Perceptions of Poverty: 
A Hospitaller approach

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Poverty was an integral part of the lives of Hospitallers, or at least it should have been. The Rule of Raymond Du Puy and Hospitaller statutes bound members of the Order of St John with the three monastic vows of chastity, obedience and poverty. The same rule ordained that all members of the order 'engage in the service of the poor'. The Papal Bull Pie Postulatio Voluntatis makes explicit reference to the Order's work in support of pilgrims and for the needs of the poor. Furthermore, poverty was an intrinsic part of their life on most of the territories in which they were based, in Outremar, in Rhodes, in Malta as indeed across Europe.

The strong correlation between ‘poverty’ and the Order of St John in general and the life of its members in particular raises a number of questions: what did the Hospitallers understand by the term poverty? Did this understanding change across time and why? How did this understanding fit in the contemporary perceptions of poverty?

The connection between Hospitallers and poverty has often been a ‘given’ in most discussions about Hospitaller history. Without dwelling at length on the subject, most Historians have referred to it en passant, assuming that their audience was au currant of it. Few studies have dwelt explicitly on the subject, and in general they focused on one particular aspect of this multi-faceted relationship; namely Hospitaller care of the sick and poor relief. The reference to the ‘vow of poverty’ has often been sketchy to say the least, generally being restricted to the apparent divergence between the precept of poverty which professed Hospitallers

were supposed to live and their actual standard of living, especially with regards to
the Hospitaller phase of Maltese history.3

This paper will seek to answer those questions by looking at the evolution
of the concept of the 'vow of poverty'4 as evident from Hospitaller statutes and
treatises penned by members of the Order on their way of life. While tracing
changes in Hospitaller perceptions of poverty prior to 1530, the emphasis will be
on the Maltese phase of Hospitaller history. It will first look at the understanding
of poverty in medieval and early modern thought with particular emphasis on the
relation of poverty to property ownership, the idealisation of poverty. This will lead
to a discussion of the Hospitaller definition of the concept of poverty by looking at
how the concept evolved though the years, the justification of how they lived their
'vow of poverty' in Early Modern Malta and an attempt to infer the causes that led
to such an evolution of the concept of poverty.

Poverty in Medieval and Early Modern thought

Hospitaller statutes were articulated, and indeed the forma mentis of its members
was formed, in the context of the Christian-inspired medieval and early modern
thought which was heavily indebted to classical philosophy as well as, in the latter
case, the renaissance humanism. In the context of the present discussion it is thus
deemed useful to look at how was poverty, and in particular monastic poverty,
perceived by Medieval and Early Modern thinkers. Indeed, medieval poverty theory,
claims, Marcia Colish, was retained after the Middle Ages in canon law courts and in
poor relief systems of the early modern catholic jurisdictions.5

Christian medieval poverty precepts were rooted in the Augustinian notions of
property ownership and his interpretation of Roman Law, intrinsic to which was the
concept of detachment from worldly possessions.

3. The 'seeming' contradiction between the vow of poverty entered into by the Hospitallers on their profession, and
the opulence in which they lived drew constant criticism upon the Order, both from within and without. In 1592,
a group of Hospitallers withdrew from the comfortable opulent life of Valletta to live a life of monastic disciple in
the Camarat. In the early eighteenth century Count de Caylus described Hospitaller Malta as 'Gomorra parva'
(Little Gomorrah). V. Malla-Milanes, 'Introduction to Hospitaller Malta', in Hospitaller Malta: Studies on Early
Modern Malta and the Order of St John of Jerusalem, ed. V. Malla-Milanes, Malta 1993, 15. See also S. Cachia.
The Treasury, Debts and Deaths: A study of the Common Treasury of the Order of St John and its relationship with
the individual Hospitaller in matters of debts and deaths based on Giovanni Caravita's Trattato del Comun Tesoro,
unpublished MA dissertation presented in the Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta, 2004,
85.
4. It goes without saying that this offers only a limited view of Hospitallers' perception of poverty; but alas an
important one. It would be also pertinent to look into poverty in terms of their poor-relief initiatives as well as in
terms of the changing standard of living in the territories in which they were present, but such approaches are
beyond the scope of this exercise which remains 'a' as opposed to 'the' Hospitaller approach.
Property ownership

Roman law, in particular Justinian's Codex, constituted the framework for Medieval discussions on property and the ownership thereof. Classical Roman law defined ownership, dominium, as an ultimate right; one was an owner in perpetuity. However, by Justinian's time there emerged a distinction between dominium and other 'inferior' modes of ownership such as usucapio, mancipatio, possessio, dos, tutela, and dominium bonitarum while civil law modes of acquisition included usus (acquisition by use) and usufruct (the inalienable right to enjoy the property of another and take the fruits there from). The distinction between dominium (defined as property or ownership considered as title), possession (as practical enjoyment) and usus was central to the development of medieval canon and civil law attitudes applied to contemporary situations of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries and in particular set a standard for mendicant attitudes to property in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as canonist and jurists sought to frame an acceptable doctrine of property that was at the same time consistent with early church legislation and the model of a poor church living along what was believed to be apostolic lines.  

