

A Revolutionary Hospitaller Catechism of 1791

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The aim of this short contribution is to bring to scholarly attention an intriguing document pertaining to the last years of the Order in Malta. On 24th September 1791 the Inquisitor of Malta, Gian Filippo Gallarati Scotti, forwarded to the Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office in Rome an unusual document: nothing less than a manuscript copy of an anonymous and revolutionary interpretation of the nature and role of the Order of St John and the duties of its members. Gallarati Scotti's note, accompanying the document throws important light on the latter.

The Inquisitor's correspondence to Rome



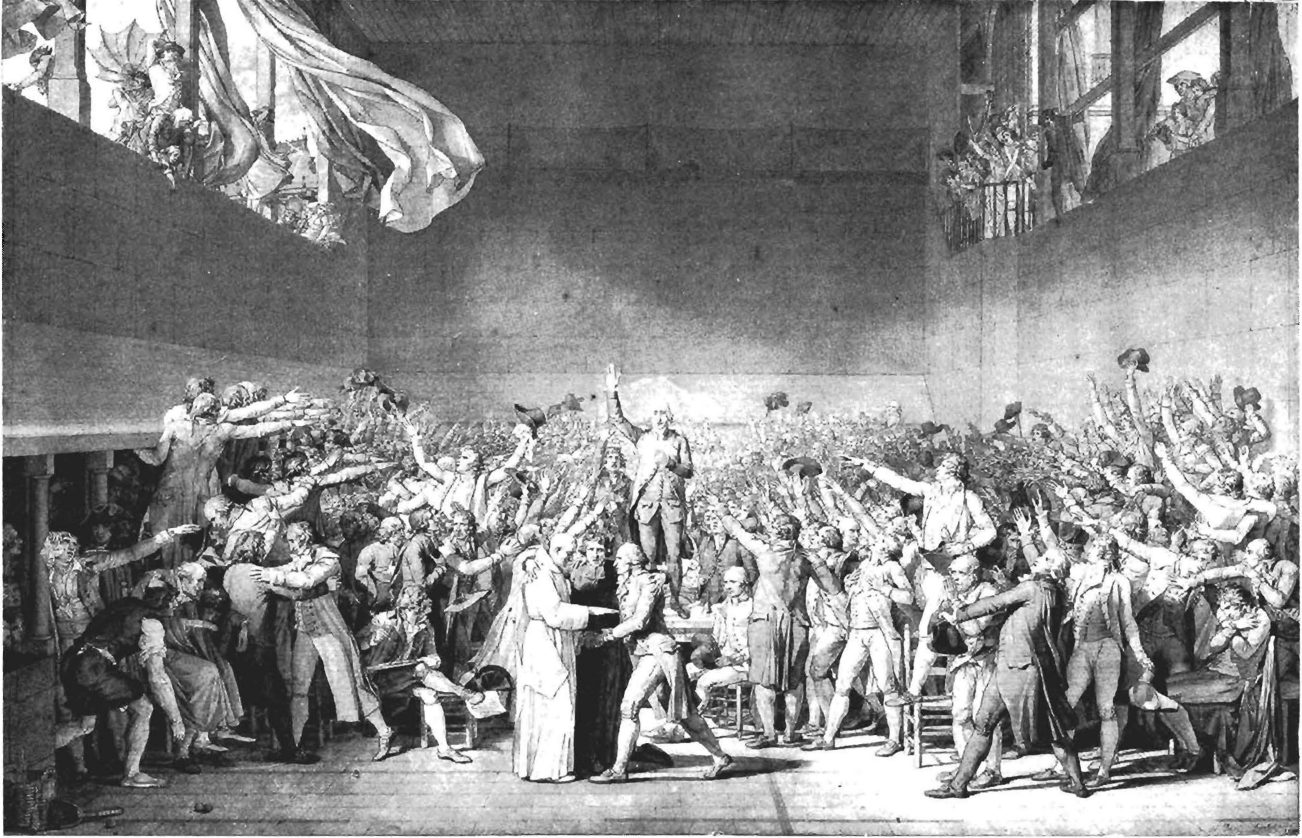
The seat of the Inquisitor in Malta - the Inquisitor's Palace in Vittoriosa

