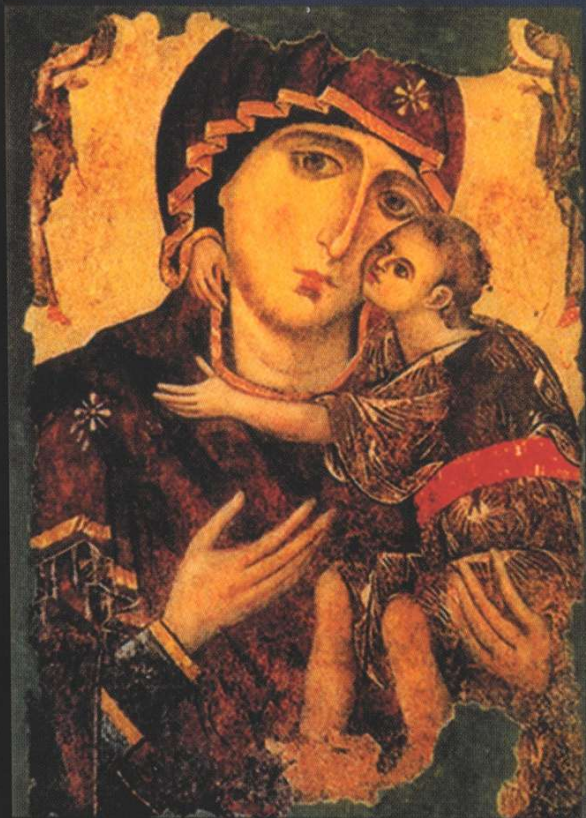


Our Lady of Damascus
The Story of an Icon



PAPAS VITO BORGIA

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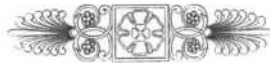
Papas VITO BORGIA

OUR LADY OF DAMASCUS

The Story of an Icon

Every icon speaks for itself, but its story adds depth, colour, and resonance to the message. The Icon of our Lady of Damascus: “A thing of great beauty and historical importance, in addition to being an expression of faith,” originally venerated in Syria and in Rhodes, is now a great treasure of the Greeks and Maltese in Valletta.

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I

THE STORY OF AN ICON

Antiquity, artistic merit, history and legend, popular devotion together with theological and spiritual significance, all combine to arouse the interest of the worshipper, the art-critic, and the historian in the **ICON OF OUR LADY OF DAMASCUS**.

Its history stretches from the 11th century to the present, from Damascus, through Rhodes, to the island of Malta. It is linked to the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes, and of Malta, commonly known as the Knights of Malta. It was, in fact, this Order that brought the Icon to Malta, when, overpowered by the Turks, was forced to leave the Island of Rhodes in 1523.

The Order of the Knights of Malta is a religious brotherhood founded in 1070, with the aim of “protecting the Faith and caring for the poor.” They saw, in the poor, Jesus of Nazareth Himself, who said: “Whatever you do for one of the least of these brethren of mine, you do it for me” (*Mt.25:40*). Accordingly, they erected a hospital in Jerusalem, where the poor found a roof and the sick a healing hand.

Moreover, to defend Christianity against Islam, they became also a military order, with a small army and fleet, wearing uncomfortable iron-coats and living in uncomfortable stone fortresses. They reached out for the **ABSOLUTE** not in the solitude of a hermitage nor in cathedras of theological speculation, but in the field of human suffering and conflict.

The Head of the Order lived in the Grand-Master’s Palace, whilst other members occupied the “AubergesA”, each named according to the respective “Langue” or country of origin:

Auvergne, France, Aragon, Castille, England, Germany, Italy, and Provence.

Following the surrender of Jerusalem and St. John of Acre to Saladin, the Knights settled in 1213 in Cyprus, later in 1303 in Rhodes, and finally in 1530 in Malta.

In this island, the Knights flourished and exercised their philanthropic activity till 1789, when Napoleon, on his way to Egypt, occupied the island in the name of LIBERTÉ, FRATERNITÉ, EGALITÉ: fine words, indeed, necessary as the air we breathe, but, when the mask slips down on the floor, they reveal dreams of military glory and hunger for imperial conquest.

How did our Icon come to be known as “MADONNA OF DAMASCUS”?

Some Knights, when they first saw it in Rhodes, identified it as the same one that they had venerated in Damascus: so the name actually derives from its place of origin.

From Damascus, gushed forth the majestic river of the mission of St. Paul, who, captivated by Christ, reckoned everything else as trash (*Phil.3:8*). Near to or in Damascus, had their birth three glories of the Syrian Church: Romanus the Melodist (490-560), the greatest of the liturgical Byzantine poets, St. Ephrem (306-375), “Doctor Marianus”, and St. John Damascene (675-749), the vigorous defensor of the veneration of the icons against the harsh opposition of the iconoclasts. The iconoclasts denounced such veneration as idolatry. “How can an earthly art,” they used to say, “represent a spiritual reality?”

