

# Provence harbors rich history of Order of Malta from Middle Ages

By JOHN T. MILLER, JR.

A visit to Provence today takes the traveler to the region of southeastern France along the Mediterranean extending from the Rhone River to the border of Italy. In the fourteenth century, the area called Provence extended across the south of modern-day France, from the Bay of Biscay on the west to Italy on the east. French was not the language of the people of what I will call Old Provence.

The Provençals spoke occitan, the *langue d'oc*. That explains why Provence was designated one of the seven "Langues" or "Tongues" in 1301, when they obtained official recognition in the Order. Provence was given precedence among the seven, for good reasons. It was the source of the largest of the Christian armies which embarked on the First Crusade, led by Raymond of Saint-Gilles, Count of Toulouse.

The spirit of adventure of the Crusaders was strongly propagated there. It has been called the "cradle of chivalry and romance." Provençal nobility began to endow the Hospital with extensive lands and villages before Pope Paschal II gave ecclesiastical recognition to the hospital and its daughter houses in 1113.

The order flourished in Old Provence in succeeding centuries, generously providing funds, members and leaders needed in the Holy Land, Rhodes and Malta. A Provençal came to hold by right the highest of the

great offices in the Order, that of Grand Commander.

The organization of the Order in Old Provence kept pace with its growth. In 1115 a priory was founded at Saint-Gilles, then the largest port on the Rhone River and a crossroads of pilgrimages, overland to Compostello in Spain and by sea to the Holy Land. A second priory was founded at Toulouse in 1315 to govern the Order's properties in the western part of Old Provence.

Some idea of the size of these organizations in later years is apparent from the fact that between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the Priory of Saint-Gilles governed 50 commanderies, while the Priory of Toulouse governed 25 commanderies. In those days, a commandery managed the estates and endowments in an area, the surplus from which supported the Order's hospitaller and military activities elsewhere; served as a center of liturgical life: recruited and trained brethren and provided them a residence in their old age; maintained in places a hospice, hospital or a parish; and sought public support for the Order's works.

Many sites in Old Provence are of interest to members of the Order. I visited three in modern Provence last year when touring with some of the family, two evoking the memory of Blessed Fra Gerard.

Historians do not agree as to where Blessed Gerard was born. The French entertain no doubts. They call him Gerard Tenque and claim he was born in 1040 in Martigues, a sunny coastal town about 15 miles west of Marseille. They have staked out that claim by placing a statue of the Order's Founder on the facade of the Church of St. Genies located on the waterfront. (See picture)

There is no dispute about the authenticity of the second place associated with Blessed Gerard. Fra Gerard died in the Holy Land in 1120. His remains were transferred in 1280 from Acre in the Holy Land to Manosque, a town about 60 miles northeast of Marseille. Why Manosque? In the thirteenth century Manosque was considered the Order's most splendid possession.



Courtesy Tom Murphy  
Blessed Gerard

Its commandery governed a 100-square-mile area. The 46 members of the Order who resided there in 1271 included professed brothers, sisters, donats and confratres. Helion de Villeneuve served as Castellan of Manosque before he was elected Master of the Order in 1319. Manosque was made a capitular bailiwick in 1466, entitling the Castellan to a seat in the Chapter General of the Order.

The passing centuries eroded the commandery's resources. Relations between the aristocratic order and the townspeople became sometimes quite acrimonious. The commandery's six-and-half-century history came to an end during the French Revolution. The castle of the Knights was destroyed in 1793. The relics of Blessed Gerard disappeared.

Today, nothing remains of the castle, not even a ruin. The hilltop where it stood is now a public parking lot. The town has some fortifications that date from the Middle Ages. Memorials of the Order's long history at Manosque can be found on the second floor of the eighteenth century Hotel de Ville. In the central hallway is a silver reliquary bust of Gerard Tenque and a few water colors, one of which shows local citizens dancing while others tear down the Knights' castle.

The third place we visited has no association with Blessed Gerard. It is in Aix-en-Provence, an attractive university city on the turnpike between Marseille and Manosque. In 1234 Raymond Berenger V, Count of Provence and father-in-law of King St. Louis, endowed the Church of St. Jean of Malta as a memorial to his father and a collegiate church for 12 Hospitaller priests. Rebuilt by him in the Gothic style, an architecture then unknown in Provence, the church today serves a local parish.

When we found the front door locked, we were able to obtain access with the help of the parish priest who resides in a presbytery fronting on an adjacent street. Next door to the church, and also facing on the Place St. Jean, is an impressive baroque palace built by Jean-Claude Viany, prior of the Church (1667-1720), to house himself and Knights of the Order. It now serves as an art museum, the Musée Granet.

For further reading: Sire, H.J.A., *The Knights of Malta*, Ch. IX (Yale Univ. Press, 1994).



Photo by Margaret de Chantal Miller

Blessed Gerard statue, Church of St. Genies