Your Eminences and Most Dear and Reverend Lords

The Instructions or Catechism, a copy of which I am hereby submitting to your Eminences, is being clandestinely circulated in this Convent. In the course of my inquiries into the matter, I managed to acquire a copy of the pernicious document in confidence. I then considered it as my duty to discuss the matter with his Eminence the Grand Master, appealing to his religious sentiments in order to make him take action against the author of the document and also to stop its dissemination. The Grand Master appears to have realised the adverse consequences that the statements contained in the document would have on their readers, and informed me that he was ready to punish the author once the latter was identified. It seems that the document is the work of the Knight of Devotion Mayer, who is well-disposed towards the Order, having expressed himself in favour of the Order on matters discussed by the National Assembly of France. Moreover, Mayer is attempting to attribute the authorship of the document to others. Whoever the author is, once he is identified I wish him to experience the Grand Master's indignation over the matter. I have felt it my duty to inform your Eminences about this issue, particularly since the author, whether he is the above-mentioned, or indeed some other, demonstrates an attachment to the reprehensible Masonic sect. This sect has multiplied on the island, as is confirmed by the communications of my predecessors. The connection between the two is evident from the interest taken in the catechism by adherents of the said sect. While hoping that my vigilance over the matter satisfies your Eminences, I express my profound veneration while bowing to kiss your Holy Robe.

Malta 24th September 1791

*Your Eminences' Most Humble and Devout Servant,
Gian Filippo Gallarati Scotti.*



Sketch by Jacques-Louis David of the National Assembly taking the Tennis Court Oath – this work of art is found at the Musée National du Château de Versailles, Versailles, France

Gallarati Scotti's communication was duly discussed by the Supreme Congregation on 16th November, when it was agreed that the Inquisitor was to be praised for his efforts.

The document

The catechism was forwarded to the Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office with the covering letter.¹ Two copies of the catechism were sent, one in Italian and the other in French. In each case the text is in two columns, the first containing the question and the second its answer.

The French Revolution and the Order

As stated in the title of the catechism itself, the work was inspired by the decree issued by the French National Assembly on 30th July 1791. Since August 1789 Armand Gaston Camus, a member of the French National Assembly and an ardent enemy of

the Order, had queried the relevance of the Order of St John in a rapidly changing France, and the Order's extensive landed property in France together with the very considerable income derived from it became increasingly the subject of attention as financial crisis and anti-Catholic sentiment became more pronounced.² On the 2nd, 3rd and 4th November 1789 the National Assembly had decreed the abolition of the payment of *dîmes*, together with other feudal rights. This was the first serious financial blow that the French Revolution dealt to the Order, and the latter's attempts to obtain exemptions from the new decree proved futile.³ In October 1790 the National Assembly recognised the Order as a foreign sovereign power and hence it avoided the confiscation of its property as was the fate of that belonging to the Church and to Religious Orders in France. The decree of 30th July 1791 suppressed all Orders based upon distinctions of class and withdrew French nationality to those French who were members of a foreign chivalric Order. The Order of St John managed to obtain a concession whereby its members were considered to be giving a service to France

1 A[rchivio della] C[ongregazione per la] D[ottrina della] F[ede] St St Hh 5-d, unfoliated.

2 For a detailed account of the difficulties faced by the Order as a result of the French Revolution, see F.W. Ryan, *The House of the Temple: A Study of Malta and its Knights in the French Revolution* (London, 1930), 143-352. See also A. Blondy, *L'Ordre de Malte au XVIII siècle: Des dernières splendeurs à la ruine* (Paris, 2002), 279-380.

