



St John's Co-Cathedral

**LOOKING AFTER
A CULTURAL GEM**

20 YEARS OF RESTORATION AND CONSERVATION

CYNTHIA DE GIORGIO
Editor

THE ST JOHN'S CO-CATHEDRAL FOUNDATION

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During conservation, Mattia Preti, Oratory, 210 x 159 cm

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FOREWORD

The surge of cultural and religious tourism which has permeated Malta since the late 1990s has been the catalyst for a new and professional approach to the holistic management of St John's Co-Cathedral, as befits this impressive place of worship and historical monument of international standing.

In achieving this aim, the Catholic Church in Malta and the Government of the Republic have succeeded in hammering out a historic compromise to bypass the long-standing controversy regarding the ownership of the Co-Cathedral and establish, by the public deed of July 2001, the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation as an independent body to manage and administer this prime Baroque monument and its priceless art collection.

One of the main tasks entrusted to the Foundation has been precisely the remit of creating and administering an effective, holistic, and sustainable conservation and restoration strategy for St John's and its artefacts. As stated in article three of the statutes, it is the Foundation's responsibility to take care, foster, and administer the artistic and religious patrimony of this heirloom and its extensive museum annexe, so that Maltese citizens and foreigners alike would be able to savour, appreciate and enjoy this monument in its pristine splendour.

The Foundation has taken this task in great earnest, as evidenced by the impressive range of restoration and conservation projects that have been implemented over the past twenty years. Indeed, over this period of time, St John's Co-Cathedral has been a veritable hive of restoration and conservation activity, with multiple projects being undertaken in rapid succession, sometimes even simultaneously! The Foundation has left no stone unturned in tapping funds, and in diligently channelling revenue generated by visitors towards the constant maintenance and restoration of this Maltese artistic gem to its original glory. In implementing this restoration and



conservation strategy, the Foundation has adopted the best in professional conservation policies and practice, in order to guarantee the highest standard of operational procedures for this great monument and its priceless works of art.

The scope of this publication is to showcase and record for posterity the extensive and holistic programme of restoration and conservation embarked upon by the Foundation over the past two decades. It seeks to render unequivocal credibility to the vision and foresight of the founding fathers of the Foundation and to the outstanding achievements of this institution. The restoration and conservation projects embarked upon by the Foundation have embraced a wide range of works of art, together with many architectural features of the Church fabric. The list of items covered by these works is indeed impressive: from fine altarpieces to funerary mausolea in marble and bronze; from gilt wall carvings to the exterior masonry of the façade and side walls; from the portal escutcheons, to the Lascaris bell and clock mechanism inside the belfries; from the altar canopy, lectern, choir stalls and pulpit, to the Mascioni and Oratory pipe organs and their ornate cases; from the Crucifixion statuary group to the Oratory timber lantern; from the marble doorway to the Oratory to its fine soffit in carved wood; from the chancel balustrades to the marble clad nave pilasters;

from the Cappella Ardente to the Crypt of the Grand Masters; from the priceless Flemish tapestries and the Carapecchia atriums to the stunning marble flooring with its inlaid sepulchral tablets.

There is no better way of safeguarding and celebrating the rich heritage of the Hospitaller Order of the Knights of St John than with the state-of-the-art conservation and preservation of what this chivalric Order has bequeathed to us. Their erstwhile Conventual Church of St John the Baptist, which served as an epicentre of Baroque splendour and a microcosmic reflection of European artistic excellence, constitutes a tangible memorial that perpetuates the Order's legacy of glory. The Knights of Malta built their stunning temple on the highest and focal point of the Valletta promontory to proclaim their ethos and identity as a religious and military Order. Without constant restoration and conservation this unique temple and its priceless artistic treasures would be gradually left to deteriorate and decay to the detriment of future generations.

