

HOLY MEN
and WOMEN *of the*
ORDER *of* MALTA

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*THE CANONIZED
AND BEATIFIED
FROM THE 12TH
TO 21ST CENTURY*

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Holy Men and Women of the Order of Malta: The Canonized and Beatified from the 12th to the 21st Century © 2021 Richard J. Wolff

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*To “our lords, the poor and the sick,” for whom the Order
of Malta has toiled for over nine hundred years*



*“We have to become saints. We have to become like
Christ. Anything less is simply not enough.”*

—Anne Rice (in the Catholic phase of her spiritual journey)



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Foreword



A monograph on the lives of the Order of Malta's saints, which applies historical analysis, is long overdue. The order's saints, especially its medieval crop, have suffered far too long from the syrupy pens of well-intentioned, but misguided, hagiographers. In the following pages, the reader will find a refreshingly balanced view of the lives of these holy men and women and a serious attempt to separate fact from fiction.

Much of what the reader will encounter in this book on the order's saints underscores the existential peculiarity of the Order of Malta: its uniqueness as a religious order, with a military mission, a focus on active ministry to the sick and poor, and an emphasis on nobiliary traditions. All of this is bound up in a sovereign state recognized by the United Nations and over one hundred countries around the world. The Order of Malta, which has existed for one thousand years, is like no other religious order in the Church. Over centuries, it has adapted to a multiplicity of situations, often finding itself with its proverbial back to the wall, but somehow it always survived and often flourished.

Manuscript G 55 in the Morgan Library and Museum in New York tells us something about the order's peculiar nature. The manuscript is not the sort usually associated with a member of a religious order. Created in France in

the mid-1460s, it is a book of hours. Popular in the Middle Ages, such books catered to the spiritual aspirations of the growing body of literate lay people who wished to pray as did the monks and nuns in their cloisters. Reflecting that desire, the calendars in these manuscripts follow the liturgical year, and in more luxurious volumes, there are miniatures that illustrate the saints and major feast days.

The latter is certainly the case with this carefully prepared manuscript. Fortunately, however, this volume went even one step further. It lets us deduce that at the very least its owner was neither a monk nor mendicant, and neither lay nor clerical. The owner's coat of arms decorates most folios, and three miniatures show him in knightly stances, clad in a black robe emblazoned with the distinctive cross of the Order of St. John. Finally, the miniature of a galley packed with Knights of Saint John prepared to do battle with a Turkish ship seals the identity of the person who had commissioned the manuscript. He was Pierre de Bosredont: a noble, a knight, and a religious of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem—not exactly the average fifteenth-century (or any century for that matter) religious.

Without a doubt, the Order of St. John of Jerusalem has evolved over time, and the addition of “Rhodes and Malta” to the name is only the most obvious example. Through the centuries, the character of its membership has changed as well. Pierre de Bosredont, for instance, may have epitomized the best in its ranks in the fifteenth century, but he would have felt distinctly out of place when Pope Paschal II chartered the order in 1113. Conversely, knights in the style of

de Bosredont had pretty much disappeared from the ranks of the order by the nineteenth century.

This is not to cast aspersions on de Bosredont or on any other knight of the order. Rather, historical circumstances forced the order to adapt or die. Its ability to change distinguishes it from the Order of the Temple and the many other orders that have long since gone extinct. Further, as the work of the order has changed, notions about its spiritual mission and expectations of holiness among its members have changed in tandem.

If work and spirituality impacted one another profoundly, we need to stress one other important point. Throughout its history, the activities of the Order of Saint John have differed rather dramatically from those of nearly every other order in the Church. If then the order encouraged holiness in its members, it was not the conventional holiness that one expected to find among Benedictine or Dominican saints. Put simply, no one expected to find contemplative ascetics in the Order of Saint John. And students would have been equally startled to hear a knight of Saint John lecturing on philosophy at the University of Paris.