The most important Latin Church father treat property rights in any detail was Augustine. His position became standard, dominating early medieval theory on the issue. For him, God sanctioned private property indirectly; He instituted rulers and rulers legitimised private property. Earthly institutions and possessions are merely useful to man on his pilgrimage through this life. Possessions such as 'health, wealth, honour, friends, houses, sons, a wife, and the rest of things in this life' are temporal and should thus not be valued, far less loved and desired for their own sake, but only as a support towards the eternal possessions. Twelfth-century Gratian builds upon the Augustinian model that private property is legitimate given our fallen state and what we can reasonably expect about human behaviour, a concession to human weakness that should be tolerated even as man seeks to transcend it. The monastic 'sharing of all things is an ideal', but to which most persons are not called. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, however, canonists and theologians influenced by Aristotle directly or by way of Cicero, argue that private property is a natural right possessed by all rational human beings as such. Still, its use is limited by the requirements of the common good and of needy individuals. Aquinas agreed that the apportionment of private property was a postlapsarian consequence, and that the purpose of property is its use for men in pursuance of higher ends. Private property was a utilitarian conclusion of reason in the circumstances to further peace and commerce. People, he argues, are more likely to take good care of their own property than of the property belonging to everyone. Aquinas also argued that when things are used through consumption, what has been exchanged is the ownership of the consumables as well as their use. Voluntary poverty is commendable because it frees a man from 'worldly solicitude', and those who embrace it do so to follow Christ and be useful to their community.  

The Dominicans, separated jurisdiction from ownership, arguing that if one owned property, it was illogical to separate ownership from its use. John of Paris, writing in the late thirteenth century stressed that lay property was something natural to man; the result of his own labour each individual is the administrator of what is his own, to do as he wishes and once property is acquired through labour and industry an individual's right to own his property is inalienable. However, he conceded that ecclesiastical property is given by prior, original owners to communities and not to individual persons. No one person has proprietary right and ownership over ecclesiastical property. An ecclesiastical individual may have right of use, but he has this not as an individual in his own right but purely as part and member of an ecclesiastical community.  

Franciscan apologists disagreed. They held that all members of ecclesiastical and lay communities have no fundamental (as opposed to legal) rights of ownership as individuals or collectively and that there are only administrators and stewards of wealth. At the same time they argued for the separation of use and dominium in consumables where the use of a thing can be distinguished from its ownership (house, land), then a rent may be offered for use without the concomitant transfer of dominium or ownership. St Bonaventura in his Apologia Pauperum (1269) differentiated between a fourfold gradation of holding property: dominium, possessio, usus and simplex usufruct. Franciscans, he underscored, renounced voluntarily all title to possession and they abdicated all ownership, possession, usufruct, leaving only the obligation to use what was necessary to stay alive, which he termed simplex usus facti. Implicitly, they renounced dominium and possessio,
but not usus. Marsilius of Padova, whilst conceding that it was more common to use the term dominium to mean both the principal power to lay claim to something rightfully acquired and the use or usufruct of the thing, stressed the distinction between dominium and usus.

Idealization of poverty

The justification of private property and the attempts to differentiate between different levels of holding and avail such property was an attempt to sanction life that was less than perfect as well as a way of reconciling the necessity of living in a world where private property was the norm, as opposed to the fictional, hypothesised, pre-lapsarian state, with attempts to re-create that 'perfect' way of life; living without worldly possessions.

The notion of 'poverty' as a 'perfect' state of life was rooted in the New Testament which lauds the poor as the Children of God and calls the believer to follow Jesus and renounce everything, particularly material goods which could preclude access to the Kingdom of God. Christ, it was understood lived a poor life free of all possessions whilst the early Church, as described in the Acts of the Apostles lived a communal life with everyone sharing his possessions with the rest.

Outwardly, monasticism under whichever rule, in the original cloistered form as well as the mendicant orders which arose in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, constituted a form of collective poverty where the individual did not own any property (vivere sine proprio). Nominally, this form of poverty made tangible the religious' desire to denude oneself of all possessions in the effort to discover God as well as the mystic experience of discovering that one is totally unworthy or poor before the Almighty and thus wholly dependent on Him.

Ecclesiastical history is rife with examples of individuals or groups who chose to follow this ideal, in different ways depending on the prevalent social conditions. In the second century, St Anthony sold all his belongings, donating the income received to the poor and sought refuge in the Sinai desert as a hermit setting a model for hundreds of like minded persons eventually through the rules of St Basil in the east and St Benedict in the west to collective forms of pauperisim or monasticism. The improvement in the conditions of life in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries led to a re-discovery of evangelical poverty, attacks on the wealth and worldliness of the Church, a spring of reform movements within the Church and the establishment of new monastic orders through exponents such as Romuald, John Gaulbert, Peter Damian, Stephen of Muret, the Cistercians, the Augustinian and Carmelite revival, the lay groups and spiritual ascetics like the Patarini, the Poor Men of Lyons, the Humiliati, and the Cathars. Poverty was perceived as the embodiment of the spiritually powerful, unattachment to material goods, the object of charity and mercy.