Of course, the iconographer works with the matter and light of this world, but in a way that these natural elements somehow transcend themselves, stirring deep longings for communion with

the Invisible. Are the *Nine Symphonies* of Beethoven only a running up and down of the bow on the four strings of the violin? Besides, Christ - “the image of the invisible God” (*Col. 1:15*) - concealed His glory, becoming one of us, perfect man and perfect God, in the unity of one Person, identical and coeternal with the Divine Essence. He was seen, touched, spoken to: “We ate and drank with Him” (*Acts 10:41*): a mystery that flows forth from the inexhaustible fount of Infinite Love.

In fact, “God is LOVE” (*1 Jn 4:8*) and it belongs to the nature of God to love, as it belongs to the sun to give light and heat and to the waters of the source-sweeping down in torrents - to gladden the valley, making the grass grow for the cattle and the plants grow for man’s table and health. To the swan God gave the lake, to the horse the steppe, to the eagle the mountain; but on man He lavished the Love of Christ, inexpressible and inexhaustible. If this Love glows in our heart, it may bring “Christmas fire” to many cold and withered hearts.

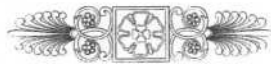
Who painted the Icon of Our Lady of Damascus?

Documents and tradition are silent about the name of the artist, but his personality runs in his work. We can revere him unhesitatingly as a man of prayer, steeped in the liturgical life of the Church, hidden in the shelter of God’s presence and love. All these interior riches were breathed into the Icon, which shines with the unearthly beauty of the transcendence and evokes a response of humble contemplation.

When was the Icon painted?

The anonymity of the iconographer makes difficult an accurate dating, but the opinion of the art-historian suggests it to be of considerable antiquity: an antiquity that goes back to the

time when the refinement of Byzantine art, permeated by the Revelation of the Good News and the Glory of the Resurrection, lifts man from the transitory to the eternal world.



II DAMASCUS AND THE LEGEND OF THE ICON

East of the Anti-Lebanon, a mountain range south-west of Syria, lies the ancient city of Damascus. Thanks to the wise irrigation system of the river Barada and the consequent thriving trade with Mesopotamia, Arabia, Egypt, and the Mediterranean it became an enchanting oasis of orchards and fountains, a breeding-ground of opulence.

Doubtless, opulence has its advantages and can make friends in Heaven, but if it dwells deep in the heart and bows to the lifeless and deceitful idols of money, lust, and power, it heaps troubles upon troubles. “Those who choose other gods increase their sorrows” (*Ps.15.4*) and become worthless themselves, in love with their own ruin.

While Damascus was basking in the sunshine of its “Dolce Vita”, the ruthless Tamerlane (1336 - 1405) came thundering down with his Mongol hordes from the planes of Turkestan to the fertile lands of Syria. Unimaginable acts of violence, horror, and profanation were perpetrated against the unhappy city: houses all ablaze, rending cries, babies overturned from their cradles or torn from their mothers’ breasts: scenes that echo the biblical text of Jeremiah (*49:24-25*):

*Damascus is undone, she is put to flight,
trembling hath seized on her
as a woman in labour.
How they have forsaken the city of renown,
the city of joy!*

Men, women, and children, like nestless swallows, fled and trudged along the way of the refugee: a lonely way, along which

one could see nothing but weeping eyes and hear pale lips murmur the ancient prayer, so dear to Dostoievski: “In you is all my hope; Mother of God, keep me safe under your mantle.”

We cannot trace their wanderings, but legend speaks of the fate that befell our Icon. It tells us that the sacred image came afloat across the sea, preceded by a light of unusual brilliance. Some sailors, surprised at the sight of the phenomenon, dropped their nets and, burning with curiosity, followed it, until it came to rest on the shore of the island of Rhodes.

We are told that, at the hearing of this supernatural event, the Grand Master Giovanni Battista degli Orsini (1415-1476) rushed to the spot and, gazing at the Icon, cried with astonishment: “But this is Our Lady of Damascus!

In festive procession, the Icon was brought to the conventual church, but, the following day, it disappeared and was found in the Greek Church of the Madonna Eleimonitria, opposite the Langue of England.

These pious legends are not unique: they remind one of the transition of the Madonna of Good Counsel from Scutari in Albania to Gennazzano, seventy -five kilometres south of Rome, in 1462, and of the Madonna of Montenero from the island of Euboea (Greece) to Livorno (Central Italy), in 1345. Again one recalls the story of how the angels bore the image of the Mother of God of Tikhvin from Constantinople to Novgorod in Russia, in 1395.