The Order of St. John is one of the oldest orders in the Church. With roots that preceded by many years its recognition by Pope Paschal II, it was chartered to serve sick and poor pilgrims who found themselves stranded in the holy city of Jerusalem. Later, during the Crusades, it added to that mission a reputation for military prowess. Yet, perhaps because of that, it is not known for a roster of saints that might compare favorably with its peers in the Latin Christian world. It had no St. Benedict, no St. Francis or Claire or

Dominic, no Catherine of Siena or Ignatius Loyola. In fact, no medieval saintly figures in the order easily come to mind, save perhaps for Blessed Gerard, and his reputation scarcely reaches beyond members of the order.

Members of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta wear its history on their sleeves. The cross itself likely came from a colony of merchants from Amalfi. With the sanction of the Fatimid caliphs in Egypt, they had established a trading enclave in Jerusalem, and there they founded the Benedictine abbey of St. Mary of the Latins. The abbey in turn put in place a hospice to serve poor and sick pilgrims in Jerusalem next to the church of the nativity of St. John the Baptist. As the work of the hospice grew, it became difficult to reconcile the need to staff the hospital with the demands of claustral life. In time, the monks relinquished control of the hospice, and it became an independent entity under the direction of Frá Gerard. In 1113, that foundation became the home of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem.

From its origin, the order stood literally and figuratively on a new frontier. Spiritually, its very foundation depended on an ethos that was just starting to sprout in the Latin Christian world. Since the time of the Emperor Charlemagne in the early ninth century, the Rule of St. Benedict had been mandated as the sole guide for religious foundations in the empire. With the rule's emphasis on claustral life and the public recitation of the divine office, life in a Benedictine monastery was meant to be a full-time job. While each monastery did have a guesthouse, into which monks received all guests "as if they were Christ himself," only a small coterie

of monks tended to the needs of the guests. Beyond that, monks were barred from public ministry, and that likely explains why the monks of St. Mary's gladly surrendered their hospice to Frá Gerard. It had become simply too much for them to handle.

The only rival to Benedict's rule was the much shorter Rule of Saint Augustine. It became the basis for orders of canons, who combined life in a cloister with pastoral service. But even they were not yet to the point at which the mendicants found themselves in the early thirteenth century. To the personal sanctification to which the monastic orders committed themselves, the mendicants added a second element. Service to the Church would be the complement to lives of personal holiness, and this led directly to the plethora of active orders that burst on the scene in the sixteenth century.

Compared with other medieval orders, the Order of St. John found itself in uncharted territory. It was not a monastic order, and it would not commit itself to life in a cloister. Nor was it an order that engaged in service that was exclusively pastoral or educational, as was the case with the mendicants. Service to the sick and the poor was at the core of the mission of the Order of St. John, but there had yet to be articulated a spirituality that would describe such a mission. No one should be surprised that from the very beginning, its spiritual ideals were a work in progress. They have been so ever since. Despite the novelty of marrying personal spiritual growth for the knights with service to the sick and the poor, it was still an idea whose time had come. That combination provided the framework for centuries of experiment and development.

More than anyone, it was Frá Gerard who shaped the ethos that has guided the Order of St. John through the centuries. Though we know little about his life, as explained in the following pages, we do know that he was something of an organizational genius. He governed the hospice in Jerusalem, coordinated a series of hostels that funneled pilgrims and financial support from Western Europe to the Holy Land, and formed a community that over time would accomplish far more than its numbers would warrant. All the while he would create a legacy of service that would inspire a steady flow of recruits to Jerusalem.

Frá Gerard's greatest imprint on the spirituality of the order was its Christocentric character. Acting on the teaching of Jesus that "what you do for the least of people you do for me," Gerard translated that into the order's mission to serve "our lords the sick and the poor." It was a double entendre that all would have understood at the time. Members should see the face of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the faces of the sick and the poor. But they would also see in the sick and the poor their personal lords. The sick and the poor had intrinsic value, despite being among the least in society.

A host of other sources reinforced this Christocentric work. Gerard need only recall that one of the first actions taken by the apostles after the ascension of Jesus was the appointment of deacons to see to the needs of widows and orphans. More immediately, the Benedictine view of hospitality was a value that Gerard likely knew well from his association with St. Mary of the Latins. "Receive all guests as Christ" easily transferred from the monastic guesthouse to the hospice. Finally, the Fatimid caliph who chartered the

hospice did so on the condition that the brothers serve the sick and the poor of all faiths. If that seemed difficult for some to accept, it still reflects the Nicene Creed's statement that all are created in the image of God. That has been a constituent element of Christian and Hospitaller service from the beginning.

