

The Knights of Malta

One of the anomalies of the modern world is the Roman Catholic military order of laity and "religious" known as the Knights of Malta. It specializes in modern medical relief in the manner of the Red Cross and operates a fleet of Italy-based ambulance planes; yet two of its three categories of membership are traditionally open only to the nobility. Moreover, the order is recognized as a sovereign state (with no territory, but with diplomatic representatives) by the Vatican and 13 countries.²

Last week five cardinals met in Rome, as a papal tribunal, to investigate the knights, and perhaps shear them of some of their anachronistic powers.

For Services Rendered. It may be a sad comeuppance for the proud and potent Hospitallers, whose origins go back to the Crusades. In the 12th century, they were well established in Jerusalem as an order of brothers caring for poor and sick pilgrims, and with a contingent of their own armed knights to protect them. For their services, the Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem, as they were then called, won historical privileges from the Holy See, e.g., independence of all spiritual and temporal authority save that of the Pope, exemption from tithes, and the right to their own chapels, clergy and cemeteries.

They grew fabulously wealthy. At one time they occupied half a dozen fortified strongholds around the Mediterranean, and drew revenues from more than 140 estates in Palestine and from some 19,000 manors in Europe.

After Jerusalem fell to Saladin, the Hospitallers looked for a new outlet for their energies. They found it as corsairs against the Moslem empire. As the Knights of Rhodes, an island they captured in 1309, they spent two centuries fighting Turkish pirates and raiding Turk-

* Spain, Argentina, Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Holland, Ireland, Haiti, El Salvador, San Marino and Panama.

ish towns. Driven out of Rhodes at last by Suleiman II, they were granted the sovereignty of Malta by the Emperor Charles V, in exchange for a token payment of a falcon a year. Promptly they resumed their sea-raiding as the Knights of Malta. And lords of Malta they remained until 1798, when their own grand master treacherously handed the island to Napoleon. The English, who soon captured it from the French, never allowed the knights to come back.

Late into Line? Today the Knights of Malta (membership 4,256) are as long on good works as they once were on swash-buckling adventure. The order consists of



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He left a modern anomaly.

three categories: Professed Knights (nobles who take religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience), Knights of Honor and Devotion (nobles who take no vows), and Knights of Grace (commoners who take no vows). The order numbers some 250 members in the U.S.

The appointment of an investigating tribunal is the result of Vatican dissatisfaction with the laxity of the knights' control of their finances in recent years, and the knights' insistence on their autonomy in religious affairs. When the last grand master, Prince Ludovico Chigi Albani Della Rovere, died last fall at 85, after a reign of 20 years (*TIME*, Nov. 26), it seemed to Rome like a good time to bring the knights' rights and privileges up to date and into line. The cardinals on the tribunal are well acquainted with their subject; all of them are also members of the Knights of Malta.

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