

A SWORD AND A HELMET*

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(Translated into English by Carmel Vella)

For centuries, the Popes of Rome felt the need to encourage the spread, and to sustain the supremacy, of the Christian faith in the states of Europe and in those of the Mediterranean basin. This concept brought about the birth of the Crusades, and stirred up many a king and emperor, in obeisance to the papacy's aims, to take up arms against the Moslem infidels who occupied and held the Holy Land.

A SWORD AND A HELMET

Moved by feelings of gratitude, the Supreme Pontiffs naturally sensed the obligation to recompense all those who had distinguished themselves in the implacable and bloody struggles on the frontiers of Christianity and also those who, within their countries, had contributed to the triumph of the Catholic faith.

Among such rewards, one may mention the insignia of the 'Tuck and Casque' solemnly blessed by the Pope, which had at one and the same time a symbolic value and the repute to ensure victory to the soldiers of the Holy Cross.

The Tuck was a silver gilt sword, about five feet long. The Casque was a helmet of purple velvet embroidered with gold and adorned with the dove of the Holy Ghost in pearls.

From the beginning of the 14th to the end of the 16th century, about fifty monarchs and princes received this prestigious emblem. To mention a

* In this write-up we relate, with brief comments, the account of the solemn ritual of the Sword and Helmet conferred, by Pope Benedict XIII, on Don Anton Manoel de Vilhena, Grand Master of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, as it appears in the memoirs of the Bailli Jean-Jacques de Chambray.

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few of the recipients: In 1514 the Emperor Maximilian I and in 1532 Charles V and his brother Ferdinand, the King of Rome; also in 1514, before breaking with Rome and founding his proper church, Henry VIII of England, and King Manuel I of Portugal who had banished the Jews and the Moors from his kingdom; and in 1674 the King of Poland, John Sobieski, many times conqueror of the Turks.

Other famous persons who received the Sword and Helmet included war leaders who had distinguished themselves in the field of battle such as, in 1535, Andrea Doria, "renowned for his victories at sea against the infidels", in 1567 Don Juan of Austria who, four years later routed the Turkish fleet at Lepanto, in 1569 the Duke of Alba, general of the king of Spain and Flanders who fought against the heretic Prince of Orange and, in 1690, the Prince Eugene of Savoy, general of the Imperial armies.

THE ORDER OF MALTA

Glancing through the list of Sovereigns and eminent generals, it is surprising to note the absence of the Order of St John of Jerusalem whose essential *raison d'être* was precisely to protect Christians and to strike incessant blows at the Turks — a role which they never ceased to play so gloriously even after the transfer of their Convent to Malta in 1530.

In 1565, when the Order forced the Turks to raise the siege of Malta, and became itself the bastion of Christianity in the Mediterranean Sea, Grand Master Jean de La Valette, in deference to the heroism of his knights, deserved a hundred times to be conferred with the Sacred Arms; but at that same instance, Vienna, another rampart of Christianity, was equally threatened by the Turks and similar feats of arms were being unrolled beneath its walls.....

It was therefore proper and timely to make amends for the unfortunate oversight; and this was exactly what the Supreme Pontiff did in 1725. An austere Dominican, elected Pope in 1724 at the age of sixty-six after having served as archbishop of Benevento, Benedict XIII could not avoid being sensible to the legendary virtues of poverty and humility of the intrepid Knights, as well as to their acts of bravery made widely manifest in the previous years.

Indeed, it is probable that the news of the capture of the *Patrona di Tripoli* in May 1723 had gone beyond the Vatican walls, considering that

the event was reported in numerous newsheets in Europe. This *Sultana*, or galleon of the Grand Turk, armed with fifty guns, had seized many Christian vessels. It was discovered sailing in the Straits of Sicily and, after a fierce battle, it was captured by the "illustrious captain Fra Jacques-François de Chambray" and brought triumphantly to the port of Valletta with 270 Turks destined for slavery and 33 rescued Christian slaves. Once more, the Knights of Malta had vanquished the enemies of the Faith to the great admiration of their Grand Master who, eventually, came in person with all his court on board the victorious galley to congratulate publicly its fortunate captain.