The Middle Ages abounded with such miracle-stories, alien to the sceptical mentality of modern man, but of deep significance to the believers, who feel the presence of God as naturally as the warmth of the sun or the fragrance of flowers. Some scholars, like Adolph Harnack and the gifted John Henry Newman see them not

simply like embroidery on reality, but as stories that contain some grain of truth. Such legends, if nothing else, show that our Icon enjoyed vast popularity, even beyond its country of origin.



A. Mandala (1923 - 2004)



III THE ICON IN RHODES

The new home of our Icon became then the island of Rhodes, a land where nature has lavished beauty upon beauty: “Beautiful as the Sun,” in the words of Lucian of Samosata (Syria), the second century Greek writer.

Sheltered in its own church in the “Langue of Aragon” within the city walls, the Icon received hymns of praise from Knights and Rhodians, in Latin and in Greek, in the two traditions that, like mind and heart, aim at the same scope: the perfection and the salvation of man. As the Greek Metropolitan put it: “It is the same Faith that unites us in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Indeed, we must learn to pray and work together, if we want to make a better world of lasting peace and happiness, just as the captain, officers or simple seamen, everyone must do his part to bail out the water of the sinking boat. We must learn to pray and work together and not argue about the colour of the uniform of the firebrigade, while the house is on fire.

Rhodes enjoyed peace and prosperity, but its geographical position and the presence of the Knights of St. John made a painful thorn in the flesh of Suleiman. To appease his hunger for hegemony and glory, his Ottoman army moved to conquer the island and subjugate the Order.

After months of fighting, the Knights capitulated, losing all hope of succour: France was entangled in war with Austria, Venice interested in trade with the Turks, and Spain, the “Cattolicissima”, wavered between Yes and No, nailed to the pedestal of indecision, while the wolf devours the lamb.

They capitulated, but did not let the crown of dignity fall from

their heads. Suleiman, admiring the steadfastness of their faith and their military virtues of loyalty, courage, and endurance, allowed them to leave the island and carry away their archives, relics, sacred vestments, and among other treasures, the precious **ICON OF OUR LADY OF DAMASCUS** with the other two historical icons, the Virgin of Philereimos and the Theotokos Eleimonitria. The sultan, surely, deserved the title, **THE MAGNIFICENT**, which he shares with the Florentine Lorenzo de' Medici, one of the wealthiest and most powerful princes of the Renaissance.

The Knights weighed anchor and took to the open sea on first January 1523, at sunset, when darkness was falling on the human turmoil of the day and on the peaceful scene of the sheep and the cattle returning to the fold, while in the monasteries the monks were chanting the vespertine hymn *Fos hilarôn...* "Oh joyful light of the holy glory of the Immortal Father..." illuminating the darkness with the flame of their devotion.

Although unemotional men of war, they were overcome with grief for leaving the island they had loved and defended for over 200 years, saddened by the memories of their brethren lying in the silence of the cemeteries, freed from time, fixed in eternity.

Still deeper, no doubt, was the grief of the hundreds of Rhodians - *To anthos tes Rodou*, (The Flower of Rhodes) - who, to join the Knights, left their home, family, and friends: "There is no sorrow above the loss of a native land." (*Euripides*)

Ignoring what the future had in store, the Knights wandered (the Icon always with them), from harbour to harbour, from place to place, Candia (Crete), Messina, Civitavecchia, Viterbo, Nice... till, at last, the Emperor Charles V, the most powerful monarch of the West, offered them the island of Malta, a possession, then, of

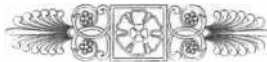
the “Crown of Sicily,” administered by a Spanish viceroy.

With all the hardships and misfortunes, (which sea is without its storms?), the Knights persevered in their mission, for the man of faith is like the mysterious bird, that, against the wind, builds his nest on the waves and sings amidst the roaring sea, or like the confident sparrow, that, thanks to its wings, chirps safely on the bending of the twig.

When the sun goes down, the stars come up: Providence does not deprive us of its light.



Philippe Villiers de l'Isle Adam (1522 - 1534)



IV THE ICON IN MALTA

On October 26, 1530, the Knights anchored their galleys in the Grand Harbour of Malta.

With the visions of Rhodes, “Beautiful as the Sun,” shining in their memory, their heart sank at the sight of a barren landscape, meagre of vegetation, poor of water.

Malta, admittedly, lacks the charm of the Aegean Island, but, as Dr. Johnson observed: “The Creator doth not appear partial in distribution, but balances, in most countries, their particular inconveniences by particular favours.”¹ Nature, in fact, has favoured Malta with a magnificent harbour, worthy to rank with any other in the world. Besides, the island is blessed with picturesque bays, whose crystalline waters invite irresistibly to a refreshing and invigorating swim.