Throughout the Middle Ages theologians and canonists agreed with monastic writers that poverty can have a positive moral value; provided that it was embraced voluntarily. Whilst allowing the monk, nun or friar to imitate Christ, it freed those embracing it from worldly cares, the better to serve God and neighbour. The idealisation of poverty reached the apogee in the writings of Francis of Assisi and his followers in the early thirteenth century. While Francis called for the friars to 'have no property', 'not to claim ownership of any place', and 'have neither use nor regard for money, considering it as dust', his followers radicalised the interpretation, eschewing any contact with money, bestowing nominal ownership of property to the Pope and their protectors advocating the absolute poverty of Christ. The Sacrum Commercium, written in or around 1227, by an anonymous Franciscan, describes poverty as 'mountain of light', 'Christ's bride' and 'the Seal of the Kingdom of Heaven' such that 'if he be not sealed with thy Seal, no man may enter the Kingdom of Heaven'. Pope Nicholas III, in his Papal Bull Exiit qui seminat, which attempted to settle the internal debate within the Franciscan order on the Rule, differentiated between the abdication of the jus domini and the retention of the usu facti. He explicitly allowed friars the usu facti that is the use of all things granted to them without enjoying any proprietary rights on them, however obliging them to the usus pauper, which bound them not to use anything which could lead to any degree of superfluity, riches, or abundance or which 'would derogate poverty such by either treasuring up or by such a spirit so that they might alienate such things, or sell them, receive them, either under the appearance of providing for the future'. John XXII declared the Franciscan doctrine of Christ's absolute poverty was heretical in 1323, trimming the radical interpretation of evangelical poverty, and shaping the future discussion on teleological discussions on different grades of property ownership and use thereof.

22  Coleman 2008, 617.
Property, the Poor and their relief

Intrinsically linked to the debate on property ownership and its correlation with poverty is the question of poor relief. In the fourth century Ambrose of Milan questioned whether the rich had a right to property without a related obligation to assist the poor. Johannes Teutonicus added that it is denied of anyone to appropriate to himself more than suffices for his own needs. Thus, in times of necessity any surplus wealth, or ‘superfluities’, is to be regarded as common property to be shared by all those in need.

Aquinas continued along this line of thought when he stated that beyond the satisfaction of limited human needs and modest profit, the superabundance possessed by any individual is owed to the poor by natural right and is to be used for the common welfare. It is left to individuals to make provision for the poor from their own wealth, except in cases of urgent necessity when a starving person may take what legally belongs to another and may not be considered to have done so through robbery.28

28 Coleman 2000, 115.
At the same time, canonists accepted that superfluous property belonged to the poor in need, though they took into account that superfluity of wealth was to be measured according to what was considered decent and fitting to one's status in society.29

One's status in society also defined the need for alms. While all the needy were understood to have a right to mercy, compassion was deemed stronger towards those who were rich and noble and who misfortune has thrown into extreme misery. This was based on the tradition of giving alms preferring those who were ashamed to receive it, such as the worthy poor man who was often of knightly status, presented by the eleventh century reformer Peter Damian, who did not know how to beg to survive and suffered embarrassment as well as hunger and preferred to die rather than beg publicly and who thereby merited most to receive secret alms.30

Poverty and property in the reform period and beyond

To a certain extent, the reform period, understood to incorporate both the Protestant and the Catholic reformations, was a watershed in the understanding of monastic poverty and the question of property ownership.

In general, Protestants rejected monastic poverty. The Lutheran Book of Concord describing the poverty of the monks is called a sham or pretence and is condemned for its hypocrisy. In contrast to the monastic poverty, the reformers hold up as an example the poverty of the Gospel, which poverty they see as the lack of greed or as not trusting in riches, and they accent the poverty of humility, that is, poor consciences ready to receive 'the riches of the Grace of Christ'. While voluntary obedience, poverty and chastity can be useful as non-obligatory forms of discipline because they create more time for 'teaching and other pious duties', they held that 'the abandonment of property is neither commanded nor advised in the scriptures' because 'the poverty if the Gospel does not consist in the abandonment of property, but in the absence of greed and trust in riches'.31

Calvin too rejected the notion of voluntary poverty arguing that poverty is worthless if love is lacking and viewing the withdrawal from the world as a lesser calling than an active life of obedient love in society.32 Indeed, he defines monastic life as the following of 'idle dreams' by 'foolish people'.33 The essence of self-denial is not to renounce oneself, but rather to 'look to God', also from within the

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30 Ibid., 628.
33 http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/calvin/cc31/cc31097.htm seen on November 23, 09.

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Fig. 5. Pasquale Cati, Council of Trent and the Church Triumphant, 1588.
anxiety and discomfort of the present life and its threats, uncertainties, claims, and temptations.  

English Puritan theologian William Perkins, writing at the end of the sixteenth century described voluntary poverty as a 'popish conceit', though poverty in itself was providential and menial duties do not debase the individual before God.  

On the other hand, the Council of Trent reaffirmed the Catholic teachings about the vow of poverty, allowing all professed to 'order their lives in accordance with what is prescribed by the rule which they have professed'. It explicitly forbade all regulars, both male and female, from possessing to holding as their own, or even on behalf of their convent, 'any property moveable or immovable, of what nature whatsoever it may be, or in what way whatsoever acquired'. Such possessions were to be immediately delivered up to the Superior, and be incorporated with the convent. Superiors were only to allow moderate use of moveables, to a level 'suitable to the state of poverty which they have professed' such that brethren would not be allowed anything 'superfluous', while at the same time 'nothing shall be refused which is necessary for them'. With the exception of Capuchins, and Franciscan Minor Observants, all monasteries could possess immovable property. Individuals entering into a religious order could renounce their private property on behalf of third parties up to two months prior to their profession, after which such renunciations would be declared null and void, though the property would only accrue to that order only upon profession. Of note, the Council explicitly stated that its decrees on the Reformation of Regulars, which were promulgated in 1563, were applicable immediately by 'all convents and monasteries, colleges, and houses of all monks and religious whatsoever, as also of all religious virgins and widows soever, even though living under the conduct of the military orders, of the order even (of St John) of Jerusalem'.  

