

Stemming Vice: A Proposal for Hospitaller Virtuous Living in *Ancien Régime* Malta

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Fig. 1
War games and the real thing: A rare contemporary manuscript map by Paolo Passionei showing the Christian naval victory at the battle of the Dardanelles on the 26th June 1656 over the Ottomans. The Order's naval squadron is shown on the right, with its seven galleys carrying off eleven captured Muslim prizes. (Courtesy of the Biblioteca Angelica, Rome)

The regulation of the conduct of the various categories of members pertaining to the Hospitaller and Military Order of St John and residing in Malta constituted a major concern for much the entire period of that institution's settlement on the Island. A more cosmopolitan society and greater interaction with the Maltese population following the Order's transfer from Vittoriosa to Valletta in 1571 certainly contributed towards an accelerated transformation of its erstwhile convent mentality, reinforced through the practice of a segregated residence within a *collachio*.¹ The ideal of the chaste warrior-monk - in so far as it proved to be the rule prior to the mid-sixteenth century - metamorphosed into one where military prowess was no longer balanced with an austere lifestyle, but increasingly with one where noble lineage, wealth and a resulting sense of self-confident superiority often made a mockery out of the prescribed vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Knights visited prostitutes, procured mistresses and in some occasions even ended up contracting clandestine marriages.² Individual Grand Masters who attempted to stem the trend did so at their own peril, as the unprecedented events of 1581 and 1639 so clearly demonstrated. Meanwhile, the real threat of Ottoman invasion decreased, while the ideal of permanent war with the infidel itself lost much of its glamour. Rising absolutist and Enlightenment tendencies on the Continent, from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards, could not but further reinforce this process of secularisation where knightly attitudes and the resultant behaviour were concerned. Absolutism, sexual promiscuity and the ensuing disregard of the Order's statutes by the Grand Masters themselves, particularly from Perellos's magistracy (1697-1720) onwards, could not but set the example.³

In their generally futile attempts at reining in Hospitaller behaviour, individual Grand Masters did attempt to create spaces and occasions where the Order's members could pass their considerable amount of free time without giving rise to scandal. Grand Master Lascaris's construction of the *maglio* at Floriana, just outside Valletta, was a case in point. So was de Vilhena's first purposely constructed theatre in 1732. As for the latter, the stated purpose of providing 'honest recreation' was to be proved ironic on a number of documented occasions where knights openly indulged in sexual activity within the premises of the theatre itself.

The aim of this short study is to bring attention to yet another attempt - in this case in the form of a proposal - at harnessing Hospitaller energies and free time into more orthodox channels. A good number of suggestions which the document proposed are known to have been actually attempted, even if on a more or less sporadic basis, throughout much of the eighteenth century. In its discussion of the various activities which could be organised to instruct and entertain the Order's members, some highly revealing insights into, among other, the type of potential leisure activities and amusements on the Island emerge. A number of these undoubtedly were practised on the Island; however little as yet is known about them, and they certainly deserve greater scholarly attention.

The Document

The neatly written proposal is entitled *Trattenimenti virtuosi per occupare li Religiosi e Novizi del Sacr'Ordine Gerosolimitano conforme al loro Istituto Ecclesiastico, Ospitaliero e Militare nel corso di tutto l'anno, con utile, e buon esempio*. It is to be found in the Salviati family archive, held within the Archivio Segreto Vaticano.⁴ It is bound with other miscellaneous papers relating to Malta which were gathered by Gregorio Salviati, Inquisitor of Malta between 1754 and 1759. It is undated, with internal evidence pointing towards the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries as its time of writing.⁵

Neither does the manuscript bear any indication as to its author. It was possibly composed by a previous Inquisitor or a high-ranking inquisitorial official. Alternatively, it could have been written by a member of the Order and passed over to the Inquisitor of the time for his consideration and - following approval - its subsequent forwarding to Rome. Indeed, it cannot be excluded that an original of the report had been forwarded to the Congregation of the Holy Office at some point.⁶ Inquisitor Salviati included the document with others which he took with him to Rome once his term as Inquisitor in Malta was concluded.