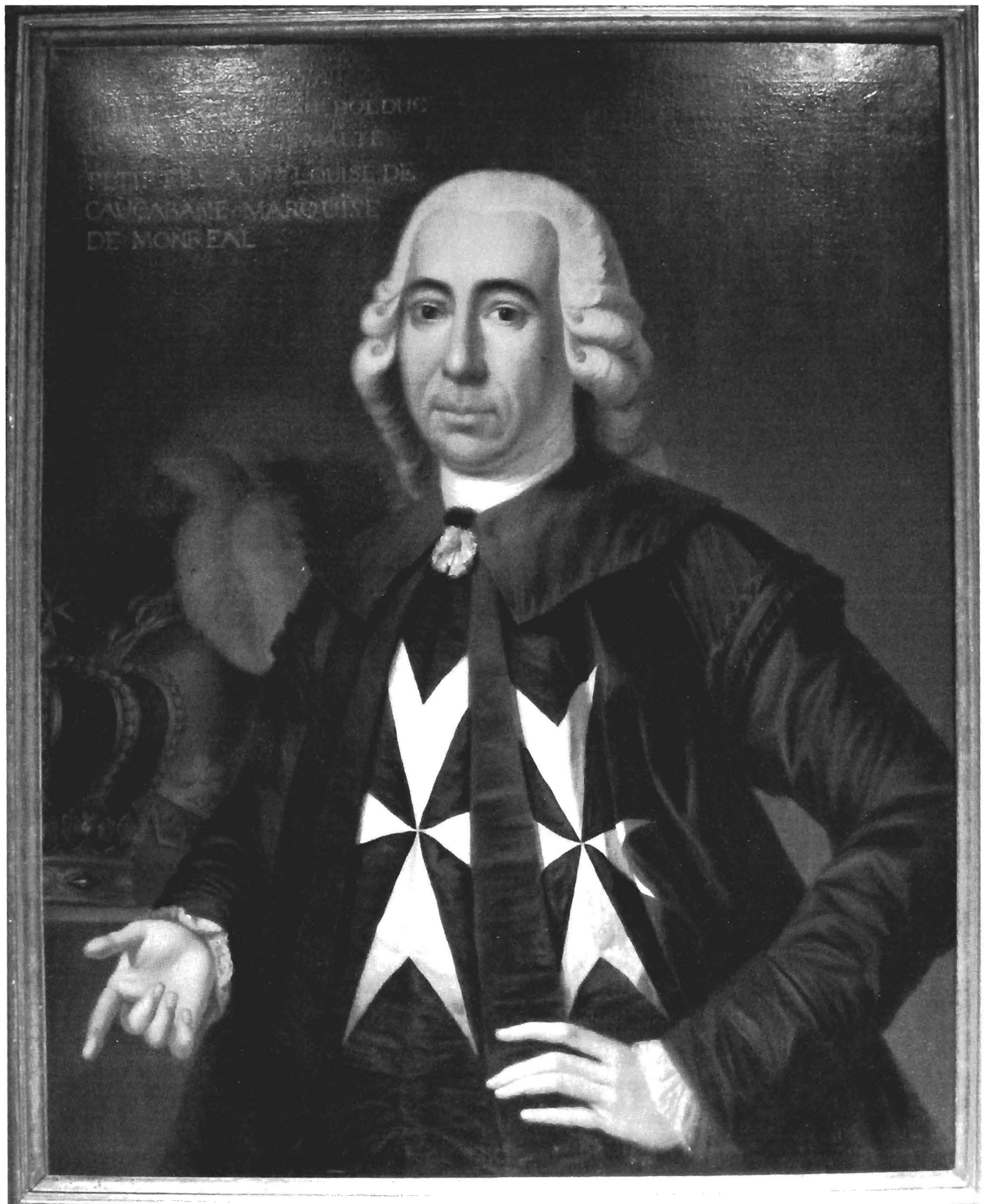
3 Ryan, 165.

PREMIÈRE SUITE
DU
DÉVELOPPEMENT DE LA MOTION
DE M. CAMUS,
RELATIVEMENT A L'ORDRE DE MALTE.
De l'Ordre de Saint-Lazare & de celui du Mont-Carmel.
Imprimée par ordre de l'Assemblée Nationale.

QUELQUES Ordres religieux ont, comme les grands Empires, leurs temps fabuleux. Une conformité de noms, une expression équivoque, ont souvent servi de base pour appuyer une origine très-reculée : ainsi des Auteurs ont affirmé sérieusement, que l'Ordre de Saint-Lazare avoit existé dès les premières années de la Religion Chrétienne (1); ils lui ont donné pour Instituteur le frère de Marthe & de Marie, parce qu'il avoit plu à ceux qui l'avoient créé dans le douzième siècle, de le dénommer Ordre de Saint-Lazare.

Cet Ordre religieux & militaire est né, comme celui de Malte, dans la Terre Sainte, & vers le même temps, aux approches du douzième siècle. En 1104, l'Empereur Baudouin confie la garde de la ville d'Acre aux Frères

(1) De Belloy, de l'Origine de la Chevalerie, chap. 9. p. 126.



Grand Master Emmanuel de Rohan-Polduc
during whose reign the clandestine catechism was being distributed.
The painting by an 18th century unknown artist is found at the
Musee de la Legion d'Honneur, in France.