Prominent Jesuit Theologist Francisco Suarez explicitly stated that 'actual poverty is neither necessary to salvation, nor is it of precept', and indeed 'the dominion of individuals over property, is contrary to no natural law'. He deemed the vow of poverty as meritorious in its intent to avoid the trappings of riches. He explicitly excluded the possession of ecclesiastical benefices and temporal goods associated with one's religious office from being a contradiction to the vow of poverty, and differentiated between different levels of holding property: dominium, usufruct, use, possession, actual use and administration. In accordance with his legalistic interpretation, 'in excessive actual use by, for instance, luxurious living, lodging, or dress, there may be sin by reason of scandal, or inasmuch as such luxury is unbecoming the state of poverty, but there is not a violation of the vow of poverty'. Only dominion contravened the vow of poverty, and the definition of dominium was totally subjective, dependent on one's will: 'One cannot possess actual dominion without the consent of one's own will, hence although a man may receive a thing for his own use, still if he has no affection and consent, either formal or virtual, to the acceptance of dominion over it, he does not acquire dominion'. Implicitly, poverty entered into via profession was a question of 'intention'. Indeed, the retention of abundant riches was compatible with the state of perfection implicit in the 'vow of poverty' provided that 'in the intention and obligation of the person not to possess those riches save in order to the end of self-support and his neighbours benefit, or the service of God in other ways and the honour of His saints; secondly, in an intention and obligation not to seek riches by traffic and with that solicitude which attaches to temporal business'.  

Hospitaller definition of poverty  

Writing in the early eighteenth century, in a strong apologetic vein, on how the Hospitaller's lived their 'vow of Poverty', Fra Marc'Antonio Zondadari wrote: 'the second vow is that of living without own things, commonly known as 'of poverty', with which, equality denuded from the love and effect of temporal goods, with greater ease we achieve our ultimate aim [understood to be eternal salvation]'.  

Zondadari's text highlights two important precepts in the Hospitaller interpretation of the vow of poverty. First, the Hospitaller vow was not an embracing of poverty in the Franciscan sense of materially living in poverty, but a question  

34 Berry, 1872.  
35 Berry, 1872.  
38 Ibid., 305.  
39 Ibid., 317.  
40 Ibid., 316.  
41 'Il secondo de voiti è quello di vivere senza proprio, comunemente detto di Povertà, col quale, spogliati ugualmente dall'afetto e dall'efetto dei beni temporali, con maggior facilità corriamo al conseguimento del nostro ultimo fine'. Marc'Antonio Zondadari, Breve e Particolare Istruzione del Sacro Ordine Militare degli Ospitalieri Detto oggi volgarmente di Malta, e della diversa qualitàdini Persone, e di Gradi che lo compongono, Padova 1724, 8.  
42 F. Acroca, 'La Regola dei Frati Minori una Regola di Vita in Tensione tra la Memoria e la Profesia', in www.ofm. org/caspen06/Relatios/01AcrocaIT.doc, seen on October 10, 2009, 3.
of living without owned belongings. Indeed the vow was not 'of poverty' but 'commonly known of poverty'. Second, the emphasis is on the spoliation from 'the love and effect' of material possessions. What the author is stressing is not 'keeping a distance' from temporal goods, but rather their impact on the individual and the degree to which such detachment facilitates personal spiritual eternal salvation.

**Evolution of a concept**

The concept of how Hospitallers lived their 'vow of poverty' as discernible from the statutes enacted by the Council general from time to time underwent quite some change since the early twelfth century from which period date the first documents. The concept of 'poverty' and property was as a constant throughout, though there was a gradual move away from the rigour of the original Rule as the Council General, seems to have sought to strike a balance between the Hospitallers' religious status, the applicable legal precepts and the perceived necessities of an adequate standard of living pertinent to their noble status.

The Rule drawn by Raymond du Puy in the first half of the twelfth century was part of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century ecclesiastical reform movement defined by Gilles Constable as the process which led to a new form of communal life different from that practiced in the 'old houses', whether they built an established model of the existing monasteries from which they had departed such as the Cistercians or Cluny, or whether they looked towards a new ideal such as the military orders, and the regular cannons \(^{44}\) in the twelfth century or the mendicant orders in the thirteenth. In line with similar 'rules' compiled during this period, it called upon the individual to undertake a personal conversion and turn away from the world and its ways.

In this regard, and in line with the medieval understanding of poverty discussed earlier, it referred to the 'vow of poverty' as the non-possession of property; the brethren were bound 'to live without property of their own'.\(^{44}\) Prima facie this is akin to the phraseology used by Zondadari six hundred years later. However, the Rule goes on to specify what belongings a brother of the Hospital of Jerusalem could 'claim as his due', namely bread, water (though another clause forbade eating meat on Wednesdays and Saturdays and during lent, indicating that such was allowed on other days) and clothing. The latter was explicitly qualified as 'humble', and specifically brothers were forbidden to put on brightly coloured cloth or animal furs or fustian. It also bound members to live on alms, seeking refuge in a church or 'at some suitable person's house' rather than an inn, and beg for their food, purchasing 'one meal only' when they found nobody to support them. The Rule also stipulated severe punishments for 'brethren found with private property', or if they sought to bequeath some sort of private property on their death. In such cases, the guilty brethren were to have their money tied around their neck, led naked through the Hospital of Jerusalem or the house in which they lived, whilst being beaten 'severely' by the other brothers, do penance for forty days and fast on bread and water on Wednesdays and Fridays.\(^{45}\)

