

# The Order of Malta in Queensland

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The Order of Malta or to give it its correct title, The Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta, was established over 900 years ago but its official history in Australia spans less than 50 years. The full title gives some indication of the history of the Order as does its motto ‘Tuitio fideo et obsequium pauperum’ meaning ‘Defence of the faith and care of the poor and the sick’.

The Order had its naissance when Amalfi merchants established, in the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, a hostel in Jerusalem in the Christian Quarter near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Staffed by monks from a nearby Benedictine abbey it was dedicated to St John the Baptist, now a patron of the Order. It was originally built for pilgrims of any race or religion. The hostel became a much expanded hospice and hospital after the first Crusade captured Jerusalem in 1099, and subsequently there were significantly increased numbers of pilgrims to the Holy Land. The order became an independent organization under Fra Gerard with the Papal bull of 15 February 1113 confirming the confraternity of the

Hospital of St John directly under the Holy See with the right to freely elect its superiors.

It was Blessed Gerard who instituted the charism of profound spirituality of service to the poor and the sick. His instruction was to serve them as if they were Christ the Lord and thus the ancient reference to the sick as 'Our Lords the sick'. It is said that the Hospital of St John could house up to 2000 patients by 1170 and that there were 10 wards. Apparently, all were housed in comfort with sheepskin covers and dressing gowns. Salaried staff comprised four doctors, a physician for the weakest patients and three or four surgeons, plus blood-letters. Also there was a facility for women dedicated to St Mary of Magdala with women attendants and with wards for 'lying in' and for care of foundlings.

Jerusalem became a renowned medical centre over this time with physicians coming from Europe and the Middle East, including Christians, Jews and Muslims. Significantly the Order has today a maternity hospital in Bethlehem with an attached orphanage. This modern hospital is of the highest standards and its neonatal unit is second to none. Its staff are predominantly Christian but its patients are predominantly of the Moslem faith as Bethlehem is situated in Palestinian Territory in Israel.

Subsequent to the Papal Bull of 1113, the military role for the Order of St John achieved an equal footing with its hospitaller role and saw the establishment of an Order of Knighthood. By virtue of the Papal Bull the organization became a lay religious order and all the knights took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Because of the political situation in the Holy land the military protection

of the pilgrims became as important as caring for their health.

The knights had first aid stations on the battlefields, and from these the wounded were brought back to the hospital. The hospitaller role proved important also in military operations in future ages as would be seen centuries later in the siege of Malta.

After the fall of the last Christian settlement in the Holy Land in 1291 the Order re-established on Cyprus and underwent a period of re-organization and transition to a naval force. After more unrest in 1306 the Hospitallers invaded Rhodes and this became the centre of their naval endeavours until 1522 when the Ottomans launched a successful invasion of Rhodes driving the Hospitallers out. The next eight years saw significant uncertainty until the Order was given Malta by Charles V. It governed there until 1798 when it was expelled by Napoleon.

Both on Rhodes and Malta, the knights' medical and hospital care of the poor and the sick continued alongside their military and naval (some would say pirate) endeavours.

In Rhodes the hospital had separate wards for infectious disease and maternity care. In Malta the Order ran a health service for the local Maltese and established a renowned school of anatomy and surgery. The ward in the hospital in Malta had the longest room in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe and can still be visited today.

In the Great Siege of Malta of 1565 which lasted four months, the Hospitallers knowledge of health and hygiene were important in the final outcome. The care of the

injured and control of disease assisted those on Malta to resist the attack of the Ottomans who were in turn repelled in part because the Hospitallers poisoned, with dead animals and herbs, the wells of water that the Ottomans could access.

Napoleon seized Malta in 1798 and after dispersion of the knights in Europe with the establishment of various offshoots, many non-official, the Order settled definitively in Rome in 1834 and its hospitaller role has taken precedence over its military.

Today the Order provides humanitarian and medical work through Malteser International, the Global Fund for Forgotten People, the Holy Family Hospital in Bethlehem as well as many, many other activities in individual countries.

The Order has a very definite organizational structure and is currently undergoing a significant review. It is a lay religious order with three classes of membership. The first Class are professed (currently only knights) who take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, the second class take a promise of obedience and are Knights and Dames of Justice and the third class comprise committed Catholic lay people as Knights and Dames.

Very interestingly for we who live in egalitarian Australia there has been a long history of a requirement of noble lineage and membership being restricted to men. Until World War 1, most members were of the noble class. However, the category of Knight of Magistral Grace was established for those without sufficient proof of nobility (A knight by the grace of the Grand Master).

