

Order of Malta
American Association

Year of Preparation Formation Program

Module 4 – A Brief History of the Order of Malta
Script

M4S1: [M4S1 = Module four, slide one] Title Page

The Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta, known more commonly as the Order of Malta, is an organization with a rich, complex history dating back to the year 1099, and even earlier. It was formed as a hospitaller order and religious order, and later became a military force during the Crusades. Its hospitals were, for hundreds of years, the most advanced in the world. Today it remains a lay religious order of the Roman Catholic Church; one of its primary functions provides international relief to those marginalized by war, natural disaster, or systemic poverty.

There are volumes written on the history of the Order, replete with maps, portraits, and armorial bearings. Similarly, there are books dedicated to the spirituality of the Order, and there are several websites describing the actions of the Order worldwide. Stated simply, there is no shortage of research material on the past and present of the Order of Malta.

This module will provide a short introduction to the Order, and will attempt to answer the questions most frequently asked.

We are very grateful to James-Michael von Stroebel, a Knight of Justice and member of the Federal Association for his gracious permission to use the content of his work, [An Introduction to the Order of Malta](#), to develop this module.



M4S2:

The Order of Malta traces its origins to a hospice for pilgrims started in Jerusalem, perhaps earlier, but certainly by the 1070s. The word hospice comes from the Latin word for guest or stranger. It was a place of recovery after the rigors of a long journey and of assistance to those in need.

About the middle of the eleventh century, a Benedictine abbey was founded next to the church of St Mary of the Latins, by merchants from Amalfi, in Italy. A hospice was established outside the abbey walls, next to the church dedicated to St John the Baptist. In the last years of the eleventh century, it was ministered by a lay religious fraternity under a Frá Gerard (Frá was short for Frater, Latin for "brother").

Frá Gerard's fraternity, although dependent on a Benedictine monastery, was a separate community and adopted the Augustinian rule as being more flexible for their operations. However, his community (like the Order afterwards) always followed the spirit of the Benedictine rule in its spirituality. About 1080, a hospice for women, dedicated to St Mary Magdalene, was established in conjunction with the work of Frá Gerard.

During the siege of Jerusalem in the First Crusade in 1099, Frá Gerard rendered great service to the Crusaders. After the victory, he and his fraternity continued to help the wounded and sick of all faiths, the pilgrims and others in need. A number of the Crusader knights, attracted to this work as a way of following in Christ's footsteps, joined his group. In effect, this religious fraternity became the first "order of chivalry", that is, a group of knights formally joined together under a rule or code of conduct, and recognized as such. The rulers of the newly established Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem recognized Frá Gerard and his companions and gave them many honors, as well as considerable donations of land and buildings in gratitude and to help their work. Many other Crusaders and their families followed that example and also spread the fame of the work of Frá Gerard and "The Hospital of Saint John" when they returned to Europe.



M4S3:

While continuing to be a hospice for pilgrims, the facilities of the fraternity of Saint John developed into what became the first real "hospital" in the modern meaning, and the brothers became known as "The Hospitallers of Saint John" or merely "The Hospitallers." As early as 1111, many of those serving with the Order were volunteers who did not take the religious vows.

By a Bull of February 15, 1113, Pope Paschal II approved the institution of the fraternity "of The Hospital of Saint John", recognizing it as a religious order of the Church. It was placed under the direct protection of the Holy See which ensured its right to elect Frá Gerard's successors without interference from other ecclesiastical or lay authority, making it an "exempt" order and establishing the foundation of its being a sovereign entity. It was the first religious order of the Catholic Church with a centralized administration and government and as such, is the oldest in the Church. It was exempt from the power or control of local rulers and bishops, as it still is. Pope Callixtus II, on July 13, 1120, and many succeeding Pontiffs, confirmed and amplified the Order's privileges.