(This illustration is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 3.0 Licence)



An illustration of an eighteenth century French Masonic lodge

and were thus exempted from that decree. With the radicalisation of the Revolution, resulting in the fall of the monarchy and the declaration of the Republic in August 1792 however, the ultimate disaster could hardly be avoided: on 19th September the newly-formed National Convention passed *le loi spoliateur*, whereby confiscating the Order's movable and immovable property in France. A month later the confiscated movable property was put up for sale.⁴

A revolutionary catechism for revolutionary times

The manuscript catechism sent by Gallarati Scotti to the Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office and which was being circulated on the island between members of the Order, was an attempt at distancing the Hospitaller institution from all other Catholic Orders and hence exempting it from suppression and the confiscation of its property in France. With hindsight, the catechism's attempt at trying to square the circle might have granted a reprieve to the Order; however the latter's innately Catholic nature could hardly be negated and this was bound to prove anathema in the later stages of the French Revolution.

The catechism's attempt to make the Order seem less monastic, and to emphasise its practical utility and above all its sovereignty was indeed the culmination of decades of gradual moves towards that direction, inspired by the absolutistic and enlightened

philosophies of the period. On the institutional level, practically all Grand Masters from Ramon Perellos (1697-1720) onwards increasingly stressed the Order's sovereign status and particularly the grand master's role as Prince of Malta, rather than that of being the head of a Catholic Order. On their part, the lifestyle of many individual members of the Order had long since shed any pretence of strict monastic observance. The French Revolution and the real and immediate dangers it created for the Order provided the right setting for the formulation and dissemination of a document unequivocally affirming such a position, even if this ran in contradiction to the Order's statutes.

The catechism consists of thirteen carefully structured questions and answers which were intended to assert the Order's sovereign status, while at the same time playing down its monastic and Catholic roots. The first four deal with the duties and rights of the Order's members. The predominant duties of the knights were the hospitaller and military roles. Humanness, honour, virtue, justice, the defence of law and order and charity were all characteristics expected of a knight. The religious aspect is played down by simply stating that the knights were expected to give a good example in that regard. Questions five to eight deal with the central issue of whether the Order and its members were bound by the vows usually expected out of religious Orders. The vow of chastity taken by the knights was dismissed as a corruption of the original requisite of celibacy. The latter was required as safeguard so that

⁴ Ibid., 208-9.



The square and compasses are the Insignia of Freemasonry - this particular example is carved in stone

the passing on of the Order's commanderies within the same families would be avoided. This negation of the vow of chastity for the knights certainly constituted a major objectionable assertion where the Inquisitor was concerned. The vote of poverty which knights took, in turn, was interpreted in the sense that the individual members were just administrators of the Order's property, and were indeed accountable to the Order's Treasury. Discipline and respect for authority within the Order, rather than monastic strictures, was behind the vote of obedience taken by the knights. To the question as to whether the knights were Christian and Roman Catholic, the answer given stated that since its foundation the Order never ceased to embrace and defend Christianity. Significantly, no reference to Apostolic Catholicism is thus made in the answer.

The issue of the Order's sovereignty was addressed next (questions nine to eleven). The catechism claimed that the Order had enjoyed undisputed sovereignty since its foundation and at par with the other sovereign states of Europe, with absolutely no reference to ultimate subjection or at least deference to Rome.

The last two questions (twelve and thirteen) elicited answers reiterating the Order's secular and sovereign identity and its distinction from monastic and other types of religious Orders, even if guided and inspired by Christian principles. The catechism ends by a prayer invoking God and St John the Baptist to protect the Order against those seeking to harm it.

Authorship

Gallarati Scotti's attribution of the catechism to the Knight of Devotion Mayer was primarily based on the fact that the latter authored a number of works in defence of the Order against the onslaught of the French Revolutionary government.⁵ While Mayer might well have been behind the manuscript catechism, the involvement of others cannot be excluded. In 1796 Inquisitor Carpegna informed Rome that knight Rabastens had, some years before, been implicated in the writing of a condemned catechism of the Order. Both Mayer and Rabastens seem to have been involved in Masonic activity on the island, active since the 1740s but especially so during the 1780s and 1790s.

⁵ For a description of Mayer's published works see F. De Hellwald, *Bibliographie Méthodique de l'Ordre Souv. de St Jean de Jérusalem* (Rome, 1885).

