The Maltese Cross

The eight-pointed cross known as the Maltese Cross is probably the most attractive symbol ever created. It almost certainly developed gradually from what is called a cross ancrée – this had similar proportions but the arms were not of the familiar “v” shape, and the rounded points curved out into a semi-circle a little like the flukes of an anchor. During the Rhodes period the four white arms of the cross being worn then, started to assimilate the cross we have now, but it was still different, and close to what was used as the symbol of Amalfi, but with the arms of each of the four “v” shapes not at all straight.

It is almost alarming to think that the Maltese Cross, as we now know it, was not yet in use at the Great Siege of 1565. On the other hand it may be comforting to realise that the great Maltese Cross really achieved its sophisticated and unchangeable final version on the Island of Malta – and should truly be known as the Maltese Cross. It would indeed be heartening for Malta not to have to think of the grand symbol as an import.

Aesthetically the Maltese Cross has inspired the highest honours. Grand orders like that of St Stephen of Tuscany, the Bavarian Order of St George, the Sicilian Order of St Januarius, the French Order of the Holy Ghost, the Prussian Order of the Black Eagle, the Polish Order of the White Eagle, the Bulgarian Military Order of Merit, the Spanish Order of Isabella la Cattolica, the Russian Order of St George, the Swedish Order of the Sword, the British Order of the Bath, the Papal Order of St Sylvester, the Dutch Order of the Netherlands, the Greek Order of the Redeemer, the Order of the Württemburg Crown, the Saxe-Weimar Order of the White Falcon, the Order of the Rumanian Crown, the Serbian Order of St Sava, the Belgian Order of Leopold, the Papal Order of St Gregory the Great, the Norweigan Order of St Olaf and finally the Ernestine Order of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

Not content with copying the gallant and heroic Maltese Cross, other versions were made adding more arms and points to it, and aesthetically failing dismally – as with the British Order of St Michael and St George, the French Legion of Honour and the Brazilian Order of the Southern Cross.
It is reasonably well recorded that the first fully-developed Maltese Cross as we now know it appeared on Jean de La Valette Parisot’s coinage. It occupies a dominant position on the 2 and 4 tari coins starting from 1567.

If we are to search for a symbolic meaning to the Maltese Cross, we should consider three elements: first, we must see it as Christ’s Cross the prime emblem of Christianity, with the cross triumphantly declaring Christ’s victory over death. Secondly, we could attribute the four arms to what are known as the cardinal virtues, which are: ‘prudence’, ‘justice’, ‘fortitude’ and ‘temperance’. All other moral virtues, which a fervent and animated Christian would aspire to, are connected with one or other of these four.

Thirdly, we should put attributes to the eight points of the Maltese Cross. These are normally ascribed to the eight beatitudes – those callings defined and explained by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. The way to goodness and ultimate happiness, the way to our beatification – this was the way a knight of Malta consecrated himself to, and the points of the cross which he wore, and was identified by, signified exactly his determination to achieve and spread salvation, and ultimately happiness, through the rigours of his cross.

Christ promised the following when He pronounced the eight blessings:

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
2. Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the earth.
3. Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
4. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after justice, for they shall be satisfied.
5. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.
6. Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.
7. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.
8. Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice’s sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The eight-pointed cross was such an acceptable symbol, such a high standing representation, that it also became a beautiful embellishment. The jewellers made plain gold crosses to be worn around the neck or as brooches; the better jewellers made filigree crosses and also the intricate gran’spinatt Maltese cross composed of the smallest gold pellets all held
together and mounted with intense skill. Perhaps some of the finest were made with diamonds.

Following is a description of a formal presentation of a diamond cross by Grand Master Gregorio Carafa to the natural son of a British monarch. Here we have some wonderful detail of the Malta Palace’s protocol. What a compliment to be received on the top step and then to take your leave at the bottom of the staircase! Had the Grand Master received you in an inner room while he sat down, then the compliment of being received was not quite so great.

Grand Master Carafa’s Council held a meeting on October 5th, 1687. In it they decided that James II’s illegitimate son Henry would be properly saluted and given an important present. He was welcomed by a number of Grand Crosses. It was agreed that the Grand Master, in the name of the Religion, would present ‘Prince’ Henry Fitzjames with the eight-pointed diamond cross which had belonged to the late Bali of Montenegro.

The story continues in translation:

Next day at 10 a.m. Henry Fitzjames son of the reigning King of England visited His Eminence *incognito* in a sedan chair without an entourage, accompanied only by another chair. FitzJames’s sedan chair was carried right up to the door of the Grand Master’s room, and then having alighted, the door to the Grand Master’s room was opened and His Eminence received him at the entrance. Offering his hand, they sat down and spoke for a quarter of an hour using the English Consul as interpreter. The Grand Master addressed FitzJames in the 3rd person and because Fitzjames was the son of a Catholic King he was given a diamond cross as was decided by the Venerable Council. The Prince accepted the present with the profoundest demonstrations of esteem for His Eminence and he wore it on his chest with His Eminence’s permission for all the days that he spent in Malta. On taking his leave, the Grand Master accompanied him to the door. Fitzjames entered the sedan chair waiting for him outside the room and departed.
Seventy years later, during the reign of Grand Master Emmanuel Pinto, it is recorded that another two fine eight-pointed crosses were given away by the order to an important visitor.

Lorenzo Colonna Prince of Palliano and Castiglione arrived in Malta on September 15<sup>th</sup> 1752 in an entourage accompanying his younger brother on his honeymoon trip. The newlyweds were on a two-week visit from Sicily. With them came the Duca Benedetti and many others. They were invited as guests of the Balì Lanti and would stay in Valletta at the Casa Dorrell in Strada Mercanti.

The story continues in translation:

The Prince and Princess received visits from Knights of the Grand Cross and various Commanders all morning. After luncheon, the Grand Master’s carriage-and-four collected the guests of the Balì Lanti to take them wherever they wished to go. Their Most Serene Highnesses were first and foremost, at 10 a.m., taken to see the Grand Master [Pinto]. He received them in the form and manner in which he would normally receive princes of the blood. From the moment they entered the whole Guard was on Parade. In waiting, also, was a multitude of Knights, and when the visitors had reached the audience chamber, the door was immediately opened and the Grand Master who was surrounded by an official circle of Knights, moved forward to greet them at the entrance of the room. Once the Prince had entered all officials took their leave and a frate servente brought in a chair for the Prince to sit on, and he sat in front of the Grand Master. Following the indication of the Grand Master he then put on his hat. With the door open, so that the other knights could observe, the Grand Master then made a long address. In his speech he first remembered all the obligations that the Religion owed the Colonna Family, and then he paid numerous compliments on behalf of the Order. This all happened with total cordiality and gentleness.

Grand Master Pinto gave Lorenzo a golden Cross of Devotion during a banquet at the Palace. At the same ceremony he was also presented with a diamond studded eight pointed cross as a
sign of esteem and in memory of the important part played by his Colonna ancestors in the Great Siege of 1565.

Today the Maltese Cross is still perhaps the most popular of symbols. It swells the hearts of the Order of St John and the Maltese People. It is seen to embellish architecture, flags, costume, drapery, books, posters, boats, ships, aeroplanes and, of course, the art of the jeweller.

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