Both the Pie Postulatio Voluntatis \(^{46}\) and the Rule \(^{47}\) make explicit reference to the properties held by the Order. Implicitly, there was a differentiation between the property held in common by the Order and, given that they could not hold any property of their own, the Hospitallers' role as administrators of that property. This role was however not specified, and there is no indication of the legal or philosophical parameters establishing the relationship between the brethren and that property.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, however, the monastic way of life of the members of the Order of St John, inspired by the religious precepts of poverty, simplicity, and frugality, began to make way for increasing secular mores. Arguably, this followed the trend towards the increased laxity of monastic vows evident among religious and monastic institutions alike in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In most monastic orders, this change meant 'inroads by private possessions' and 'preoccupation with personal property', and was redressed by various attempts at reform within the respective institution.\(^{48}\)

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45 King, 25; http://blessed-gerard.org/.

46 The Pie Postulatio Voluntatis confirms the ownership by the Hospital/Order of all the properties it had in 1113 and it would acquire in the future: "Perpetua honores omnes sive possessiones, quem idem Xenoachelum ultra suo cito more in Asia videbit vel in Europa aut in presenti habitet aut futurum largiente [Davum potest] adipsi tam tibi quam successoribus tuis hospitallatibus pia studia imemanenibus et par vos etdem Xenoachelio in perpetuum confirmamus, Camilleri," 34.

47 The Rule refers to the properties in the Obediences (that is in the lands owned by the order across Europe) as well as to the lands received by the brethren on behalf of the Order. King, 25; http://blessed-gerard.org/.

Within the Order of St John, the change was much more extensive than was the case in the other religious orders, and became institutionalised rather than remedied. By the thirteenth century, the statutes let transpire a divergence between the statutory 'poverty' and the actual practice. Such divergence continued to increase over the years and in the following centuries frequent Council General enactments sought to codify what possessions could be enjoyed, the degree to which a brother had control over such possessions and the extent to which he could alienate them if at all. Such statutes, effectively trace the change in the Hospitaller perception of the 'vow of poverty' over the years.

The Statutes of Alfonso of Portugal of 1206 prohibit the brethren, including the Master and the Bailiffs from entering into pledges using Hospitaller property as collateral or alienating any Hospitaller property. Property could only be sold by Bailiffs and above if the property was donated to the Hospital as alms, and the proceeds from such sales had to be sent to the Master as soon as possible. The language used, specifying what should not be done rather than what should be done, suggests that members of the Order could have actually been alienating the Order's properties or entering into pledges on behalf of third parties and using Hospitaller property as guarantee; that is using such property as if they had absolute ownership of that property rather than merely taking care of it.

The Chapter General of 1268 forbade brethren from purchasing robes costing more than three bezants unless by permission. Two years later boots were forbidden, while black, grey or natural decorated shields and saddles, as well as golden and silken embroideries. The Chapter general of 1268 also prohibited the use of black mantels with white crosses as well as scarlet sur-coats were allowed, while five years later they were allowed to put on a black and white silken mantle, with embroidery and gold or silver threads forbidden. In yet another five years, black or brown-dyed mantles with collars and buttons were allowed while long coats and short tunics were forbidden unless a brother had a cassock. Hospitallers were also forbidden to keep gold or silver swords unless they were shown to the Master or Bailiffs. Two years after the fall of Acre, brethren were forbidden from having riveted plates on gold or silken cloth, though such garments already in possession of members of the Order could be kept. The statutes of that year also let transpire that brethren possessed 'movable goods' including farm animals such as oxen, cows, sheep, other small beasts and mares and could incur debts which could be paid from such movables with the remaining accruing to the Order's bailiwicks and priories. In 1295, once more brethren were forbidden from having embroidered turbans or indeed any covering for their heads which was not white. Furthermore, they could not sell, mortgage, alienate or indeed whatever they purchased without a permission of the master and the council. In 1300, brethren were banned from wearing cote-hardie, though cassocks were allowed. The following year, the Council decreed that brethren could have all necessary things, including things which had been prohibited only a few years before such as buckrams, boots, iron, wool, leather etc. The statutes also make reference to brethren who continued to have their robes 'in town' or in a different 'taille' from that of the Order as well as to their possession of jewels which had to pass on to the Commander on