Elected Grand Master for life by the Knights of Justice in 1722, the Portuguese Manoel de Vilhena, assumed the title of Eminence with all its attributes of sovereignty. Like all his predecessors he was entitled to strike coins and to establish diplomatic relations. He was, in a way, an absolute monarch but he avowed the supremacy of the Pope.

He was elated that through his mediation, a number of Christians, imprisoned as slaves in Turkey, had obtained their freedom. He was doubly pleased when, in February 1725, he learned by letter from his ambassador in Rome that His Holiness the Pope had decided to bestow on him the consecrated *Tuck and Casque*; and that His Holiness had chosen l'Abbé Olivieri, a Knight of Malta and nephew of Cardinal Olivieri, to travel to Malta as an Ablegate, i.e. envoy, for the presentation.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE CEREMONIAL

Great emotion and unanimous joy were felt at the Magisterial Palace, and all the members of the Order eagerly strove to be involved in the unique celebrations. After conferring with his Council of State, His Eminence nominated four Grand Bailiffs to work out the ceremonial for the great occasion. As one would have expected, all the research made at the Chancellery to find a precedent proved unsuccessful, as this was the first instance, since time immemorial, that a Grand Master had received this time-honoured papal award. The commissioners were therefore constrained to improvise their proper method how to pay due tribute to the Papal envoy, to the Grand Master and to the island of Malta. To receive the Ablegate in full accord with "the holy intention" of the Pope and to set the programme for the ceremony was indeed a restless task!

After boarding a French galley at Leghorn, the Pope's Ablegate arrived



Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena

at Valletta on the 19th April at five o'clock in the evening. He was welcomed with his retinue on the landing place by Commander de Chabریان, His Eminence's Master of the Horse, and by four Knights of court who had taken their place on the cutter of the state galley, which was "magnificently decked" for the occasion.

"He came ashore on the quay beside the limestone kilns and immediately stepped inside a carriage drawn by six horses, followed by several others. He alighted at the Main Gate where he was received by the clergy of the conventual church of St John and by all the religious Orders of the city. To the cheerful chimes of church bells and the echoing thuds of artillery fire, the procession led the prelate to the conventual church, where he knelt in worship before the Holy Sacrament and rendered thanks to God for his safe arrival. After expressing his gratitude to the clergy, he again boarded the carriage and, under escort of the Grand Master's equerry, he proceeded to his quarters to the incessant sound of bells and musketry.

Official receptions and presentation of credentials traditionally implied the offer of gifts which, in the case of high church dignitaries, usually consisted of sacred objects. So, the next morning, after due rest in the wake of his sea voyage, the Ablegate ordained the presentation, on his behalf, to His Eminence of three big *Agnus Dei*, a miniature crystal cross holding a bit of the True Cross, and a small gold reliquary containing relics of St Elizabeth, of St Anthony of Padua, of St Paul and of St John. Soon after, being anxious to accomplish his commission, he beseeched his first audience with His Eminence who, on his part, fixed the appointment for eight o'clock the following morning.

The Ablegate arrived at the Palace in a six-horse carriage and was received pursuant to the protocol earlier set down for the first audience of Monsignor the Inquisitor. Sentiments of respect and of mutual veneration were exchanged during the meeting. Two days later another audience was held for the presentation of a brief and a papal bull bearing a general confirmation of the privileges enjoyed by the Order and the concession of additional favours.

The date for the bestowal of the sacred Sword and Helmet was fixed for Thursday 3rd May, quite a symbolic moment, as on that day the church celebrates the feast of the Invention of the Cross. The Order was gratified with the choice of that festivity, considering that it had committed all its glory to fighting under the banner of the Cross. "To stress the solemnity of

such a glorious event and to mark the sense of universal joy, all the bells were rung after sunset, all the guns were fired and the entire city was lit up" on the vigil of the propitious day. That was repeated for the next two nights.