In the introduction to his proposal the author described quite vividly the evils arising from the lack of occupation that was bedeviling the Order's members. Laziness and the lack of commendable pursuits, he remarked, constituted a receptacle of every evil and a snare purposely set by the devil. The Equestrian and Hospitaller Order of St John, he proceeded, was composed of three types of members, hailing from the nobility, honest families and respectable individuals respectively. These, in turn, had three main roles within the Order, namely the ecclesiastical, the hospitaller and the military ones. For the Order to attract honourable members, suitable for fulfilling the Order's roles, the author thus proposed various occupations which he divided into ecclesiastical, literary, military and general ones.

Ecclesiastical Occupations

The Conventual Church of St John, observed the author, was the head of all the Order's churches on the Island, and the place where the Hospitaller's Grand Prior and all of the conventual chaplains officiated regularly. While the Order's statutes made it obligatory for members to participate in all solemn functions, members should at least attend Sunday services and those held on feasts of obligation. Learned and pious French, Spanish, Italian and German confessors were to be available in St John's on a regular basis, so as to enable the knights to confess habitually and hence be able to frequent the sacraments regularly. The practice of having a foreign preacher to give sermons in the oratory of the church was a laudable one that ought to be revived. Moreover, the presence of foreign regular clergy in the convents of Valletta made it possible for the latter to engage the knights in religious conversation and instruction on a more informal basis. The celebration of the major feasts in Valletta could be

made more inspiring through the use of greater pomp and decoration, including the use of fireworks. This, the author added, would further inculcate a sense of divine majesty in the hearts of the Order's members.

The hospitaller role of the Order, described by the author as the first and major obligation, also required members to fulfil their duties in that respect. Besides the great hospital for male patients, the Order also sustained an institution for females and for abandoned children. The correct care and education of such children demanded particular attention which the Order's members should not overlook.

Literary Occupations

The importance of reading and learning was highlighted in that such occupations would provide the knights not only with learning and sound morals, but also with practical knowledge directly relating to their military duties. The author indicated three areas of learning which were of particular relevance to the Hospitallers, and for which classes should be set up. Foremost was that pertaining to the Order's own statutes and internal organisation. A class for Mathematics would cover practical geometry, military architecture, arithmetic and navigation. The third class, History, would impart knowledge relating to heraldry and knightly comportment, besides providing more general historical knowledge.

Interestingly, while teachers fluent in Italian, French and Spanish would be utilised for all three classes, the imparting of military-related learning could well include some use of the Turkish language. For the conventual chaplains, obligatory lectures in moral and dogmatic theology were to be held at St John's Church. A class of Mathematics had actually been set up within the Jesuit College in Valletta in 1655, the curriculum of which had more or less covered the areas suggested in the proposal. Suffering from a recurrent lack of suitable teachers, funds and interest, the class functioned on an irregular basis down to the transformation of the Jesuit College into a State University of Studies in 1769.⁷ Interestingly, the study of navigation proposed by the author could at times itself lead to unorthodox beliefs. In 1770, two Maltese students studying the subject expressed their scepticism towards the heliocentric theory still sustained by the Church, they being more convinced by the Copernican theory.⁸

Besides such formal classes, the author suggested the setting up of academies where such learning would be imparted in a more relaxed atmosphere. These, taking place in the Grand Master's Palace, would cover areas like mathematics, politics, history and the Order's statutes. Games about heraldry, geography and mythology would prove particularly appealing to the younger knights. A number of such occasions are known to have been held. Thus during the evenings of the Carnival period of 1721, Grand Master Zondadari had games and musical sessions held in his palace specifically to provide morally sound means for the knights to pass

away the time. This initiative seems to have proved a success, with the vast majority of the knights taking part.⁹

The setting up of a well-run and stocked library, argued the author, was much desired and did not require all that effort to put in place. Such sentiments and indeed stronger ones were later to be echoed by Louis Guerin de Tencin in his preface to the manuscript catalogue of his library, which he compiled. In 1760 de Tencin was to unite his own book collection with that of the deceased Cardinal Joaquin Portocarrero in order to eventually set up the first public library on the Island.¹⁰

Military Occupations

As a military Order, the constant involvement of the knights in military training was fundamental. The author proceeds by suggesting the organisation of sessions of war games, both on land and sea, and tournaments so as to keep the knights physically active and well prepared to carry out their warring duties. Medals were to be specifically commissioned to be awarded during such contests.