In 1956, faced with a decreasing number of knights in the First Class (Professed), the Order established the Second Class (Obedience). From 1956 to 1998, members of the Second Class were designated ‘of Obedience’ without further distinction, but nobiliary proofs were usually required and women were not admitted. Since 1998, members of the second class are designated ‘in Obedience’ and persons without nobiliary proofs and women are admitted.

Women were admitted as Dames initially if they were of noble lineage. The first ‘Role’ to list such Dames was in 1938 and the first regulation for admission of Dames of Magistral Grace in the Order in the third Class (no noble lineage required) was approved on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1976.

In 1971 Australia was the only continent in which the Order had no official presence and a decision was made to expand the Order to Australia. This was initiated in discussion with Ernest Kirby, a Sydney solicitor and in February 1972, Ernest Kirby was received into the Order as a member of the Hungarian Association. It required fifteen members from a country to form a National Association so at that time there could be no Australian Association.

Ernest Kirby and his wife Anne had come to Australia from Austria as refugees in 1939 when Hitler invaded Austria. Ernest had done law and worked as a lawyer in Austria. On coming to Australia, like many other similar refugees fleeing Nazi Germany, he wished to support the fight against Hitler. He joined the Australian Military Force and was put in one of the so called ‘refo’ battalions who were not allowed to be armed because they were

‘aliens’ but were instructed to undertake transport of goods which happened to include ammunition. Although her husband was in the Australian army, Anne had to report twice weekly to the police as an official ‘alien’. While in the Army, Ernest studied law in Australia and graduated in 1945 and after discharge, commenced practice as E J Kirby and Co. in Sydney. Because of his Austrian background he had interaction also with members of the Order in Hungary and thus it was as a member of the Hungarian Association that he was invested into the Order.

Ernest had a very pronounced European accent and he felt if the order was to flourish in Australia it required another to take the role of President, one who was seen as a distinguished Australian. He approached Justice Dennis Mahoney. I had the delight of speaking with Justice Mahoney, now aged ninety-three, when preparing this talk. One of his comments was regarding the tradition of the requirement of noble lineage. This of course was not possible in the ‘New world’ and the members and potential members in the New World sometimes had difficulty persuading the Old World that nobility of achievement was more important than bloodlines. Perhaps eventually practicality over rode all else. After the Wars the noble families of Europe no longer held the financial resources they had previously whereas the New World had the money but no lineage.

When Ernest Kirby began the process of registering the Association in Australia, this was at first opposed by several other groups, including the Order of St John (the St John’s ambulance organization). As I mentioned

earlier, after the Order left Malta they were dispersed to various European countries and other groups subsequently also sought their origins through the Order. I do not have the time in this talk to discuss this interesting topic.

In April of 1973, Ambrose Galvin of Melbourne was received into the Order as a member of the Irish Association. As the Code of the Order required fifteen members to form a national Association, this occurred with the assent of the Holy See on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1974. Of the fifteen, seven were from Sydney, six from Melbourne and two from Adelaide and the two women who were invested as Dames were Anne Kirby, Ernest Kirby's wife and Mary Moore, Ambrose Galvin's sister. This was two years before the regulation admitting women without nobility (Dames of Magistral Grace) and Anne and Mary were admitted as Dames of Grace and Devotion.

In undertaking research for this talk, I was provided with some very interesting letters from the Archdiocesan Archives here in Brisbane. There was at least one member of the Order present in Australia in 1959 some 15 years before the official record. John L Preece, in Victoria, was a Knight of Magistral Grace. It would seem from the archived letter of John Preece to Archbishop Duhig that there may have been more than one member of the Order in Australia at this time.

The Australian Dictionary of Biography writing about John Preece, bookseller, historian and magazine/journal owner and seemingly somewhat avant garde states:

In 1955 John, who suffered from Parkinson's disease, visited Italy, possibly seeking a cure. A Catholic, he was appointed a knight of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. He retired from the firm in 1957 and with his young friend Mario Guerrino Callegari moved permanently to Italy in 1959. ....They lived in Rome, then Padua where Preece died on 20 May 1969 leaving Mario all his possessions.

