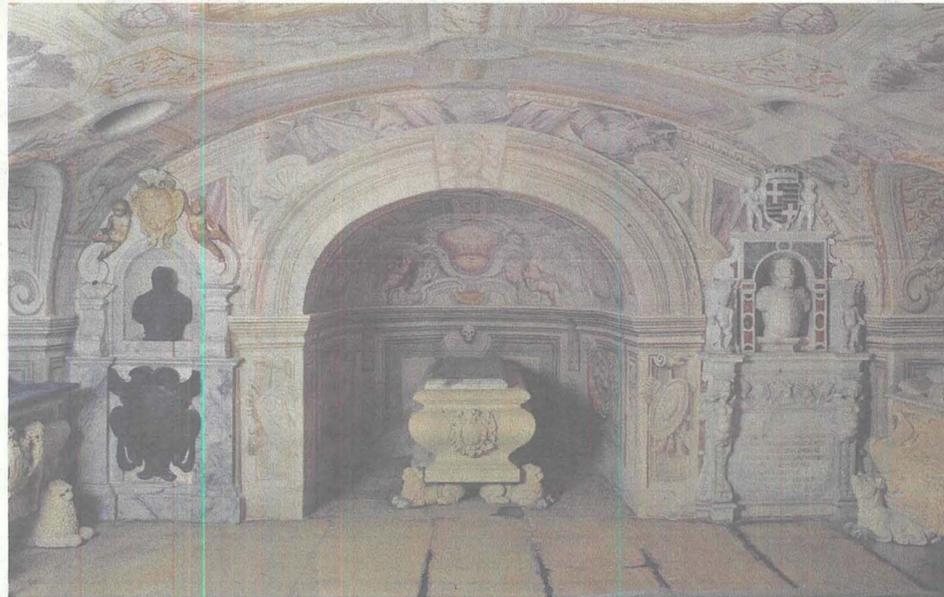


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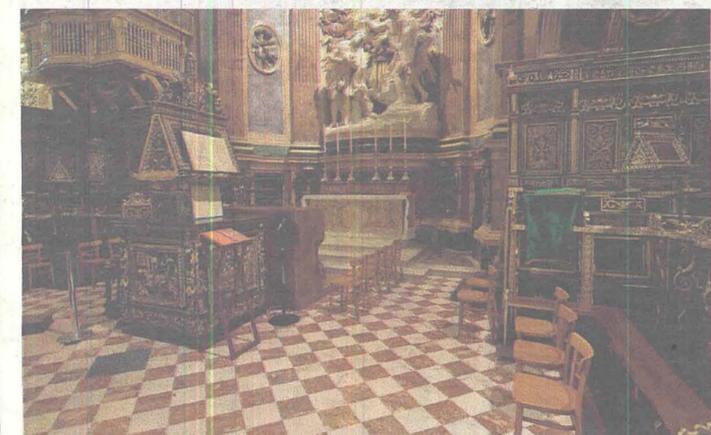


The restored Grand Masters' Crypt, beneath St John's Co-Cathedral, is the final resting place of the first 12 grand masters of the Knights of the Order of St John. PHOTOS: CHRIS SANT FOURNIER

Grand Masters' Crypt reopens after 13-year restoration



View of the reinforced and strengthened duct inserted beneath the main altar. PHOTOS COURTESY OF DIN L-ART HELWA



The main altar following the relaying of the marble paving.

Project cost St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation around €500,000

GORDON WATSON

The Grand Masters' Crypt underneath St John's Co-Cathedral, in Valletta officially reopened on Tuesday following a 13-year restoration project.

The crypt, located under the main altar of the co-cathedral, is the final resting place of the first 12 grand masters of the Knights of the Order of St John who shaped Malta from 1530 to 1623. The space is adorned with war trophies and frescos by Italian artist Niccolò Nasoni.

Tuesday's event came just a month after the crypt reopened to the public.

Extensive restoration and conservation works had started in 2007 and have cost the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation almost €500,000.

Curator Cynthia de Giorgio explained that the project's biggest challenge was controlling the temperature and humidity inside the crypt. Major fluctuations had caused severe damage and deterioration to the paintings and stonework.

"We collected studies between 2007 and 2009 that identified the periods of wetting and drying, which allowed us to draw the conclusion that maintaining a constant temperature of 74 degrees Fahrenheit (23°C) would protect the crypt," she said.

A small army of structural and architectural engineers were called in to help devise the installation of a specially-built ventilation system connected to the roof. This involved having to lift and replace old marble tiles on the floor of the presbytery,

in order to filter equipment through four existing holes on the floor.

The environmental control project recently won the Prix d'Honneur in the category for restoration and conservation at the 14th edition of the Architectural Heritage Awards, organised by Din l-Art Helwa.

To rejuvenate the crypt, the foundation employed a team of restorers from the Courtauld Institute of London, who were tasked with the painstaking work of restoring and revitalising the aesthetics of the crypt. Visitors are now able to see the crypt from a specially-installed viewing platform and a glass door that seals it off from the outside environment.

"It's a very special day for me. I am getting to see the goal reached. You feel a sense of purpose for having completed a project that is bigger than yourself," she said.

The sarcophagi in the crypt belong to Jean Parisot de Valette and Jean l'Eveque de la Cassière, among other important names.

The co-cathedral was commissioned by de la Cassière and built in 1572. As the patron of the co-cathedral, his tomb is located directly underneath the main altar and is covered in marble.

"There is a very significant European dimension to this project. These men came from some of the most important families in Europe and they directed the history of Malta. It's like going to see Napoleon's tomb," Ms de Giorgio said.

Archbishop Charles Scicluna, the Minister for National Heritage, Arts and Local Government, José Herrera and the president of St John's Cathedral Foundation, Wilfrid Buttigieg, attended the reopening.



From left, Wilfrid Buttigieg, José Herrera and Archbishop Charles Scicluna with Cynthia de Giorgio at the crypt's official opening on Tuesday.