At last the great day had arrived and the Maltese people had the privilege to watch the colourful processions, which brought to the admiration of one and all the Sword and Helmet blessed by the pope on Christmas Eve of the previous year. Mounted on a horse in splendid harness, in the midst of the retinue, the Secretary of the Ablegate carried the insignia. In his hand he held the sacred sword whilst the helmet sat majestically on its point.

From the Ablegate's temporary home to the Magisterial Palace a company of mounted soldiers and their commanders, with kettledrums and trumpets, opened the cortège. Behind these troops, in a six-horse carriage, followed the Papal Ablegate, the Grand Master's equerry, and the Ablegate's Secretary holding the consecrated emblem. A detachment of magisterial guards and their carriages marched at the rear. From the Palace to St John's church the Ablegate marched on foot wearing the red robe, lined with ermine, which papal chamberlains usually wear on such occasions. He took his place to the left of the Grand Master, a step behind, and was followed by the Commanders of the Grand Cross in ceremonial attire, whilst militiamen from the town regiment and sailors from the galleys formed rows along the roadway under the eyes of their officers, dressed in leather jerkins. His Eminence was given the salute by a general salvo of musket fire

In the vicinity of St John's church, the cortège marched with more solemnity. At that spot it was welcomed by Monsignor Melchior Alpheran. Under a canopy carried by four Grand Crosses of the Order the Prior, wearing the mitre, held the precious relic of the Holy Cross. The Ablegate's Secretary followed behind him carrying the consecrated Sword and Helmet. The Grand Master came next followed by the Ablegate and all the Order's dignitaries, to the sound of bells and artillery fire from all the fortresses.

Inside the church, the Ablegate took the seat reserved for him on the bishop's throne, which was overlaid with rich cloth and cushions of red damask. The mass was then celebrated "pontifically and with excellent music", and at its end the congregation was addressed in turn by the Ablegate, by the Prior and by His Eminence.

THE ABLEGATE'S DISCOURSE

Escorted to the lower step of the altar by the Master of Ceremonies, the Papal envoy expounded the purpose of his commission "in a very elegant speech" some of which deserves to be here highlighted.:

"Most Eminent Prince, I come to bestow on you, in the name of His Holiness, a magnificent present. The whole world is aware that this is a token of the esteem which Benedict XIII feels towards your Eminence. The gift is also an evidence that our Sovereign Pontiff, solicitous about our salvation, as well as for the reward of virtue, has put his trust in your prudence and your bravery which both are a safeguard against barbarian invasions....."

(....) "Now that you are armed with this Sword and this Helmet, your own heart and that of your knights, will nourish a sense of greater valour and zeal to help you vanquish all your enemies...."

"....Every time you draw this weapon, Your Eminence will be regarded as a new Gideon and everyone will look at the sword as a sure pledge of the new victories which lie in his way..."

In conclusion, the Ablegate spoke of the joy he would feel when reporting to the Holy Father the spirited ardour of the Grand Master as a defender of the Faith. Lastly, the Ablegate enjoined his Secretary to read aloud the papal brief.

THE PAPAL BRIEF

"To our dear Son, Manoel de Vilhena, Grand Master of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, Benedict the thirteenth of the name.

Dear Son, greetings and apostolic benediction.

The great and remarkable deeds, which you and your Order have rendered to Christianity, and the zeal with which you defend the faith, demand that we publicly express our esteem as a solemn testimony of the worth of your exploits....."

"....We have, in conformity with old procedure, solemnly blessed on Christmas Day this Sword and this Helmet. The Popes, our predecessors, have always conferred them on the most worthy Princes and on the most distinguished defenders of Christendom.....

".....All the world knows that if the Knights of your Order fight so gloriously they do not owe their victories to their sole strength and their sole tenacity. They

owe it mostly to the Arm of the Almighty and to the prayers of the church.....”

“....It is our intention that, after the celebration of the mass, the Sacred Arms will be presented to you by the Prior of your conventual church.....”

“.....Given in Rome at the Vatican under the Ring of the Fisherman on 27th February 1725, the first year of our Pontificate.”