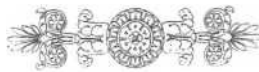
The Knights settled in Borgo di Castello, at the east bank of the Grand Harbour, that is, to the left of whoever enters it from the open sea. Borgo di Castello is called today VITTORIOSA, for having been the site of unsurpassed heroism during the Great Siege (1565).

In a chapel of St. Catherine’s Church, the Grand Master Philippe de l’Isle Adam (1522-1534) installed the much-travelled Icon of Our Lady of Damascus.

Having survived the invasion of the Mongols in Syria and two sieges of the Ottoman Turks in Rhodes, untouched by the maelstrom of turbulent seas and war-plagued lands, the Icon, finally, found its home in Malta, amidst a people, who put Christian values at the centre of their existence.

How little did the iconographer, in his workshop, realize that the product of his talent, inspiration, and prayer would reach such a remote place, where its content - more transcendental than physical - makes its way to our mind and to our heart.

It seems that nothing is lost. Even a word, which, like a pebble, drops in the sea of our soul, causes ripples which die at the shores of eternity. “Our works follow us” (*Rev.14:13*). *Defunctus adhuc loquitur* (“Though dead, he still speaks”).



V
LA VALETTE, THE GREAT SIEGE,
OUR LADY OF DAMASCUS

Many Grand Masters are the pride of the Order of St. John, but who stands out among them is Jean Parisot de La Valette (1557-1568).

Born in Provence in the Castle of Labro, near Parisot, seduced by the beauty of a life free from human vanities and ambitions, at the age of 20, he left - never to see them again- relatives, castle, and estate to acquire that priceless pearl mentioned in the Gospel (*Mt. 13:46*), a decision incomprehensible to human reason, foolishness for the “Wise and prudent” (*Lk 10:21*) of this world.

Pierre de Bourdeille, Seigneur de Brantome (1540- 1614), who visited Malta soon after the siege, tells us that “He was very handsome, calm, unemotional, speaking fluently many languages: Italian, Spanish, Greek, Arabic, and Turkish.”²

To the consolidation of the Order and the defence of the island from the Turkish threat, he lavished time, thoughts, and energies.

His ambitions were transcendental, that is, set on the destiny of the soul, on the world beyond, on time and eternity. Nevertheless, according to the highest values of time, he was more often seen wearing a soldier’s armour than a monk’s habit: devout amidst the incense and the psalmody of the sanctuary, brave in the dust and din of war, attentive to heavenly as much as to earthly calls.

He was called in Greek DEMOPROVOLOS and ETHEROPOLEMOS (Shield of the People and Destroyer of the Foe).³

Courage and wisdom of decision - gifts planted in the soil of a religious piety - characterized his leadership. His name is linked with the name of the island's capital, Valletta, which he founded, and the Great Siege, in which he was the hero, "The bravest of the brave" (*Trim mbi trima*), as the Albanians say.

The siege broke out on May 18, 1565. It was not a foray of pirates, who, in those days, molested the Mediterranean routes and pillaged the coasts of Spain, France, and Italy, but in it was involved the might of the Ottoman army that overran Syria, Persia, Egypt, captured Constantinople, notwithstanding the supposedly impregnable walls, and routed the Balkans in spite of the heroism of the Serbs and the Albanians.

At the impending approach of this war-hungry enemy, the Knights summoned all their material and moral resources.

In the church of St Lawrence, they renewed their monastic vows, exchanged the kiss of peace and forgiveness. Then, they took the oath to defend the Christian faith at any cost: glaring example and reproach to to-day's Christians, in whom have germinated the seeds of an insipid pacificism and of an unreciprocated tolerance, while the Gospel's PARRESIA (self-reliance, boldness, confidence) withers in a shameful timidity: yes, "simple as doves and cautious as serpents," but not credulous fools in the midst of a pack of wolves! "Go, I am sending you like lambs among wolves" (*Lk 10:3*).

Notwithstanding the fall of Fort of St. Elmo, the Ottoman attack was blunted by the sturdy resistance of the Knights, motivated by the same ideals that inspired John Sobieski and Blessed Marco d'Avviano in the defence of Vienna.

After 3 months and 20 days of harsh fighting, the invaders "*efugan kopiasmenoi kai skôtemenoi*" (left foiled and

confounded), according to a Greek inscription on a picture of Georges Klontzas (1546-1668), representing THE EXPEDITION OF SULEIMAN TO MALTA.

Apprehension tormented the two commanders, Piali and Mustapha: “How will we face the Sultan, whose anger means death?” Certainly, they did not crave the eternal garden-delights of the Prophet! A gout-attack had prevented Suleiman to lead himself the expedition: he, the founder of an empire, victim of ten molecules of uric acid!