Statutes enacted in the following years clearly make reference to brethren who had their robes made outside the Order, as well as dying Hospitallers who held buckrams, cloth of gold and silken coverlets, uncut cloth, decorated shields and saddles, as well as golden and silken embroideries. The Chapter general of 1268 forbade brethren from purchasing robes costing more than three bezants unless by permission. Two years later boots were forbidden, while black, grey or natural decorated shields and saddles, as well as golden and silken embroideries. The Chapter general of 1268 also prohibited the use of black mantels with white crosses as well as scarlet sur-coats were allowed, while five years later they were allowed to put on a black and white silken mantle, with embroidery and gold or silver threads forbidden. In yet another five years, black or brown-dyed mantles with collars and buttons were allowed while long coats and short tunics were forbidden unless a brother had a cassock. Hospitallers were also forbidden to keep gold or silver swords unless they were shown to the Master or Bailiffs. Two years after the fall of Acre, brethren were forbidden from having riveted plates on gold or silken cloth, though such garments already in possession of members of the Order could be kept. The statutes of that year also let transpire that brethren possessed 'movable goods' including farm animals such as oxen, cows, sheep, other small beasts and mares and could incur debts which could be paid from such movables with the remaining accruing to the Order's bailiwicks and priories. In 1295, once more brethren were forbidden from having embroidered turbans or indeed any covering for their heads which was not white. Furthermore, they could not sell, mortgage, alienate or indeed whatever they purchased without a permission of the master and the council. In 1300, brethren were banned from wearing cote-hardie, though cassocks were allowed. The following year, the Council decreed that brethren could have all necessary things, including things which had been prohibited only a few years before such as buckrams, boots, iron, wool, leather etc. The statutes also make reference to brethren who continued to have their robes fitted 'in town' or in a different 'taille' from that of the Order as well as to their possession of jewels which had to pass on to the Commander on

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52 King, 66.
53 Ibid., 67.
54 Ibid., 68.
55 Ibid., 70.
56 Ibid., 72.
57 Ibid., 77-8.
58 Ibid., 80.
59 Ibid., 82.
60 Ibid., 87.
61 Ibid., 95.
62 Ibid., 99.
63 Ibid., 108. This was a tightly fitted jacket with long set-in sleeves, fastened by rows of closely set buttons from elbow to wrist. Fur (often ermine) was used to border it. It was worn by both men and women. It evolved in France in the fourteenth century.
their death, while that of 1303 referred to the golden and silken cloths and golden coverlets which had to go to the church and infirmary respectively. A fuller list of possessions is discernible in the statutes of 1304 which specifies which belongings should accrue to which officer in Convent, listing various forms of clothing, and rich drapes including embroidered turbans, purses, gold and silk embroidered oreillettes, birettas, brimmed hats, mantles, straps etc.

A major evolution of the concept of 'poverty' is discernible in the statutes promulgated by the Council General of 1305 which explicitly allowed Hospitallers to own private property donated to them personally by friends and relatives, though only with superiors' acquiescence. At the same time, though it decreed that Hospitallers who conceal any belongings from their superiors or who purchase, sell or exchange anything without due permission from their bailiffs, would lose their habit.

During the Rhodian period of Hospitaller history, statutes enacted by the various chapter generals continued in the same vein. Five Chapter generals under so many masters/grandmasters prohibited Hospitallers from alienating Hospitaller properties. Chapter generals held under Foulques de Villaret, Helion de Villeneuve and Giovan Battista Orsini ordered hospitallers to recover Hospitaller properties alienated from the order, with the former two allowing them a period of three years to oblige. The Chapter General of 1446, held under Jean de Lastic forbade brethren from living according to their free will, binding them to put on austere clothing. In 1467 the general chapter under Pere Ramon Zacosta decreed that brethren in convent should put on clothing pertinent to their religious status specifying that only long coats and decent mantles could be worn, with colours limited to black, grey, purple and dark blue. Footwear was likewise circumscribed.

In Malta, the freedom of Hospitallers to enjoy 'private' property both during their lifetime and on their death continued to increase. The general chapter of 1555 quantified the amount of 'private' possessions which a Hospitaller could bequeath at will on his death as not exceeding 'one-fifth' of the 'money and goods' in a brother's spoglio that remained after all the debts and credits of the deceased.

Hospitaller were honoured. This was known as the quinto. Under the magistracy of Verdalle, Hospitallers were allowed to dispose freely of the patrimonial properties inherited from their parents after obtaining a specific licence from the grandmaster. Furthermore, in Malta, Hospitallers could alienate, both during their lifetime and as a legacy after their death, any house or structure that they had built or bought in Valletta, Senglea, or Vittoriosa. Such was the case of the house bequeathed by prior Imbrol. According to Giacomo Capello's 1716 report on Malta to the Venetian Senate, by the early eighteenth century the Order discontinued this practice as Hospitallers began to invest in houses, which they were able to will freely, at the expense of the Treasury. Hospitallers could also dispose freely, upon getting a specific licence from the grandmaster of any property acquired, in whatsoever way on the Maltese Islands.
Poverty as 'non-ownership' - a justification

The Hospitaller approach to living the 'vow of poverty' was not without its critics, then and now. Zondadari's eighteenth-century apologetic discussion of that vow explicitly refers to the criticism afforded to the Hospitaller way of life by critics who deemed it too much of a stretched association to bring together wealth and poverty; 'the merits of wealthy Abraham and those of needy Lazarus'.

However, in the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth century Hospitaller theorists justified the brethren's way of life with reference to contemporary understandings of the 'vow of poverty', such as exemplified by Francesco Suarez, Juan de Lugo and Luis de Molina, which sought to set the parameters of what was allowable to professed religious and what was not, thus circumscribing the definition of poverty. Two Hospitaller theorists sought to define the parameters for the interpretation of the 'vow of poverty' within the Order of St John: the prior of Lombardy and long-time Secretary to the Treasury, Fra Giovanni Caravita in his Trattato della Povertà, and Trattato della Regola amongst others and Zondadari in his Breve e Particolare Istruzione del Sacro Ordine Militare degli Ospitalari Detto oggidi volgarmente di Malta, e della diversa professione dei fratelli d'Armadio.