Other Various Occupations

The author suggested a number of other interesting means through which the Order's members could engage themselves better while at the same time not fall into vice as a result of a lack of occupation.

Sessions could be held in the Grand Master's Palace, led by the Grand Crosses and by other senior and competent members of the Order, during which aspects of the Order's set-up would be discussed. The exemplary conduct of members of the Order would be pointed out to those attending, while also gently rebuking those whose behaviour left something to be desired. Current world affairs would be brought to the attention of those attending. Newspapers and other forms of printed news would be read to the participants, who would be encouraged to comment and participate in the ensuing general discussion, but with care being taken to channel the discussion in such a way as to not cause offence.

Similar debates could also take place in the residences of the senior knights, including games to test and improve the participants' general knowledge. The Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans and Theresian Orders on the Island all held public disputations on a more or less regular basis. The occasional attendance of the Grand Master, particularly when these treated the more unusual subjects, would greatly encourage the participation of members of the Order in such intellectually stimulating conversation.

The Grand Master's sojourn in one of his country residences, observed the author, took place regularly three or four times each year. While serving as a needed break for the ruler, these occasions could well be utilised as means through which the prince could show himself as a humane, affable and humble personality to his brethren.

Entertainment in the form of organized spectacle could also contribute towards involving the knights into healthy activity. During the months preceding Lent, comedies in French, Italian and Spanish could be performed by the respective Langues on a rotation basis. Another one or two annually could similarly be performed by the Maltese. The author here cautioned about the need for well-chosen subjects and a good plot. Furthermore, one needed to watch out for the practice of comedians dressing up as they wish. Actors, warned the author, should be dressed-up in appropriate costumes and provided with the required theatrical props by competent persons within the Grand Master's own palace.

Music and dances would add to the wholesomeness of the spectacle, so long as these are based on heroic and war themes. Balls could be held during the same period, with dances reflecting the traditions of the different nations forming the Order, and with the use of various instruments and costumes. Balls organised by third parties were to be discouraged since these usually resulted in abuses of every sort. Theatrical performances by the Order's different Langues, as well as by companies of Maltese actors, are documented from at least the mid-seventeenth century onwards.¹¹

Similarly, the same period of the year could be used for the formation of a squadron of thirty to forty youths who, led by knights as their officials, would provide spectacles through their use of guns and lances. While providing spectacle, this form of entertainment would also serve to inculcate military prowess in such youths. This is strikingly similar to the *parata*, a mock-battle between knights and infidels fought out by youths, and which was to become an integral part of Maltese Carnival celebrations to this day.

The inhabitants, particularly those of Vittoriosa, Senglea and Burmola, could moreover be encouraged to organise dance companies, performing a variety of games and dances in the Greek and Turkish fashion, and with the use of instruments from those nations. In such cases, the participants would be allowed to make use of the galleys, while also being encouraged with refreshments. A variety of popular dances could be held which would add to the cheer of Carnival, without however, falling into immoral and reprehensible practices.¹²

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the above-described and other attempts at stemming the decline in the observance of the vows taken by the Order's members in general, success proved elusive. The changed reality of eighteenth-century Europe in general and of the Hospitallers' island-

state in particular, militated against any attempt at reform. Visitors to the Island regularly described the profligate lifestyle of the Order's members, culminating in Carasi's spectacular and widespread denunciation in 1790.¹³ By the end of the century and indeed of the Order's presence on Malta, the extent of moral degeneration within the Order's ranks could hardly be more obvious, contributing in turn to the less than enthusiastic support received from the Maltese when French Republican forces invaded the Island in June 1798. By then the Order had become financially, but above all morally, bankrupt.