La Valette, inspired by an unshakable faith, buoyed up with unbounded hope, and under the vow to defend the treasure of the Christian heritage, had fought with courage and tenacity, though at the time an old man, but he attributed his triumph to the aid of Heaven; convinced of the futility of human effort without God. His mind echoed the psalmist-words: “If the Lord does not watch over the city, in vain does the watchman keep vigil” (*Ps. 126:1*).

While the Ottomans, frustrated, were sailing away, the Grand Master, Knights, Greeks, and Maltese, amid cries of gladness and thanksgiving, thronged to the chapel of Our Lady of Damascus.

Not bent by age, with legitimate pride, but not strutting along like a French general or a captain of the Highlanders, Jean Parisot de La Valette approached the altar of the Madonna and on its steps laid down his sword and his hat, as a votive offering.

*I will lead the rejoicing crowd
into the house of God,
amid cries of gladness and thanksgiving,
the throng wild with joy.* (*Ps. 41:5*)

A plaque, put up on the wall by Grand Master Emmanuel de Rohan (1775-1797), saves from oblivion this glorious event.

The resistance of Malta to the Ottoman siege was a trial of the human spirit, a triumph of faith and fortitude.

Although it was a feat far from the magnitude and the consequence of the Naval Battle of Lepanto (7 Oct, 1571), it delayed the march to the heart of Europe and marked the decline of the Ottoman Empire.

The Reformation broke the unity of Europe, as a living entity bound in one great Catholic commonwealth, with the same language and the same creed, which ruled the thoughts and coloured the conduct of men. The Islamic invasion of Europe would have uprooted trees and bushes, Catholics and Protestants, Guelphs and Ghibellines, all traces of Christian civilization: no more pilgrimages to Rome, to Jerusalem or to Santiago of Compostela, centres of evangelical light, of spiritual healing, and fraternization of a variety of peoples: probably, our steps would have been diverted to the Black Stone of Mecca. Europe would have followed the fate of North Africa, once a flourishing land of Christianity, conquered not with the golden sword of the WORD, but with the steely Scimitar of intolerance. When we let go our reins to others, they will not govern us as we would wish, but they will drag us by the ears like rabbits, we do not know where!

The news of this glorious day travelled in all directions. When it reached Rome, the Pope ordered a thanksgiving procession from St. Mary Major to St. John Lateran, and to fire salvos from the Fort of St. Angelo, just as in the day of his coronation. The Romans, even those who ignored who La Valette was and where Malta was, made merry.

Queen Elizabeth of England joined the Catholic Church in ordering thanksgiving - services in the churches of her realm, and Queen Mary of Hungary and Bohemia, wrote a letter of

congratulations to the heroic Grand Master, while Philip II of Spain sent him a sword and a poniard studded with diamonds, now at the Louvre in Paris: a splendid gift indeed, but not so much appreciated as would have been the answer to the desperate appeal for succour during the heat of the battle.

The Great Siege was not only talked about at the time, but a great deal was written later. Voltaire (1694-1778) said: *Rien n'est plus connu que le siège de Malte* ("Nothing is better known than the Siege of Malta"). The English philosopher and economist, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), reports in his *Biography*, "The heroic defence of the Knights of Malta against the Turks excited in me an intense and lasting interest."

Art and literature did not ignore this event: it inspired painters, poets, and writers.

George Klontzas (1540-1608) and Perez d'Aleccio (1547-1600), who assisted Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, painted its main episodes.

It is the subject of two epic poems: one, in Greek, by Antonios Achélis, published in Venice in 1572, the other, "La Maltea", in Spanish, by Hippolito Sans, published in Valencia in 1582.

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), on his visit to Malta, collected material for a novel, and Frederick Schiller (1759- 1805) used the theme for his play "Die Malteser". Both writers, surprised by death, left their work unfinished, cut off in mid-sentence. S. Fowler -Wright worked on Scott's manuscript and notes to write the novel, *The Siege of Malta*, London 1942 and 1972.



Jean Parisot de la Balette (1557 - 1568)

VI THE PAINTING ITSELF

Between 1963 and 1966, the Icon was cautiously and meticulously cleaned and restored in the ISTITUTO CENTRALE DEL RESTAURO, in Rome.

The Icon was freed from a Madonna of different style that was painted on the original, blurred by the long accumulation of dust and oil-lamp soot. The restorers were lost in admiration, when, in the process of cleaning, emerged an unsuspected and most beautiful Byzantine Madonna and Child. They felt the joy of the scholars who, in a palimpsest, discover an old text, that is infinitely more precious.