The underlying precept was that the 'vow of poverty' meant that brethren were bound to live 'without property of their own' in terms of the first statute of the Order. In this regard, the term property ownership was understood to mean the faculty to use property 'according to one's will' as opposed to the need for approval by a superior. Implicitly, given that the First Statute of the Order decreed that 'our brothers have no right of property, it being vested in the Order... entrusted [only] their management to our brothers' and that they could not alienate any belongings of the Order, including their spogli, without nominal magisterial approval, it followed that Hospitallers were not infringing their 'vow of poverty'.

Quoting Suarez, Lugo and Molina all along, Caravita differentiated between various forms of ownership and use. The professed religious, he noted was not only precluded from any dominium, that is the ability to dispose of a belonging at will, but also from its usufruct, given that this implied the faculty to dispose at will of the fruits, such as rents, accruing from such property. This he stressed was denied to Hospitallers, who were only allowed the possibility to use such properties and any accruing 'fruits' for their needs.

Non-ownership could be limited in that Hospitallers could have absolute dominium, that is own manuscripts 'because they're only intellectual meditations noted on paper to assist one's memory' as well as relics and Holy paintings and sculptures made by the said Hospitallers, though concerning the latter they required permission to donate or in whatsoever way alienate the costs of colours and other materials employed!

In line with the Medieval definition of poverty discussed above, the acceptable level of use or consumption was defined by one's status in society, which in case of the Order of St John meant the noble status to which the Hospitallers were accustomed prior to their profession, avoiding superfluous consumption over and above what was deemed as pertaining to that status. Caravita clarified that Hospitallers were not allowed to use without any limit (illimitatamente) what accrued from the properties which they managed, but only whatever was necessary for the maintenance of their personal dignity taking into consideration, their status, their family, their rank within the Order, and the quality of life in the country in which they were living. Such 'consumption' included 'moderate' expenditures for 'licit games' such as jousts, and hunting.

Notwithstanding the general prohibition to alienate Hospitaller properties and monies accruing therefrom, brethren were allowed to use their 'belongings', con molta larghezza, for 'usi pij' or charitable deeds. The term could be quite far-ranging and included anything which related to the Divine Cult such as masses for...
the departed souls, and other liturgies, donations to Hospitals, confraternities, academic colleges 'since teaching is a merciful deed', as well as assisting anyone who did not have the necessary resources to live according to his or her status, including relatives. Indeed, according to Caravita, it was more meritorious to assist one's relatives than strangers. Hospitallers were allowed to support impoverished sisters, providing victuals and dowries, as well as their impoverished parents or brothers, as well as children begotten prior to one's profession into the Order, provided that such assistance was rendered in the spirit of charity and to ensure that their noble status was maintained and did not seek to enhance their family's status for vanity. However, Hospitallers who were elected bishops or to the grandmastership, were allowed to provide resources to their relatives so that they would be able to live according to the dignity pertaining to the Hospitaller's rank. Although the Statutes prohibited brethren from supporting their children born out of wedlock and recognised as one's own by calling them by one's own name, it was deemed acceptable to support such children modestly provided this was done without any publicity and the illegitimate child was not given one's family's name.

Hospitallers were also allowed to dispose freely of their possessions, assuming tacit consent of the Order, if these were deemed to be spent for the utility of the Order. Such expenditure included the provisioning of a galley, or embassies. They were also allowed, maintained Caravita, to make modest expenditures a titolo di liberalità (freely and without any reason) to their parents, such as to show them gratitude for their parentage, or for whatever other reason, provided that such expenses were made in usi honesti.

The brethren's flexibility in managing their finances was only limited to a low degree. Three statutes expressly forbade members of the Order from entering into commercial partnerships, though in practice, such partnerships were condoned by the Order, especially if a Hospitaller invested in corsairing activities and indeed returns maturing from such investments earned until the death of a Hospitaller formed part of the spoglio, as was the case with the 'investment' of the prior of Champagne, Fra Tessancourt, who had lent 200 scudi to Fra Giovanni Monfaucon Rocatagliata to operate a corsairing vessel and eventually carried onto a second vessel, at an interest rate of 30 per cent. Secondly, Hospitallers could not employ the Order's resources (that is nominally any possessions which they enjoyed) to pursue litigation in courts of justice other than those belonging to the Order. Lawsuits could only be filed in non-Hospitaler tribunals with the permission of the venerable procurators of the Treasury and by virtue of a privilege conceded to the Order by Pope Pius IV in 1560, the grandmaster together with the ordinary council, or their nominees, had the right to assume the function of a judge in any litigation in which Hospitallers were involved, both actively and passively.

Beyond the justification: the individual and the community

In practice, the Hospitaller interpretation of the 'vow of poverty' meant that each Hospitaller enjoyed full, almost unrestricted use over all assets that he acquired, he was allowed to keep any funds that he earned for himself, paying to the Treasury the passaggio (the fee one paid to enter the Order), the annual responsibilities (annual fixed payment which Hospitallers who administered Hospitaller property were bound to pay to the Treasury), the tavole (food rations) or soldea (clothing) which he received from the Order beyond the value to which he was entitled, and any incomes he received on account of the Treasury. It was only on his death that all his possessions passed to the Order's Treasury as part of the spoglio, or what Cachia calls the 'manifestation of the process whereby the theoretical totality of possessions of the Order's property, scattered as it was among the different Hospitallers, became re-integrated into the communal whole that was the Treasury' in accordance with the monastic requirement confirmed by the Council of Trent even with regards to the Order of St John that a professed religious was required to hand over to his monastery, or to his order, any goods that he or she acquired and thus the precept 'what a monk acquires, is acquired by his monastery' took effect in accordance with the vow of poverty. Whilst the spoglio was a tangible expression of that 'vow of poverty' taken solemnly on profession, during his lifetime a professed Hospitaller enjoyed what has been termed as a separate 'juridical and fiscal personality' within the Order.