Much of Gerard's legacy was unwritten, but we can tease some of it from other evidence. The eight-pointed cross embodied the Beatitudes, for example. Another source, the Rule of Raymond du Puy, certainly reflects the values of Gerard, if not his exact words. Though short and succinct in its language, that rule discouraged individualism within the order. It meant to facilitate the flow of alms from West to East, and it was those alms that financed the hospice and the community that staffed it. It also fostered peace among the brothers, and it encouraged poverty and simplicity of life. Above all, it discouraged the accumulation of wealth and power. Frá Gerard's work would only succeed if all worked together, and personal fiefdoms would only inhibit that.

Frá Gerard's teaching became the foundation upon which the order built. Along the way, historical exigencies required course corrections, but each time we have to imagine that the decisions were made with due deliberation. Likely the most far-reaching adjustment was the assumption of military responsibility. Western immigration to the Holy Land was never enough to sustain the Christian "statelets" that emerged. Soon enough, the Knights of St. John were drawn in to supplement the military forces there. That military commitment impacted the order enormously, with repercussions that have reached down even into our own times.

It was not long before the Knights of St. John staffed castles and forts in addition to the hospice. Eventually, however, the Latin colonies in the Holy Land could no longer stem the tide of the Muslim armies. Along with the other Westerners in the Holy Land, the Knights of St. John left first Jerusalem and then the Holy Land altogether. That in turn set in motion a series of difficult decisions about the future of the order.

Could the order survive without a hospice in Jerusalem? Could it carry on from a new base of operations first in Rhodes and then in Malta? Would the military character of the order eclipse the Hospitaller character? Would aristocratic requirements for membership become a permanent feature of the order? Could it survive what seemed to be the loss of everything when Napoleon exiled the order from Malta?

Much as the loss of the Papal States revitalized the public influence of the papacy in the nineteenth century, one can argue that the loss of Malta was not an unmitigated disaster. Through all those centuries, the order had held true to its original mission of service to the sick and the poor. Visitors to Rhodes and Malta can still see the enormous hospitals that the knights left behind, and they testify to the Hospitaller character of the order. If on the one hand there was glamour in the military exploits of the order, one must never forget that knights and grand masters alike took regular turns in serving their lords the sick and the poor in the sacred infirmaries.

From its inception, the Order of St. John did not point its members in the direction of traditional roles of sanctity in

the Church, a reason pointed to by Frá Richard in this book for the paucity of knight-saints over a one-thousand-year timeframe. While it did support a few cloisters for women, the order did not expect the knights to live a traditional monastic life. It did not found or conduct schools, nor did it foster intellectual pursuits as the traditional orders did. It did not manage shrines but instead supported pilgrims en route to shrines that others conducted. While it did have priest-chaplains, the order was not a clerical organization headed by a prelate. As a result, the knights did not preach or administer the sacraments.

If traditional paths to sainthood were closed to the Knights of St. John, the order itself was not in a good position to promote members to sainthood. In the twelfth century, popular acclaim served to elevate candidates for sainthood. But the order, with its center in Jerusalem, was hardly able to rely on the local Orthodox Christian and Muslim populations for that acclamation. Residence in Rhodes and Malta did not provide an entirely sympathetic local population either. So the acclamation of saints from within the ranks of the order was left to others rather than directed from the leadership of the order. And finally, one other factor discouraged the proliferation of official sainthood within the order. Many, if not most, people did not think that being a soldier or sailor or diplomat or bureaucrat was the most viable avenue to sainthood.

Given all that, one might marvel that there should be any saints at all in the order. In fact, though, the list of recognized saints could certainly be longer because the roster of those who achieved sanctity through the centuries has to

be quite long. That list includes those who sacrificed their lives in witness to their faith. It includes those who quietly worked to facilitate the work of serving the poor and the sick. And most of all, that roster includes all those who saw the vision of the face of Christ in the faces of the sick and the poor. That number continues to grow, and perhaps it now grows exponentially as the order increases in membership.