In 1120, the founder, Frá Gerard, died. He was soon known as Blessed Gerard and was beatified by the Church. He was succeeded by Frá Raymond de Puy, the first to use the title "Master" of the Hospital instead of Rector.

By the mid-1120s, circumstances had forced a new role on the Order, although an old role for its members who were knights, that of armed protection for pilgrims and the defense of the new Christian Kingdom and its holdings against Muslim attacks. Thus, in addition to being a hospitaller, chivalric, religious Order, it also became a military Order. It attracted many recruits and quickly became one of the two "standing armies" (with the Knights Templar) in the area. Its ability and "right" to wage war strengthened its sovereign character.

The Hospitallers of Saint John, like those in the other great military Order, the Templars, were feared and respected for their bravery and fearless fighting abilities. They were given the duty of defending a number of castles and fortresses at the most vulnerable points in the Latin East. This new role enhanced the Order's prestige and increased the steady flow of recruits, privileges and donations. The Order was able to expand a network of hospices for service to, and defense of, pilgrims not only in the Levant but also in Europe.

In 1130, Pope Innocent II approved the coat of arms and flag of the Order, a red field with a plain white cross. In 1137, Pope Eugene III approved a new rule for



the Order, introduced by Frá Raymond du Puy, which has remained unchanged in spirit to the present. The original habit of the Order was a black robe with a plain white cross. Frá Raymond introduced the 8-pointed cross. It symbolized the religious and hospitaller aspects of the Order. Usually it was not worn in battle, but rather, the plain cross as on the coat of arms was used.

In 1248, Pope Innocent IV approved the wearing of a black surcoat, instead of the robe, over the armor when in active military service. In 1259, Pope Alexander IV changed the color to red, which is still the color of the dress uniform coat. Knights were given the right, still maintained, of wearing their swords in church. The church robe remains black with the white eight-pointed cross.



M4S4:

Almost 200 years after the capture of Jerusalem by the First Crusade, the last of the Latin settlements in the Levant was lost again to Muslim forces. On 18 May 1291 the great fortress city of Acre fell after a fierce siege. The Convent, or headquarters, of the Order was transferred to the island of Cyprus where the Order had some properties. During its first two centuries, the Order had transport ships to carry supplies and pilgrims. It also had some excellent warships, but they were only subsidiary to its land forces. Finding itself on an island, however, about 1300, the Order established a navy as the only means of carrying on its struggle to reconquer the recently lost Holy Land.

In 1306, the Order invaded the island of Rhodes. The Convent moved there in 1309 and by 1310, its conquest had been completed. The Order created a new crusading base, and then strengthened it by also occupying a number of islands in the southeastern Aegean Sea, close to the coast of Asia Minor. It thus also acquired territorial sovereignty.

In 1285, Philip IV the Fair became King of France. He desired absolute power, even over the Church. He wanted to destroy the power of the military orders in his kingdom and wished to get their purported wealth. Two of the three great military orders (the Order of Saint John and the Teutonic Order) had sovereign bases outside his grasp, but he was able to bring sufficient pressure on Pope Clement V to have the Templars suppressed in 1312. King Philip seized most of the properties and goods of the Templars in his realm. Some other rulers, as in Spain, Portugal and the Papal States, took part of the spoils, often giving them to local military orders. The Pope, however, assigned much of the property and wealth of the Templars to the Order of St John, which was strengthened further.



M4S5:

During the next century and a half, various holdings of the Order were attacked many times, with wins and losses. In 1440, the Mamelukes of Egypt mounted a serious threat to Rhodes itself, with an unsuccessful invasion. They returned in 1444 for a 5-year invasion effort which again failed. On May 23, 1480 the Ottoman Turks began the first of the three "great" sieges of the Order. They invaded the City of Rhodes with 70,000 men against the Order's 600 Knights and sergeants-at-arms, about 1,500 to 2,000 troops and some armed civilians.

