. The functional sovereignty of the Order today dates from this time.\(^{31}\)

The knights were energetic masters of their island state. The Order encouraged trade, invested heavily in impressive defences, and extended patronage of the arts. Again however, the hospitaller vocation took second place, and consisted of the care of pilgrims who called at Rhodes, and a hospital of significant size.

The Order was expelled from Rhodes by the Ottomans after a long siege in 1522. In 1530 the Hospitallers secured a new island base on Malta, and reproduced the “successful Rhodian island order state.”\(^{32}\)

The expulsion from Rhodes was traumatic for the Order, but did not affect its structure, operation or mission. These were all shaken in the political and social upheaval of the late eighteenth century. The French Republic appropriated the assets of the Order’s French priories which formed a significant portion of its financial base, and in 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte took Malta. At the time the Order appeared to have


become a retirement club for elderly nobles whose chief concern was elaborate rituals, garb, and past glories. The following decades were a time of confusion and instability. In 1799 government of the Order was seized by the non-Catholic Tsar of Russia, and Paul I was proclaimed the Grand Master.

**Renewal**

The Order’s revival started in the first half of the nineteenth century when the hospitaller activities returned as the primary objective of the Order. This was also possible because the Order’s structure was revised and its membership extended to those who were not able, or not prepared, to take monastic vows. This new membership class of associates (known as *confreres* and *conseurs*) were grouped into a number of national associations.

From the middle of the nineteenth century the Order’s membership returned to involvement in local and international relief activities utilising the Order’s unique status as an independent and sovereign entity. For example, in 1834 it established a hospice and hospital in Rome, in 1876 it re-established hospitaller work in the Holy Land, and it was actively involved in relief work after of the earthquakes in San Francisco (1906) and Messina (1908).

Hospitaller and welfare activities were undertaken on a considerable scale during both world wars and for all parties involved in the conflicts. For example the Maltese Hospital which operated in Warsaw between 1939 and 1944 took care of both Polish and German casualties. Most recently, the Order provided major relief action (health care, water, sanitation and shelter) within 10 hours of the Tsunami disaster of December 2004.

Today, the Order is recognised as a sovereign entity by over ninety states, and since 1994, is a Permanent Observer at the United Nations.\(^{33}\) It has about 11,000 members worldwide, the majority of whom are lay members (without noble descent). The traditions of the Order, its prestige, mystique, and emphasis on hands-on community

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service and religious observance continue to be attractive today. Membership is growing, mostly in the national associations of the New World, in the United States and Australia. Membership is still considered to be exclusive; typically successful professionals, with the medical profession particularly well represented. The Order’s activities are supported by thousands of volunteers; ordinary people working in their local communities.

The success of the Order’s assistance lies not only in the high medical competence of the staff and fundraising, but also in utilisation of the network of local partnerships developed through the resources of the Order’s diplomatic missions and the parishes of the Catholic Church. These contacts enable the rapid delivery of aid without dependence on local government bureaucracy or resources.

The Hospitaller tradition endures today not only in the Sovereign Order but also in the works of the protestant orders of Saint John which operate in the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany and Britain.\(^{34}\) Together they form the Alliance of the Orders of Saint John, and acknowledge their common roots in the Hospital in Jerusalem. Christian values underpin their approach to their humanitarian works. The most recognised activity of the protestant is provision of the Saint John Ambulance services found worldwide.

**Conclusion**

The Order was formed to care for thousands of exhausted pilgrims who were reaching Jerusalem from the eleventh century. Its military vocation developed as an extension of care of the sick, and by the thirteenth century had matured into the primary focus of the Order, ensuring its prestige, influence and economic viability. By the fifteenth century the Order had reinvented its military strategy from encastled knights in the Latin East to naval power of the Mediterranean, and as “defender of the Faith” ensured and participated in the worldly success of Christian merchants.

\(^{34}\) Queen Victoria regulated the Order’s legal position in Great Britain in the Royal Charter (dated 14 May 1888). The Order was given the style of the “Grand Priory of the Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem in England” with the Queen as Sovereign Head. Although the establishment of the British Grand Priory was not recognized by the Order of Malta, the Charter stated that it was the “Sixth or English Language of the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem.”
The revolutionary upheaval of the eighteenth century saw the loss of significant territorial and economic assets, and coincided with the stagnation and almost ruin of the Order. The military mission had lost its relevance: Britain took on the role of naval watchdog and the Ottoman Turks were enmeshed in European alliances. The Order achieved revival when it returned to the primacy of its original hospitaller mission.

The Order of Saint John is an example of organisational adaptation over a millennium. Throughout its history it has attracted members and finances by fitting its purpose – service to the poor and defence of the faith – to the geopolitical and spiritual reality in which it found itself.

The need to aid the poor and sick is as pressing as ever making the Order’s purpose highly relevant. However, it is the effectiveness with which the Order presently undertakes its mission which makes it very much a dynamic institution of the present, and not merely a quaint relic of the past. As its founder Gerard, foresaw in the 1070s, this “institution will last until God pleases to raise up people who are willing to make suffering lighter and poverty more bearable.”35

35 Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to The Knights of The Sovereign Military Order Of Malta, The Vatican, Thursday, 19 October 2000.
Printed Primary Sources and Other Works Cited

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