THE GRAND MASTER'S ADDRESS

Here follow the opening and closing passages of the Grand Master's address in which he expressed his gratitude to His Holiness and to the Ablegate.

“We receive the consecrated Sword and Helmet which His Holiness graciously awarded to us. We receive, the Order and myself, a glorious mark of goodwill from our Sovereign Pontiff. He could not confer on us a more august present, nor a more proper one for our Order.....”

“.....I beg you to put at the feet of our Holy Father our pledge of deep respect and profound affection, which the Order and myself owe to His Holiness....”

In conformity with the set ritual, the Grand Master walked to the altar and bent on one knee on a cushion in front of the church Prior. The Pope's Ablegate then took the Sword from his Secretary's hands, drew it from its scabbard and returned it naked to the Prior who, holding it in his hands, began his oration in eloquent words, which we report here in brief summary:

THE PRIOR'S ORATION

“Supreme Pontiffs are accustomed, on Christmas Eve, to consecrate in the name of the Lord a sword and a helmet (.....) This holy and ancient usage of the Roman Church is suitably linked to the feast of the birth of Jesus Christ as it reminds us how the only Son of God made man has joined in combat for our deliverance.....”

(.....)It is therefore appropriate, Most Excellent Prince,that you receive from my hands, with a sentiment of joy and devotion, this consecrated sword, the sword of the Almighty”

(.....) Accept also this helmet, that it may be for you the casque of salvation and of strength so that in all your struggles you will always be led by the light of heaven.....to help you vanquish the enemies of the faith”

END OF THE CEREMONIES

A solemn *Te Deum* was intoned by the Prior and sung, accompanied with music, to the sound of pealing bells. This was prolonged to allow enough time to His Eminence to reach his Palace, where “a sumptuous meal” was offered to all the assistants and to the Venerable Bailiffs of the Order.

“A toast to the health of His Holiness was drunk by the Grand Master and by all the guests to the cheerful sound of fanfares, beating of drums and the echoing rumble of artillery and musket fire. And so the celebrations came to an end.”

Afterwards, the Sword and Helmet were displayed for three days in one of the Palace apartments to satisfy the curiosity of the island's population. The attendance was considerable. At the expiry of the three days, the Grand Master ordained that the insignia be kept in the sacristy of the church of St John, in the same place reserved for the holy relics, as no other locality was deemed suitable to house them, nor more proper to preserve for ever this precious token of His Holiness' paternal benevolence to the Grand Master and his Order”

Having accomplished his mission, the Ablegate could now take leave in the traditional form, which he did on 7th May, at eight o'clock in the morning, after attending another audience graciously accorded to him by the Grand Master on that same day. Then, the same procession, the same ceremonies and the same rendering of thanks as on the day of his arrival. The only difference was that presents were exchanged the other way, this time it was the turn of His Eminence. The Prince presented to the Pope's Ablegate a jewel-studded Maltese Cross, a diamond ring, the warrant for a pension valued 238 Neapolitan ducats on a priory, several rare curiosities from the Indies and a medal depicting on one side the figure of His Eminence and on the other Fort Manoel. Even the envoy's Secretary received tokens of the Prince's generosity.

Soon after, the Ablegate and his retinue embarked on the galleys of the Order., and were eventually conveyed to Naples.

THE ANNEXES

The annexes that follow contain extracts from the inscriptions which hung on the portals of the conventual church and of the Magisterial Palace in Valletta during the celebrations. They proclaim, in a more effective way than the verbal orations, the virtues of the Supreme Pontiff and of the Grand Master in their holy struggle against the infidels.

REFLECTIONS

Beneath the trappings of all the pageantry, the eulogies and the pompous words, it now remains for us to find out the real motives underlying such occasions. To what extent, at the beginning of the 18th century, were the Romans, the Maltese and the whole community of Christians, within their national and social environment, involved in the warlike concepts of the Pope and the Grand Master? How was the Infidel really perceived by the European society of the time? One must admit, that only deeper and more extensive research can provide the answer.

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