The siege was lifted in August, but the Order lost 231 Knights killed and many wounded, with large numbers of casualties among the soldiers and civilians. Frá Pierre d'Aubusson, the Master of the Order, was honored with a cardinal's hat by Pope Eugene IV, the first Master so honored. In 1489, he began the regular use of the title "Grand Master", although it had been known as early as 1177.

In 1520, Suleiman I, later to be called "the Magnificent", ascended the Ottoman throne. In July 1522, he personally led a force even larger than that of 1480, perhaps 200,000 men, in the second "great" siege of the Order.

Rhodes was defended by about 500 Knights and sergeants of the Order and about 1,500 soldiers and some able bodied inhabitants. With munitions seriously depleted, and to save the population, on Christmas Eve, the Grand Master was persuaded to accept the very honorable terms of capitulation offered by Suleiman.

On New Year's Day 1523, the Order departed from Rhodes with the honors of war, its treasure and the great relics, and with those who wished to leave. (Some forty-two years later Suleiman regretted his generosity when the knights of the Order defeated him at Malta.)



M4S6:

From 1523 to 1530, the Convent of the Order moved from Rhodes to Candia in Crete, then to Messina, Baiae, Civitavecchia, Viterbo, Villefranche, Nice and Syracuse. In 1523, the young Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, in his capacity as King of Spain, offered the Maltese archipelago (Malta, Gozo and Comino) and Tripoli in North Africa to the Order in sovereign fief. The French opposed this, but Europe was under the Ottoman threat by land and by sea.

In 1526, Suleiman conquered most of Hungary and in 1529, he and his forces were in a strategic position between the western Mediterranean and the Muslim east. On March 13, 1530, the islands and Tripoli were ceded in fief to the Order for the symbolic annual payment of a falcon, for which Malta was well known.

By a Bull of May 7, 1530, Pope Clement VII, himself a former Professed Knight of the Order, gave his approval, and on October 26, the Convent of the Order moved to Malta. [In 1551, Tripoli, always difficult to defend and supply, was lost.]

In 1565, Suleiman the Magnificent, then 70 years old and exasperated by the successes of the Order, ordered his forces to take Malta. On May 19, the third "great" siege began with 375 vessels and a force of some 40,000 men of which over 25,000 were regular combat soldiers, including about 6,300 Janissaries. Facing them were 540 Knights, the Order's sergeants and men-at-arms, 400 Spanish soldiers and some native Maltese who could bear arms. At the end of June, 43 Knights and about 650 soldiers and gunners managed to reinforce the garrison.

After almost four months of fierce hand-to-hand combat, on September 7, a relief army of 8,000 finally landed on the island. On September 8, the Feast of Our Lady of Philermo, the Patroness of the Order, the Turks quickly withdrew.

Of the defending force of perhaps 8,500, by the end of the siege, 7,000 had died and only 600, most badly wounded, were capable of bearing arms. Only 15,000 of the original 40,000 Turks returned home, and they were forced to enter their harbor at night to hide the defeat. Thus ended one of the most famous sieges in history. Europe recognized the debt it owed to the Order, and its bravery, in halting what had been perceived as the irresistible force of the Turks. Even Elizabeth I of England, separated by great distance from the Mediterranean and by serious religious differences from the Order, declared days of rejoicing and prayers of thanksgiving.



The decline of Ottoman sea power dated from this defeat. The Order had an important part in its further destruction in the great sea battle of Lepanto on October 7, 1571. The Order's galleys were given the place of greatest danger, and corresponding honor, in the Christian fleet. This battle ended the Ottoman threat to Europe by sea.



M4S7:

Before the Great Siege, the Order had not accepted fully the idea of permanency on Malta, because it was so inhospitable compared with verdant Rhodes, and it was so far from the traditional enemy. After the siege, the Order accepted being on Malta and started not only to strengthen the old fortifications but in 1566, to build a great city, Valetta (named after Frá Jean de la Valette-Parisot, the Grand Master who had led the defense). It became one of the most impregnable cities of the world, and a city described as "built by gentlemen for gentlemen".