Frá Gerard is said to have noted that the need for the work of the order will never end. Sadly, the legions of the sick and the poor have scarcely diminished. The good news, however, is that the Lord still calls members to the vineyard. Happily, someday this slim volume on the saints of the order will need a thick supplement that includes the many new saints who will have walked in the steps of Frá Gerard.

Fr. Eric Hollas, OSB

Preface



This work focuses on only a very small number of the thousands of saints that have lived since the beginning of the Christian era: the saints and blessed of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta (SMOM). Included in the following pages are all the saints and blessed who appear in the SMOM Missal, with the addition of Servant of God Frá Andrew Bertie, the seventy-eighth grand master of the order, and Venerable Frá Thomas Dingley, one of the sixteenth-century English martyrs.

The decision to include Frá Andrew is not an attempt to pre-judge the on-going beatification process. Rather, it is a recognition of the influence that he had on the many living members of the order who knew and worked with him. It is a nod to the quiet, yet significant, impact that he had on the order itself, and it's a tribute to his holiness, as perceived by so many of his contemporaries. Writing a book on the order's saints without mention of Frá Andrew just did not seem right.

The idea for this book came at a meeting of the spirituality committee of the American association, one of three associations of the SMOM in the United States. The discussion centered on the lack of any modern, historically accurate work on the saints of the order. The concern was raised that by relying on a few outdated hagiographic treatments of the

saints, we might be inadvertently promoting inaccurate and credulous portraits of these holy men and women.

The order's current writings on the saints are, by and large, derived from seventeenth-century hagiographic works which often lack historical sources and tend to accentuate the otherworldliness of the saints. This treatment of the saints as almost ethereal, perfect beings is not only inaccurate but also undermines the notion that all women and men are called to holiness. Our concern was that this antiquated hagiographic treatment, left uncorrected, would continue to leave readers dissatisfied, questioning, and even skeptical. Such an approach to recounting the lives of the saints might not promote disbelief, but it often encourages indifference.

Given this, we agreed that our goal would be to produce a booklet that would employ a modicum of historical scholarship and research, with a particular focus on utilizing scholarly secondary literature. The book also places each saint in his or her historical context to further the reader's understanding of the saint's life. That is not to say that this is an academic monograph. On the contrary, we have cited the secondary literature without actually footnoting references in each chapter to retain simplicity. We wanted to be sure that the book would be accessible and interesting to the reader.

We also wanted the reader to be able to use the book for devotional purposes, so we have included the collect for each saint's feast day. It is my view that historically accurate portrayals of the saints do not undermine piety. Rather, such portrayals promote faith in our intercessors, confidence

in our prayers to them, and a realistic acceptance of their human frailties.

We may, in fact, discover in the following pages that there is no historical basis for this story or that miracle. Or there are no existing sources for commonly-held details of a saint's childhood. Or even that there is nothing but oral tradition for us to rely on for information. All this may be the case, but there remains the core message that each individual saint of the order has for us. These messages, which may be different for each saint, do not need to be inflated by fabrications or distorted by exaggeration. The heroic virtues of these saints of the order shine through their life stories, even if those stories, as handed down to us, require some reassessment.

Finally, I must thank several individuals without whom this book could not have been written. Each one assisted me in the early research and provided me with support and encouragement throughout the process: Kenneth Craig, Linda Del Rio, Dr. Thomas Forlenza, Anne Marie Hansen, Mark Kerwin, Peter McGuire, Joseph Metz, Karen Shields, Frá Nicola Tegoni, and Charlotte Williams. Although not historians by training, they each did an excellent job providing me with backup information, outlines, and preliminary research.

I would also like to express my thanks to my editor, Patrick O'Hearn, Frá John Critien, Dr. Peter Kelly, the president of the American Association of the SMOM, for his support and patience, and to Frá Thomas Mulligan, my confrere and president of the Federal Association of the SMOM, for his encouragement. I should also recognize two very important and helpful oral history sources for the chapter

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Frá Richard J. Wolff, PhD