Two of the foundation members of the official Australian Order, Justice Dennis Mahoney, its first President, and Professor Daniel O'Connell, approached Justice James Douglas in Brisbane to establish the order in Queensland. James' son was a barrister in Sydney known to Daniel O'Connell. Justice James Douglas was the President of the St Vincent de Paul Society and Chair of Mt Olivet Hospital now St Vincent's Hospital. He was born in Townsville. He was a second generation Australian, and like Ernest Kirby of Sydney he also enlisted in the army in WWII. He served in Tobruk and from August 1944, he assisted with the repatriation of Australian prisoners of war, this work taking him to Russia and Poland. He had commenced law prior to the war and completed his law studies after leaving the AIF. He was admitted to the Bar in 1946. The Douglas family can trace their ancestry back to one of Robert the Bruce's companions. Sir James Douglas was a Scottish Knight and one of the chief commanders during the Scottish War of Independence to make Robert the Bruce King of Scotland.

James Douglas and Ernest Kirby developed a strong friendship over the time of their involvement in the Order. It is interesting to think of these two men of vastly different backgrounds, one second generation Australian



with an ancestry back to the Lords of Scotland and the other Austrian refugee fleeing Nazi Germany sharing a common goal of caring for the needy through their catholic faith.

When Justice Douglas was first approached regarding the order, he was somewhat reticent as he thought it was more interested in pomp and ‘dressing up’. However, he was persuaded that the commitment to care for the sick and the poor was a prime concern. As Chairman of the Advisory Board of Mt Olivet (now St Vincent’s Hospital) from 1967 to 1983 and Queensland President for 10 years of the St Vincent de Paul Society, Justice Douglas clearly demonstrated a commitment for those in need. He was admitted to the Order as a Knight of Honour and Devotion on 7<sup>th</sup> February 1975.

The next three members of the Order in Queensland were admitted on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1977 and they were Isidore (Jim) Josephson, Justice Kevin Ryan and Dr Barry Smithurst. Their first meetings were held in the parish at Hendra and Fr Peter Gillam, the Parish priest of Hendra, became the first Magistral Chaplain to the Order in Queensland. Fr Gillam says they chose the Hendra church because it was easy access as they were all getting older. Jim Josephson’s brother, Pat, who in 1982 also became a member of the Order, was one of Fr Gillam’s parishioners. A further four members were admitted in 1978 - Leo Williams, Sir John Rowell, Kevin King, and Dr Lawrie Parker - and a further three in 1979. These were Dr Anthony McSweeney, Sir Edward Stewart, and Prof Tess Cramond (nee Brophy).

So, by the time of the first Mass for the Order in Queensland in April 1979, there were eleven Queensland members. The Mass was celebrated by Bishop John Gerry and Fr Peter Gillam at Our Lady Help of Christians Church in Hendra. With members from interstate, including the first Chancellor, Ernest Kirby, and the first President, Justice Dennis Mahoney, the total number of members of the Order present at the Mass came to twenty. The Catholic Leader in its report of the Mass stated ‘.. the aims of (*the Order*) are the glorification of God through the sanctification of its members, service to the Faith and to the Holy See and welfare work.’

In Queensland the work the Order was committed to initially was to Mt Olivet Hospital and its program of palliative care. Justice Douglas was the Chair of the Board of Mt Olivet and Dr Tess Brophy, later to become Professor Tess Cramond, was a young anaesthetist working at Mt Olivet as well as Royal Brisbane Hospital. Tess was the first woman member of the Order in Queensland having joined on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1979. On Christmas Day 1980, Tess was visiting her patients at Royal Brisbane Hospital and was told one of the patients, a Miss Howard, had died. On her way home, Tess called to visit the other three Howard sisters to express her condolences. A month later she was asked by the Howard family to accept a small donation. To her amazement she was handed a cheque for 15,000 pounds.

Tess offered the money to Royal Brisbane Hospital to be used for palliative care as Miss Howard had been her patient in Royal Brisbane. As soon as her offer was declined she quickly took it to Mt Olivet where it was

more than matched by some substantial personal donations from members of the Order, especially Tess herself. The total was enough to start the Mt Olivet Hospice Home Care Service, including the purchase of two cars with the 'Mt Olivet Knights of Malta Hospice Home Care Service' badges on their doors. Care was then able to be delivered to the dying in their homes, thus commencing a most remarkable service.

The Order provided substantial support for Mt Olivet including through the support of members of the Order for the Mt Olivet Charity Race Day which occurred annually from 1989 for 13 years, raising nearly a million dollars. Kevin King, who became a member of the Order in 1978, and Daniel McEnery, who became a member in 1980, were two of the early members who were instrumental in this process. Perhaps Fr Peter Gillam also had a hand in it all.