As Our Lady of Damascus had been hidden and disfigured by an inferior over-painting, the same thing happens to the soul of man, when it is bogged down in the quagmire of pettiness, greed, hatred, the foolishness of a proud mind and the sensual flesh. Happy the man who, as a thirsty deer in a parched land, yearns for the living waters of Grace.

Grace is the source of divine life. A river cut off from the source is doomed to dry up, and the branch cut off from the trunk is condemned to be burned. Through the supernatural free gift of sanctifying grace we become partakers of divine nature (*2 Pet.1:4*), adopted children of God (*Rom.8:15*), temple of the Holy Spirit (*1 Cor.6:19*).

The Holy Spirit, who dwells in us, produces “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (*Gal.5:22*). If these gifts thrive and glow in our hearts, we, human beings, can expect lasting peace and happiness.

The Icon of Our Lady of Damascus belongs to the same

iconographic type as the twelfth-century Virgin of Vladimir, one of the glories of Russia.

This type, where the Son embraces the Mother - face touching face - is called in Greek ELEOUSA (the merciful) and in Russian UMILENJE (of tenderness).

Both icons portray calmness. In the words of Goethe: "Everything that is noble is, by nature, calm," and in the words of Ruskin, "Calm is an attribute of art."

Although of the same iconographic type, they come from a different context. While the Virgin of Vladimir reflects the "aulic" style of Constantinople, the Madonna of Damascus, less delicate, more austere, belongs to the "monastic art" of Cappadocia, once a remote region of Byzantium, now of Turkey. A mural of a Madonna in the Tokali Kilisi II in Cappadocia shows a striking resemblance to our Icon.

Between the Madonna of Damascus and the Virgin of Vladimir runs the same relation as the representations of the monastery - church of Hosios Loukas, attributed to the "monastic art" and those of the monastery-church of Daphni (near Athens) attributed to "Hellenistic tradition."⁴

Design gives form, but colour gives life to the painting. "Colour is the effort of matter to become light," wrote Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938), paraphrasing Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). Design appeals to reason, colour to the heart. Siena, that visionary city, loves colour; Florence, more pragmatic, values form: two cities geographically close but artistically remote.

The mantle of the Madonna is dark-cherry red; the tunic, whose only sleeves are visible, is dark blue, the colour of transcendency. The bright red of the sash of the child - "in whom

dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (*Col.2:9*), shows that the Icon is not *primarily* the Icon of the Virgin, but of the Incarnation, the union of the divine and the human, of heaven and earth, of Virginity and Maternity.

The three stars, one on each shoulder and one on the forehead - according to an ancient Syriac tradition - symbolize the dogma of the Virginity of Mary “before, during, and after giving birth.”

The gold of the background, a metal unaffected by rust, rightly symbolizes incorruptibility, transcendency, eternity. For Dante, it meant the nobility of contemplation, the stairway to the Empyrean, *Che solo amore e luce ha per confine* (*ParXXVIII:54*), “Which hath only love and light for boundary.”

On either side of the Madonna’s prominent head, stands a full length figure: to the left, the archangel Michael the leader of the loyal angels who defeated Lucifer, to the right, the archangel Gabriel, herald of the most profound message in history; he reminds us of Dante’s beautiful verses:

*Qual è quel’ angel che con tanto giuoco
Guarda negli occhi la nostra Regina,
Innamorato sì, che par di fuoco? (Par XXXII: 103-105)*

“Who is that angel gazing with such rapture
at the eyes of our Queen,
so enamoured that they seem on fire?”

Bowing their heads, they adore the central mystery of Christianity: the INCARNATION,

*...quando il Figliuol di Dio
carcar si volse della nostra salma. (Par XXXII: 113-4)*

“...when the Son of God willed
to take on himself the burden of our flesh.”

The two archangels - painted in full length - are a characteristic of our Icon shared with very few other icons, such as the Virgin of Tolga.

The Madonna with her right hand points to the Divine Infant, as if to say: Here is the TRUTH! “Take care not to let anyone cheat you with his philosophizing, with empty fantasies of human tradition, and worldly principles, which are not Christ’s” (*Col.2:8*).

The large eyes of the Madonna reflect humility and meekness, simple and fragile virtues that beautify the world and flower only in great souls.

The Virgin was humble, but not timid: “All generations will call me blessed” (*Lk.1:48*). She was meek, but determined, steadfast as Mount Sion, constant as the rising and setting of the sun. Apostles and Saints sometimes wavered: She never! Under her benevolent gaze, we receive self reliance, security, and serenity.

She did not blow the trumpet, as those keen to divulge what they do and say. The great things are born sheltered from indiscreet eyes and the world’s noise, hidden in the darkness of the foundations and roots. Her silence, however, served the Word, light to our intelligence, originator of all that is true, good, and beautiful.

If silence and word colour the soul, the Virgin is the noblest and the holiest of creatures.