Italian text of the Catechism

*Istruzione, o Catechismo
Dei Cavalieri di Malta dopo il Decreto dell'Assemblea
Nazionale di Francia fatto in favor dell'Ordine il dì 30
Luglio 1791*

- D[omanda] Quali sono li veri obblighi dei Cavalieri di Malta?
R [isposta] D'essere Ospitali, e bravi Militari.*
- D Non hanno altri doveri d'adempire?
R Quelli del buon esempio nella Religione, e di far professione di onore, e di virtù.*
- D Come Uomini quali diritti, e quali obblighi hanno?
R Di essere umani, caritatevoli, beneficanti, giusti, e zelanti difensori del buonordine, e delle Leggi.*
- D Qual' è il principal dovere de'loro Superiori?
R Di mantenere lo spirito di unione, e la pace tra loro con la disciplina la più esatta, e di attendere, che la Grandezza di Dio sia da per tutto onorificata.*
- D Non è come Religiosi, che fanno voto di Castità in quest' Ordine?
R No, li Secoli d'ignoranza, e di Superstizione hanno confuso la Castità con il Celibato, politicamente stabilito dalli Cavalieri medesimi, come il più sicuro mezzo per evitare, che le Commende non fossero perpetue nelle Famiglie.*
- D Perchè fanno voto di povertà?
R Perchè non hanno niente del proprio, non essendo, che Amministratori dei beni, che loro sono affidati per commissione alla carica, per renderne conto a un Tribunale, che presiede al Tesoro dell'Ordine.*
- D Perchè fanno ancora voto di Obbedienza?
R Il voto di Obbedienza non può servire che di freno agli Spiriti indocili, ed aver luogo di un giuramento, poichè l'obbedienza alle Leggi, ed ai Superiori è un dovere di ciascun Uomo onorato, e savio.*
- D Qual' è la vera credenza dei Cavalieri di quest'Ordine sopra la Religione? Sono Cristiani Cattolici, Apostolici, Romani?
R Se dall'undecimo Secolo della fondazione dell'Ordine, i Cavalieri di Malta non cessano di affrontar la morte per la difesa della Religione Cristiana, non si può senza ingiustizia dubitare della loro fede, e del loro zelo per difenderla ancora.*
- D Risguardo a tutti i Sovrani in generale, quali sono gli obblighi dell'Ordine di Malta?
R Di vivere con essi in una perfetta neutralità, di proteggere il Comercio di tutti indifferentemente, e di non allontanarsi mai dai riflessi, ch'esigge l'onestà, e la politica.*
- D L'Ordine è Sovrano?
R Sì, dalla sua prima origine.*

- D *Non gli si può contrastare la Sovranità?*
 R *No, egualmente che agli altri Sovrani; egli ha il medesimo carattere, che hanno quelli.*
- D *Perchè dunque diverse persone hanno potuto persuadersi, che l'Ordine sia una Società di Monaci inutili?*
 R *Non deve punto far specie, che le virtù cristiane, rigorosamente osservate da qualche secolo, e seguite da una regola monastica, abbiano fatto credere, che quest'Ordine fosse religioso.*
- D *Si è pertanto accertato, che senza essere ne Monaci, ne Ecclesiastici li Cavalieri di Malta sono buoni Cristiani, ed ospitali militari, e che non dipendono da altra Potenza, che dal solo Dio?*
 R *Sì certamente, ma a render Gloria, ed onore all'Altissimo, che per sua Divina bontà ha condotto li Ministri dell'Ordine, ed ancora ispirato l'Autore dei riflessi politici, e di commercio, il che ha determinato l'Areopago Francese, malgrado la severità de' suoi voti, a riconoscer l'Ordine come una delle Sovranità straniere, come lo è, ed è stato sempre.*

Preghiera

Dio Onnipotente! Vogliate proteggere l'Ordine di Malta, e renderlo eterno, come Voi. Penetrati dalla grandezza delle vostre bontà, dobbiamo sperare, che zelanti osservatori dei nostri doveri, e delle vostre Leggi, non permetterete, o mio Dio! che per l'avvenire i Barbari possano far tentative contro le Proprietà, e Governo dell'Ordine. E Voi glorioso S. Giovanni Protettore, che l'Ordine riverisce, non tralasciate di essere nostro Protettore, affinchè Dio esaudisca sempre i vostri Voti. Così sia.

The author

William Zammit B.Ed.(Hons), DLIS, M.A., Ph.D., has specialized in the study of the communication of ideas during the early modern period, with particular emphasis upon the role of printed matter. He has authored a number of books and academic papers, with his major publication being *Printing in Malta, 1642-1839*, published in 2008. Zammit has carried out extensive research in Maltese and foreign libraries and archives. He currently heads the Division of Library, Information and Archive Studies at the University of Malta.