Tess Cramond (nee Brophy) was the National Hospitaller for the Order for 18 years from 1991 to 2009 and initiated and co-ordinated many other activities for the Order including the Papua New Guinea Eye Project and Mt Sion Centre for the Blind. This was founded in 1995 with the Order's assistance in purchasing an operating microscope and assisting the first team of volunteer ophthalmologists, anaesthetists and nursing staff. The team has now expanded, has locally trained surgeons and has operated at fifteen villages and performed some seven thousand cataract operations and innumerable refractions. The program is so successful that it is now partly funded by AusAID and this year the Australian Association of the

Order of Malta is helping fund the training of a PNG national optometrist.

Other endeavours of the Order in Queensland have included the Coats for the Homeless Project (which is also a nationwide project), financial support for the Seminary as well as the Australian Military Vicariate, and also the Order of Malta Prize in the Australian Catholic University's School of Nursing. The Prize is awarded to the Bachelor of Nursing student who obtains the highest mark in a written assignment in a Nursing unit focusing on the nursing care of patients receiving palliative care. The recipient also must demonstrate a high level of competence, responsibility and concern in their caring for palliative care patients.

During the more recent devastating Queensland floods the Order provided financial assistance and practical help to some who had suffered, in particular through activity in the Lockyer Valley, in the Western suburbs at the Holy Family Parish Indooroopilly, and in Theodore in the Rockhampton diocese. Also, in the past the Queensland branch has supported a number of catechesis and Christian Education programs.

A significant current concern is the movement to legalize euthanasia in individual Australian states and how best to ensure the most vulnerable do not have their rights terminated. The Orders concern for both the spiritual development of its members and defence of the faith and practical care for the vulnerable is central to this issue.

The first nationwide project of the Australian Association was to sponsor a visit in 1981 by a worldwide expert on

leprosy, a condition which had played a significant role in the Order's history through the Middle Ages, another matter that time does not permit me to address. In 1981 the number of people inflicted with leprosy exceeded 12 million and the Order maintained centres for treatment in Africa, South America and Polynesia.

In 2018, 37 years on, the order continues its work in leprosy treatment and rehabilitation. Leprosy is today present in 140 countries, especially in Africa, South-east Asia and South America and three million people have been mutilated by the disease. Today the Order also works to combat major epidemics of tuberculosis, malaria and HIV/AIDS in the developing world.

The Australian Association is currently leading a project to provide four clinics in Timor-Leste with medical and surgical supplies. These clinics run by local congregations, provide primary medical care for significant numbers of Timorese in underprivileged urban and isolated rural areas.

A talk on the Order of Malta would not be complete without mentioning Lourdes.

On the first weekend in May each year, members of the Order gather from around the world with their 'malades', their sick. Members are encouraged to attend this event at least once in their life and for many, particularly in Europe, it becomes an annual pilgrimage.

It's a little far for Australian ill to travel so generally the Australian Association has assisted the Irish with their group of 'malades'. It is a fascinating weekend. Lourdes is Catholic Central! Everyone who is there is there

because of their faith. On one side of the river is the greatest array of hotels and tacky souvenir shops you could ever see and crowds of members of the Order in archaic outfits wandering around or sitting in *tabacs* drinking coffee and smoking! On the other side of the river are the hospices or hospitals where the ill are cared for in the most amazing manner and where is situated the grotto and the baths and the huge underground basilica. Each evening there is a candlelit procession of malades being pushed along by members of the Order in their archaic costumes while reciting the rosary. It is a most extraordinary experience and it is no wonder many are drawn back to attend year on year. I have had the privilege of attending the Mass of the Irish Order on two occasions. After the malades were brought up for a blessing then those caring for them were also invited up for a blessing of hands. It is a most beautiful prayer: *May the Lord bless you and your hands in protecting life, in caring for the sick and in restoring health.* In Australia, the individual states organize their own Lourdes Mass for the blessing of the sick and their carers.

I have only just touched on the long and interesting history of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta. The Order is currently undergoing a most significant discussion about what changes are needed to the constitution, to the organizational structure, to the focus, to the membership in general and to the professed members to endeavour to ensure it can remain relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Like the Church itself there are tensions, there are varying views held by traditionalists and non-traditionalists, conservatives and liberals. Time will tell if and how the

Order can maintain its relevance, its charism, its place in the Church and its practical care of ‘Our Lords the sick’.

I will finish with the words of Archbishop Francis Rush in his homily at the Investiture Ceremony for the Order at St Stephens Cathedral on June 28<sup>th</sup> 1980: *The Knights of Malta will remain relevant, as long as they retain their nine centuries long interest in the care of the sick, the poor and the lonely.*

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