Oh Silence of the Virgin, space of the mystery of God, could I imitate you all the days of my life!

Our Icon measures 147,5 X 102,5 cm: one of the greatest existing Icons of this type.

Professor Viktor Lazarev terms the Icon of Our Lady of Damascus “Remarkable”⁵ and Prof. David Talbot Rice, of Edinburgh University, describes it “A thing of great beauty and historical importance, in addition to being an expression of faith.”⁶ He believes that it is fifty to a hundred years older than the twelfth century Icon of the Virgin of Vladimir.



VII THE ICON IN GENERAL

The Icon is not simply a **religious object**, fit for decoration or instruction, but it is a **sacred image** that makes us aware of the holy events and their historical meaning as well as the holy personages with their spiritual energies and evangelical intimations. The icon evokes and glorifies God's mystery.

The icon is born of prayer, and should be contemplated in a spirit of prayer and faith. *Sighisato pasa sarx broteia. I* ("Let all mortal flesh keep silent..."), to hear that mystical voice, audible only to the listening ears of the simple, humble, detached hearts, to capture - thanks to the deformation of the figures - that message of otherworldliness beauty.

The icons are far from being idols. They do not offend against the spirituality of God, as claimed the iconoclasts and claim the Protestants. The Hebrews were forbidden to sculpt images, because, surrounded by the idolatry of the neighbouring countries, they were misled to adore the simulacrum as such, identifying it with the living and immortal God.

When I kiss the Icon, my kiss does not stop there, but goes beyond, to the archetype. We pray "before" the icons, but certainly not to "them". We know that "behind" them is the ONE, who "dwells in approachable light, whom no man has seen or can see" (*I Tim. 6:16*). As mist obscures the sun, God veils his splendour, to accommodate it to the weakness of our eyes: does not a mother adjust her steps to those of her toddling child?

Our acts of veneration of the icons react upon us in supporting our Faith: in fact, "Our deeds act upon us as much as we act upon them" (George Elliot).

We enter the domain of the Spirit but through the sensorial faculties.

Brother Leo once said to brother Francesco: “I am a simple man; to believe, I must see, listen, touch; only when I see the visible can I guess what is the invisible: without this I am lost.”

When I contemplate the Icon, I leave the crowd and, as Zacchaeus (*Lk 19:1-16*), climb the sycamore tree to catch sight of Jesus passing that way, man among men, shedding spiritual energies and infinite compassion. Do not let HIM pass in vain! Zacchaeus came down a “new man.”

“Looking into these icons, we hear the living tongue of a remote age, sometimes naive as an old legend, but filled - as an ancient poem was - with true and exalted feelings and ideas concerning beauty, valour, purity of heart, heroism and tenderness; we see a dream of happiness and justice.”⁸

“The spirit of past centuries can live again and replace our distractions with a vision of life which possesses the strength and stability to arrange all human experiences in their proper order: the permanent and the transitory, the earthly and the divine.”⁹

Icons are door-ways from the temporal to the eternal, from the finite to the infinite, from the visible to the unseen. Let us not block them up, loosing the breeze of their otherworldliness. Let us, rather, relish these crumbs from the table of the angels, “Looking forward to the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of the Great God and Our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Tit.2.13*). Then symbols, signs, images will disappear in the infinitely bright light of the last Reality: Faith will surrender to the direct vision, and Hope to the full fruition of God. “We will feast in the riches of God’s house and drink from the stream of His delight” (*Ps 35:9*), in His never-ending Kingdom. “Il est temps de jouir des délices

du port.”

O Gioia! oh ineffabile allegrezza!

O vita intera d'amore e di pace!

O senza brama sicura ricchezza!

(Par XXVII:7-9)

O Joy! O gladness inexpressible!

O perfect life of love and peacefulness!

O riches without hankering desire! *(Longfellow Translation)*



**Prince & Grand Master
His Eminence
Fra' Andreo Bertie (1986 -)**

VIII THE ICON OF OUR LADY OF DAMASCUS TODAY

Although the Icon has been in Malta for nearly five centuries, it is still called “Our Lady of Damascus. It has been and still is a radiant presence, guest and host, in her own church in the graceful city of Valletta; a city mostly surrounded by sea, beautiful even when its waters rage and foam, a city of human dimension, without the twisty alleys of a mediaeval city or the hubbub and pollution of a modern metropolis. One can hear the bells of the many churches calling the faithful to worship and the tower-clock scanning the time of our fleeting day: simple bronze-vibrations which pierce the heart and arouse a homesickness for a lost country, a country of innocence and beauty.

Our church, architecturally small, is infinitely large, thanks to the sacramental Presence of God. It is also a simple one, because ornament does not suffocate the symbol, nor does the symbol suffocate the Faith.

