A Thousand Years of Service in Jerusalem

In 600 AD Pope Gregory I commissioned a hospice and shelter in Jerusalem to treat and care for Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. In about 800AD, the Roman Emperor Charlemagne extended the hospice significantly. It was operated as a Benedictine Hospital until it was destroyed in 1005 by Caliph A Hakim bi-Amr Allah, along with a great many other buildings.

In 1023 a group of Italian, Spanish and Greek merchants from Amalfi, a rich city in the kingdom of Naples, obtained permission from the Egyptian Caliph Ali az-Zahir to rebuild a hospice, monastery and chapel on the site of the monastery of St. John the Baptist, close to the Holy Sepulchre.

It is here that they founded a church called *Sta. Maria ad Latinos*, distinguishing it from churches in which *Greek*, and not *Latin*, ritual prevailed. Two hospitals were also built, one for women and another for men, and dedicated to St. Mary Magdalen and St. John *Eleemon* (or the *Almoner*), respectively. Later, at an uncertain date, the latter dedication was changed from St. John *the Almoner* to St. John *the Baptist*.

Over time, the guest house of *Sta. Maria ad Latinos* became more a hospital and hotel than a church, becoming known as 'The Hospital of Jerusalem'. It attended to sick and orphaned children, fed the starving, clothed the needy, and also cared for discharged prisoners.

By 1099 Brother Gerard Tum had made the hospital the centre of its own religious order, and in 1113 a Papal Bull was issued, formally recognising a Hospitaller Order and releasing it of obligation to all temporal powers except the Holy See.

In 2023 we celebrate this 1000 year ethos of service. Although the Order of St John was not recognised until after 1113 AD (and with the *Venerable* Order being founded in 1888), the principle of serving the poor irrespective of class, race, religion, or the ability to pay lay at the heart of the ancient Persian Bimeristans (Hospitals). The Amalfan traders, with the Benedictine monks, carried this torch, and it is their work that laid the foundations for the Hospitaller Order of St John in the 12th century.

This ethos flourishes throughout the Johannine Orders today, bringing hope, care and compassion to countless millions of people across the world.