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Notes

- 1 For a recent study of Hospitaller behaviour and attitudes during the post-1571 period, see Emanuel Buttigieg, *Nobility, Faith and Masculinity: The Hospitaller Knights of Malta, c.1580-1700* (London: Continuum, 2011).
- 2 Giovanni Bonello, 'Clandestine Marriages by Knights of Malta', in Giovanni Bonello, *Histories of Malta, Vol. VI - Ventures and Adventures* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2005), 142-163.
- 3 Perellos had, for years prior to his death, suffered from syphilis. The disease was regularly treated in the Order's Sacra Infermeria, so much so that in 1762 the Maltese doctor Fortunato Antonio Creni published a study on its treatment entitled *Tractatus Physico-Medicus de Americana Lue*.
- 4 Archivio Segreto Vaticano Fondo Salviati 25: Ministero di Malta, Tomo II, ff.112-118v. Another copy of this document is to be found in the National Library of Malta Libr. MS 1377, ff.2-6v. The latter is, however, incomplete. Dr Theresa Vella has kindly drawn the attention of the present author to the existence of the NLM copy.
- 5 Thus, in its discussion of theatrical performances, the proposal makes no reference to the existence of the public theatre, inaugurated in 1732.
- 6 The archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, formerly of the Congregation of the Holy Office, while containing considerable Malta-related material, has suffered serious losses, and the absence of this report from the archive does not mean it was not forwarded from Malta.
- 7 On the Jesuit class of mathematics and mathematical education in Hospitaller Malta, see Stanley Fiorini, 'The Development of Mathematical Education in Malta to 1798', in Stanley Fiorini and Victor Mallia-Milanes (eds), *Malta: A Case Study in International Cross-Currents* (Malta, 1991), 111-145. See also Denis de Lucca, *Jesuits and Fortifications* (Bril, 2012).
- 8 Archive of the Inquisition Malta Proc. 129 case 143, dated 6.5.1770, declaration by student Giuseppe Parnis: '*Studiamo nautica io e Giuseppe Aloisio maltese ... avendo sentito il sistema di Copernico circa il moto della terra e stabilità del sole. Habbiam stimato più accettabile quello che l'altro accettato dalla Chiesa, che la terra sia immobile, e mobile il sole*'.
- 9 ASV Segreteria di Stato Malta 67, f.503, Inquisitor Ruffo-SS dated 12.2.1721: '*Questo Signor Gran Maestro va di continuo cercando tutte le maniere per tener divertita questa Nobiltà in leciti spassi, massimamente in questi tempi di maggior allegria; e perciò fa fare alla medesima ogni sera nelle camere del suo palazzo trattenimento di giuochi, e due volte la settimana quello di musica concorrendoci di continuo, se non tutti, la maggior parte de cavalieri, de quali alcuni nella seconda convocazione fanno spiccare la loro virtù nel suono di vari strumenti*'.
- 10 NLM Libr. MS 265, unfoliated, consisting of De Tencin's manuscript catalogue, Preface: '*J'ay déploré toute ma vie l'ignorance, qui regne également dans tous les ordres de la Religion*'.
- 11 William Zammit, 'The Communicative Role of Visual Media in Malta', in Toni Cortis, Thomas Freller and Lino Bugeja (eds), *Melensium Amor: Festschrift in Honour of Dun Ġwann Azzopardi* (Malta, 2002), 349-350.
- 12 '*... anche tra [popolare ?] come sarebbero Zingarate, Postigioni, Graziante, Scuole, Cavaiuole et altri condotte di buonsenso, e gusto da uomini*'.
- 13 Carasi (pseud.), *L'Ordre de Malthe Dévoilé ou Voyage de Malthe*, s.l., 1790. For a translation in English and a study of this pseudonymous publication, see Thomas Freller, *Carasi: The Order of Malta Exposed* (Malta, 2010).