The restoration and conservation narrative at St John's Co-Cathedral has truly been a success story. Prior to 2001, the Church interior breathed an air of a dark and grimy edifice. The faded gilding of its wall carvings and the unpolished bronze and marble of its monuments exuded an air of depressive gloom. Many of the altarpieces looked dull, dark, and lifeless. The external walls of the once proud edifice stood crusted with a patina of dirt, the effect of pollution, and the stone fabric exhibited all the alarming symptoms of decay. The fine silk texture of the famous Flemish tapestries was becoming increasingly frayed, and the stunning Cappella Ardente by Carapecchia had been condemned to an ignoble fate inside the crypt of Bartolott. The frescoed decorations and stone sarcophagi in the Grand Masters' crypt were suffering from extensive damage caused by moisture in a depressingly unventilated environment. Constant damage to the inlaid marble flooring, replete with epitaphs and funerary symbolism, was at best contained by cementing the dislodged and broken pieces in the hope that the rest would not succumb to the ravages of time.

Today, the Co-Cathedral has regained its original splendour. After decades of neglect and decline St John's Co-Cathedral has now been lovingly restored and rejuvenated to its former glory, transforming

it into the resplendent jewel of the reign of the sovereign Grand Masters of the Order of St John. Restoration and conservation projects have now brought forth this outstanding temple into a celebration and overwhelming experience of Baroque art at its best. We can now truly savour what the Conventual Church of the Knights would have looked like throughout the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. The long-lost glint which this Church once enjoyed under the Hospitallers has now been recaptured, to offer those treading these sacred precincts – worshippers and visitors alike - a sense of intense spirituality, a taste of the Divine, a foretaste of heaven. The striking outcome of the restorative programme which immediately captures the visitor's attention inside St John's has been the fruit of the Foundation's unfailing commitment and perseverance, coupled with conservators' expertise, their competent skills, and meticulous work across multiple facets of the fine arts.

Cultural heritage is a legacy inherited from past generations, and carefully maintained in order to be handed on to posterity. Culture defines who we are; it shapes a nation's identity. The Co-Cathedral of St John is undoubtedly one of the most important historical and cultural sites which define our identity as a nation. It is a major feature of our character as Maltese. This means that the sustainable maintenance, restoration, and conservation of this prime unit of our national patrimony should appeal to every Maltese citizen whose very identity is intimately associated with this historical site. As guardian of this national treasure the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation has been set up to act on behalf of every Maltese citizen. The safeguarding of this world heritage site can thus be defined as the protection of our national identity.

It is my honour and privilege to be serving as President of the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation during these twentieth anniversary celebrations. Words cannot express the great sense of gratitude owed to all previous and current members of the Foundation Council, representing both Church and State, for their dedication and collaboration in restoring dignity and prestige to this unique monument. It needs also be acknowledged that were it not for the invaluable support of the Co-Cathedral's administrative staff, the Foundation would never have been able to fulfil its strategic goals and attain the high level of success which it has achieved in restoration and conservation.

On behalf of the Foundation I would like to address a special word of thanks to our CEO and Curator, Cynthia de Giorgio who, over these past years, has expertly steered all the Foundation's projects, bringing them all to successful fruition. Her tangible attachment to St John's, her managerial skills, contagious enthusiasm and commitment throughout all the conservation projects, have been the hallmark of her tenure in office. The Foundation is indeed profoundly indebted to her for the professional services rendered towards the maintenance, restoration, and conservation of the Co-Cathedral.

The Co-Cathedral of St John once enjoyed pride of place within the social and administrative milieu of the Knights of Malta. As their Conventual Church it embodied their religious and political ethos, gloriously proclaiming their achievements and military prowess. Today this extraordinary edifice, which Malta has inherited from that chivalrous Order, is still very much a special monument that brings together all citizens of these islands for special national events. It is the pride of all Maltese, a principal attraction for every visitor, and a brand image of our island's heritage.

Future generations will indeed be grateful towards those who in our time had the vision, stamina and skill to restore St John's Co-Cathedral to its pristine glory as one of the finest examples of Baroque art for the enjoyment of mankind.

Mgr. Professor Emmanuel Agius

President

The St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation





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• Valletta Malta •