It is called “Greek Catholic,” because without renouncing the splendour of Byzantium, it welcomes the eternity of Rome. Remaining guardian of all that is best in the Byzantine tradition - where the Church-life is expressed in terms of light, joy, glory, vision, transfiguration, *theosis* (divinisation) - it is, at the same time, open to the western experience and is faithful to the successor of the Apostle Peter, Pastor of the Universal Church, which is not Greek or Latin: the Church of the living God, “pillar and foundation of the Truth” (*1 Tim 3:15*), human and transcendent, the messenger of God’s Love and Wisdom, stronghold of human freedom and dignity: House of God, house of Man!

Captivated by the unearthly beauty of the picture and the

serene atmosphere of its shrine, the devout visitor senses that he is entering a place of safety and stability, a haven where anxiety finds calmness, every problem its solution, the storm is stilled to a whisper, and silence is praise!

When he leaves the church and plunges into the hustle and bustle of the street, he feels brimful of goodwill towards his fellowmen, deaf to the voices and blind to the appearances of this world, more sensitive, like a delicate instrument, to distant messages, more engrossed in the “one thing necessary” (*Lk 10:42*) than in the narrow interest of the moment.

In the subdued mystical light, where things seem unsubstantial, the Icon of Our Lady of Damascus - THAT never lacked a flickering candle or a fragrant flower - whispers to the inner ear of those who do not discern the footsteps of God on earth, of those who walk the lonely way of human deceptions, disappointments, sorrows and betrayals, and of those whose soul pines for an unearthly bread:

LOOK FOR CHRIST
WALK WITH CHRIST
MEDITATE ON CHRIST
LIVE IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST
EAT THE BREAD OF CHRIST
LET CHRIST BE YOUR SONG

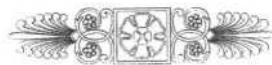
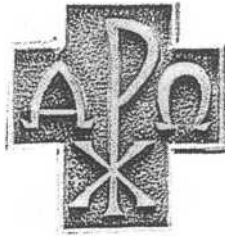
He pays your debts from the inexhaustible treasure of his merits. He takes away your sins like the unrolling wave that washes off the footprints on the sandy beach or like the wind that sweeps away the tracks on the desert-dunes.

He restores your past.
He gives you peace to-day.
He will not disappoint you to-morrow.

“He enriches you in everything” (*1 Cor. 1:5*).

Your cup overflows and there is nothing you shall want.

Our Lady of Damascus is not only an object of piety or a work of art, which conveys an aesthetic enjoyment, but is a great deal more: She shows us the path to the Grace and Truth of Our Lord Jesus Christ: “The Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last” (*Rev. 22:13*).



IX RECENT EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE ICON OF OUR LADY OF DAMASCUS

1931: 25 October: Crowned at Floriana, Malta, to commemorate the XV centenary of the Council of Ephesus.

1962: September: Depicted in one of a set of stamps issued by the Post Office of Malta to commemorate the Great Siege.

1963-66: In Rome for restoration in the Istituto Centrale del Restauro.

1970: 2 April - 1 July: Held pride of place in the XIII Council of Europe Exhibition in Malta

1972: 4 December, Issued as a Christmas stamp in Rome by the Sovereign Order of Malta

1980: A church was built in Damascus Kosour by order of Patriarch Maximus V to house a copy (100X65cm) of the Icon (147,5 X 102,5cm) painted by the Carmelite Sister Etienne of Latakia Convent (Syria).

1987: Commemoration of the IV centenary (1587-1987) of the transfer of the Icon from Vittoriosa to Valletta.

1989: (27th May, Sat. 10.40am) Official Visit (part of program of the STATE VISIT TO MALTA) by His Most Eminent Highness Prince and Grand Master Fra' Andrew W.N. BERTIE

1989: 15-31 October, included in the Exhibition of "The Order's Heritage in Malta", held in the Cathedral museum of Mdina on

the occasion of the General Assembly of the Knights of Malta.

1989: Represented in a medal by the Sovereign Order with the Oecumenical message: in Latin on the obverse "*Ave Virgo Damascena Omnes Christi Fideles Aduna* " (Hail, Virgin of Damascus, unite all the Faithful in Christ) and in Latin and Greek on the reverse "That they may be One"

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Matthew 25:40	Philippians 3:8
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Luke 10:3	I Timothy 3:15
Luke 10:21	Titus 2:13
Luke 10:42	2 Peter 1:4
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Acts 10:41	Revelations 14:13
Romans 8:15	Revelations 22:13

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photo: Segej Ledov

Church of Our Lady of Damascus with the Iconostasis painted by Grigory Maltzeff (1881-1953)
foreground - Rev. Papas Vito Borgia, Rector of the Church