After 1581, the Grand Master enjoyed the dignity of cardinal deacon and the use of the "ducal coronet" on his coat of arms. The Grand Masters had been the temporal princes of Rhodes, and were the temporal princes of Malta, and in 1607, Frá Aloff de Wignacourt was made a prince of the Holy Roman Empire, with the title "Serene Highness" joining that of Grand Master. This was reconfirmed in 1620.

In 1630, Pope Urban VIII ordained the title "Eminence" for cardinals. Frá Manoel Pinto de Fonseca, elected Grand Master in 1741, joined the two styles into "Eminent Highness" and adopted the full attributes of sovereignty including the use of the "closed crown". The dignity of cardinal for the Grand Master has been reconfirmed by many Pontiffs.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, the Order eliminated the Barbary piracy in the Straits of Messina, and Malta became the major commercial hub of the Mediterranean. Aside from the policing efforts of its fleet, from its arrival in Malta until 1722, the Order fought the Ottoman Turks, usually in alliance with other Christian powers. After that, it operated with greater independence. In effect, it also was the "naval academy" for training the officers for most European fleets.

By the last third of the 18th century, the Order had virtually eliminated the sea power of the Barbary corsairs. (The period of war between the European powers, 1793-1814, and the absence of the Order's fleet after 1798, allowed the resurgence of Barbary piracy.) In 1651, the Order extended itself into the Caribbean with the purchase of several islands, but they were sold in 1665.



M4S8:

The rise of Protestantism in the 16th and 17th centuries caused the loss of many of the Order's possessions and of much revenue. The Order had also had a sizable income from its raids on the enemy, but by the 18th century it was suffering from its own success in having driven all but the smallest corsair vessels from the sea, thereby gaining much less in booty. By the end of the century, it was in financial difficulties.

In addition, the growing nationalism of European states clashed with the supranational character of the Order. All this and the effects of the philosophical debates of the era led to some slackening in discipline, and with some, of religious fervor. There was some discord among the Knights and between Knights and the Maltese population, and between the Order and some politically minded Maltese bishops and clergy.

In 1789, the French Revolution began a process that drastically changed Europe. Part of its ideology was the abolition of the old system, especially rule by the nobility and their privileges. In June 1798, General Napoleon Bonaparte visited Malta on his way to invade Egypt, with the intention of capturing the important islands and of destroying the power of the noble Knights. The terms of the treaty by which the Order had acquired Malta required strict neutrality on the part of the Order in conflicts between Christian powers, and guaranteed their neutrality toward the Order, but in June 1798, the French, deliberately violating this neutrality, invaded Malta, expelled the Knights and carried away the treasures of the Order.



M4S9:

Within a brief time, the Maltese population found the French to be "unwelcome" and besieged them in Valetta. In 1801, the British navy defeated the French navy and helped the Maltese drive the French out. In the Treaty of Amiens of 1802, the European powers including Great Britain recognized the Order's sovereign rights in Malta, but because of the renewal of hostilities, British forces continued to hold the islands.

In 1814, Great Britain obtained the islands by the Treaty of Paris, although the signatories obligated themselves to find another suitable territory for the Order in compensation for the loss of Malta.

In 1798, a number of the Knights, dispossessed by Bonaparte's continuing conquests, took refuge in Russia with Tsar Paul I who had shown himself friendly to the Order (and who had hoped thereby to gain a Russian presence in the Mediterranean). Tsar Paul became the "protector" of the Order, and then had himself proclaimed "Grand Master". By threat of force or promise of reward, he obtained de facto "recognition" from a number of countries. That was, however, totally without legal basis, since it was impossible for a married non-Roman Catholic to be head of a celibate Catholic religious order or for anyone other than a Professed Knight to be Grand Master of the Order of Saint John. After the death of "the mad Tsar," his son and successor, Alexander I, renounced the claim of his predecessor to the title of Grand Master and helped the Order to return to legitimate rule with the election in 1803 of a Grand Master, Frá Jean Baptist Tommasi, who died soon thereafter, in 1805.

