



KNIGHTS HOSPITALLERS

OF THE
SOVEREIGN ORDER OF SAINT JOHN OF JERUSALEM
KNIGHTS OF MALTA
THE ECUMENICAL ORDER



PRO FIDE, PRO UTILITATE HOMINUM
“FOR THE FAITH AND IN THE SERVICE OF HUMANITY”

The 900 year old **Knights Hospitaller**, also known as the **Order of Hospitallers** or simply **Hospitallers**, and known at various points in their history as the **Order of St John, Knights of Rhodes and Knights of Malta**

Knights Hospitallers, members of the military and religious Order of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, sometimes called the Knights of St. John or the Knights of Jerusalem. The symbol of the Order of St. John came to be a white cross worn on a black robe; thus the Hospitallers were the Knights of the White Cross, in contradistinction to the Knights Templar's, the Knights of the Red Cross. The Maltese cross has been used by various secret organizations, which have been falsely alleged to have a connection with the Knights of St. John.

The politics of the eastern Mediterranean region during the era of the Crusades was quite complicated. With the Byzantine Empire in decline, there were few major countries and many minor principalities. The map was a quilt of duchies, bishoprics and bailiwicks that was ceaselessly forming and dissolving alliances with or against each other.

Power was not necessarily linked to geography. One of the most powerful political organizations in the late Middle Ages was the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, the Knights Hospitallers, whose ranks were filled by scions of the richest aristocratic families of Europe. Formed in Jerusalem in the 11th Century to provide hospital care and protection to Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land, the Knights soon became one of the foremost military powers in the region. Their base of operations was a chain of castles and ports. After Saladin, King of the Saracens, dislodged them from Jerusalem, the Knights relocated briefly to Cyprus, and then to the island of Rhodes in 1309.



In 1522, the Ottoman Emperor, Suleiman the Magnificent, successfully laid siege against the Knights in their Aegean stronghold. Once more they were set adrift. After a two-year stay in Corinth, Greece, which the Knights again defended against Muslim attacks, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, offered them the island of Malta in 1530 with favorable terms. In exchange for a perpetual lease, the Knights sent the emperor a falcon once a year as a token of their fealty. They remained on the islands, making Malta the most impregnable Christian fortress in the Mediterranean.

In 1565, a vast Ottoman fleet of 250 ships carrying 40,000 men laid siege to the islands. The Knights were heavily outnumbered with a mere 700 men and 8,000 Maltese irregular troops. The Turks first decided to attack isolated Fort St. Elmo, on the Sceberras peninsula, because of its commanding position between the two harbors. Repeated assaults were launched over 36 days, but the small garrison of Knights held on to the fort for far longer than Suleiman anticipated. After four weeks, the Turks finally overran St. Elmo, but at a heavy price – the loss of 8,000 men.

The Turkish general was so vexed by the Knights' stubbornness that he had the dead bodies of St. Elmo's defenders nailed to crosses and set afloat in the harbor. In retaliation, the Grand Master of the Order, Jean Perisot de la Valette, beheaded his Turkish prisoners and fired their heads from cannons into the enemy lines.

The battle for Fort St. Angelo in Valetta saw some of the bloodiest episodes of this holy war. Mustafa Pasha was to launch some ten attacks on the walls of St. Angelo and the fortified three cities throughout the long, hot summer of 1565. Even on August 18, when a huge part of the defenses was breached, the Ottomans failed to take the Fort. Grand Master la Valette personally entered the battle and, despite the uneven odds, refused to accept the Ottoman's terms of surrender.

By September, the Ottomans were concerned about having to remain in Malta during the winter, and their morale began to ebb. At this point, la Valette's long-awaited relief forces appeared at Mellieha Bay and took control of high ground inland. Almost trapped, the Ottoman troops retreated, in the aftermath of the siege; the Knights used their enormous wealth to rebuild Malta as the masterpiece of military architecture.

In 1798, Napoleon threatened to invade Malta. The Order of St. John, headed by Grand Master Ferdinand Von Hompesch, surrendered without resistance. Von Hompesch went into exile. Some of the Knights scattered all over Europe, returning to France, Spain, Prussia, Bavaria, Italy and England, where they joined their brother Knights and arranged separate royal protection, establishing their various groups as independently functioning chapters according to their geopolitical location and religious persuasion. That was the beginning of the other Branches of the Order that exist today.

The majority of the Knights opposed the decision by Von Hompesch. Led by the Prince de Conde', they established themselves in St. Petersburg, Russia under the royal protection of Tsar Paul I. In 1798, the Catholic Grand Priory of Russia (formerly of Poland), along with the newly established Orthodox Grand Priory of Russia, elected Tsar Paul I as the 70th Grand Master of the Order. Pope Pius VI, from the Monastery of Cassini near Florence, bestowed his paternal and apostolic benediction upon Paul I shortly after he accepted the office of Grand Master. The Russian Orthodox Grand Priory of the Order included 117 Commanderies and 23 Hereditary Knights created by Paul I.

Tsar Alexander I returned the Catholic Grand Priory of Russia to the control of Pope Pius VII and retained the Orthodox Grand Priory of Russia, which then became the Russian Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Knights of Malta. The Russian Order was headquartered during the 19th century at the Vorontsov Palace in St. Petersburg and had its own dedicated church, the Priorski Chapel at the royal palace at Gatchina. The Russian Order retained the three most holy relics of the original Order, which were a piece of the Holy Cross, the right hand of Saint John the Baptist and the icon of the Virgin of Filerimos (Rhodes).

In 1919, Count Alexei Ignatiev, Grand Prior of Estonia of the Russian Order of the Knights of Malta, rescued the three most holy relics of the Order from the Bolsheviks. Subsequently, by instruction of Empress Marie Fedorovna of Russia, these relics were entrusted to an Orthodox Monastery in Serbia where they are still kept today.

The Russian Order had Grand Priorities in Estonia and other countries under the Russian Empire. Its last imperial-family Grand Master was Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, brother-in-law to the last Tsar, Nicholas II. He transferred the Russian Order to the United States in 1916. After the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917, these Hereditary Knights continued the activities of the Order in the United States, France, Denmark and other countries.

Today, although the Knights, like the Christian Church, are split into many Orders, our Order is true to the original tradition and operates under the royal protection of King Michael of Romania and the late Prince Wasili Alexandrowich Romanov, president of the Romanov Family Association, and son of the last Imperial Grand Master of the Russian Order of St. John (Order of Malta). Along with the other two major Orders of St. John, the Sovereign Military and Hospitaller Order of Rhodes and of Malta (SMOM), and the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John (VOSJ), our Knights and Dames are all bearers of the centuries-old tradition of caring for the sick and the poor and observing the Code that was written centuries ago.

Be sure to read '***Courage That Changed the World***' - by Rick Joyner
Historical Account also included in his book, '***Leadership: The Power of a Creative Life***'