As General Bonaparte advanced through Europe, he systematically tried to abolish the Order, as he did many other small sovereignties, and confiscated its resources. In 1803, the Convent moved to Messina and later to Catania in Sicily, and in 1826, to Ferrara in the Papal States.



M4S10:

It would appear that in 1802, Pope Pius VII, by his interference, virtually destroyed the Order's chances of recovering Malta, and in 1814, he was instrumental in preventing the Order from making good that loss in another place. Internal jealousies, inept leadership, the attempts of the Austrian Empire to get control of the office of Grand Master, and actions by France, Portugal, Spain, and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies were major factors that interfered with the reestablishment of some territory under control of the Order.

Years of petty self-interests made permanent the disasters of the period of the French Revolution. Finally, at the invitation of Pope Gregory XVI, in 1834, the Order established its Convent in Rome in what had been its embassy to the Holy See, on the Via Condotti, and in its villa on the Aventine, both of which had and still have extraterritoriality.

The Order was governed by Lieutenants of the Grand Magistracy from 1805 until 1879 since no Grand Master had been elected as required by the Papal Bull.



M4S11:

In 1879, the leadership of the Order was restored to legitimacy when Pope Leo XIII confirmed the election of a Grand Master and bestowed the honor of cardinal attaching to that position. In 1880, the Grand Master was also given the rank of Prince of the Austrian Empire, which was reconfirmed in 1889 and 1905.

Although with the fall of Malta, the Order lost its military power and much of its resources, it continued with its original charism, the care of the sick and the poor. As the old Professed members died and there were fewer vocations, there were proportionally fewer Knights in vows and increasingly more "Knights of Honor". The Order began to take on its present structure in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

In 1859, the first "National Association" was founded in Rhineland-Westphalia; in 1867, the second, in Silesia; in 1875, the third, in Great Britain, and more followed. Members of the Order were involved in assisting the sick and needy, including those wounded and displaced in a number of conflicts in Europe and in the colonies, including both World Wars.

Since the Second World War, the Order has expanded its membership, including in the New World, and greatly expanded its hospitaller work. Today, the Order is larger than ever in its history. It has operations on every continent (except Antarctica) and is one of the major aid and relief agencies in the world. It has diplomatic relationships with over 110 countries, has the status of Permanent Observer at the United Nations, and participates in a number of international organizations.

The Order has 13,500 members, 80,000 volunteers and 25,000 employees around the world. In some ways it has wider influence and serves more people than its founders could have imagined. It is still a sovereign, military, hospitaller, religious Order, by tradition nobiliary, all of which may seem anachronistic to some. But during its 900-year history, the Order has faced many challenges, and has changed and adjusted to meet them without ever changing its primary purpose: the spiritual development of its members through the defense of the Faith and help of one's neighbor.

The history of the Order is fascinating and for many, it is inspirational. You are in your year of preparation to join this Order with its long tradition and steadfast commitment to its members to help them grow spiritually.



M4S12:

We end this module with the Daily Prayer of the Order:

Lord Jesus, thou hast seen fit to enlist me for thy service among the Knights and Dames of Saint John of Jerusalem. I humbly entreat thee through the intercession of the Most Holy Virgin of Philermo, of Saint John the Baptist, Blessed Gerard and all the Saints and blessed of our Order, to keep me faithful to the traditions of our Order. Be it mine to practice and defend the Catholic, the Apostolic, the Roman faith against the enemies of religion; be it mine to practice charity towards my neighbors, especially the poor and the sick. Give me the strength I need to carry out this my resolve, forgetful of myself, learning ever from the Holy Gospel a spirit of deep and generous Christian devotion, striving ever to promote God's glory, the world's peace, and all that may benefit the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem. Amen.