In effect, this Hospitaller practice meant that although the Order was nominally the owner of all the Hospitaller possessions it was not in a position to know with any precision what the belongings of its members were (that is unless it was informed by them). Furthermore, a Hospitaller could, and often was, inclined to consider

94 AOM, 1121, f.60v.
96 Cachia, 187-8.
98 M. Bezzi and A. Grilli, Regola del Maestro, Brescia 1995, 161.
100 AOM, 1679, 120. The legal monastic precept referred to was that 'Quidque acquisit monachus, monasterii acquisit'.
101 Cachia, 210.
102 One must bear in mind that many Hospitallers had properties both on the Continent, as well as in Convent. In Malta, various Hospitallers tended to live in their own houses, while the majority of the Hospitallers had administered a commandery. Besides, given the autonomy with which Hospitallers managed their finances, a Hospitaller could owe money to various creditors, as well as being owed money by various debtors.
the property (moveable or immovable) whose usufruct he enjoyed as his own, rather than as assets belonging to the Order and as a consequence a Hospitaller was prone to bequeath these possessions to members of his family, friends, and charitable institutions. Implicitly, it betrays a latent conflict between the 'needs' of the individual Hospitaller and those of the 'Order'.

The religious profession implies the unconditional surrender of oneself to God through the community of one's choice. The 'vow of obedience' meant the subduing of one's own will — often this was the most difficult vow to live up to. The 'vow of poverty', on the other hand implied 'communal life' and 'communality of ownership'. However over the years, Hospitaller statutes and practices increasingly emphasised the role of the individual as opposed to the communal. Hence, communality, which was literally interpreted by the early Order, evolved into a theoretical notion. The change in the Hospitaller interpretation of 'poverty' or lack of individual ownership discussed above was paralleled by a similar change in the two other essential interpretations of communality - the sharing of a common dwelling, the sharing of daily meals which by the seventeenth century were retained only for the conventual chaplains and Hospitallers who had not yet acceded to the administration of a commandery. Whereas in the early Order, as in the other monastic institutions, Hospitallers lived in communities, both in Convent and on the priories, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saw the Hospitallers in Convent splitting up according to their 'nationality' into auberges. In addition, in the priories, during the course of the fourteenth century, the original hospices were stripped of their charitable dimension and transmuted into economic units of feudal administration, namely the commanderies. In Convent, the change, minimised in Rhodes by the grouping of all auberges into a fortified collachio, was amplified in Malta, especially with the move into Valletta. Hence, not only were the auberges spread around the city, but also individual Hospitallers could and did build their own houses all over the island. To name but a few the French Knight Fra Gio Batta Dolomieu had rented a house in Valletta from Maria and Giorgio Galea, the Italian Knight and renowned painter Mattia Preti lived in Zurrieq. Grandmaster Juan de Lascaris Castellar owned a house in Siggiewi.

Similarly, the theoretical sharing of meals evolved into a fixed annual allowance from the Treasury — the tavola — that was paid to all Hospitallers who did not reside in the auberge. Between the 1600s and the expulsion of the Order from Malta in 1798, each Hospitaller was allowed 60 scudi worth of food annually. Boisgelin maintains that only Hospitallers who administered a commandery that yielded an annual revenue less than 2,000 scudi were entitled to receive their tavole, but his claim was not ascertained through other sources. The commissars responsible for the report on the state of the Treasury, which was presented to the general chapter of 1612, while qualifying that only Hospitallers who did not have a commandery could receive the soldea, they did not refer to any restrictions as to who could enjoy the tavole. They merely stated: 'there are in Convent 600 professed Knights, who enjoy their tavole at the rate of 60 scudi a year'. The tavola was given either

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112 AOM 945, fl.20r et seq.
114 AOM 6385, fl.22r.
in cash or kind. In the latter case, they were given 4 salme of wheat and 4 cafisi of oil, the former at 5 scudi per salma, and the latter at 26 scudi per cafiso.

Arguably the above move away from 'the communal' may be ascribed to a number of factors: the need to administer properties spread across Europe, the increasing militarisation and aristocratisation of the Order, the 'laicisation of social and moral attitudes' of the Renaissance, and the increasing 'individualism' in Europe.

The Order owned properties across Europe, from Scotland and Wales in the north to the Iberian Peninsula and Sicily in the south, to modern-day Poland in the east. The statutes required that Hospitaller property had to be administered by the brethren themselves, thus minimising the possibility that such properties drifted into private hands by unscrupulous administrators. At the same time, in accordance with the feudal precept that an estate should be able to maintain a knight, each estate was bestowed to the administration of a single brother who was obliged to reside on that commandery. Zondadari recognised that one of the causes for the lack of communality, and thus the 'different' interpretation of the vow of poverty, was that whereas other religious orders were able to administer their properties from their convents, this could not be the case in the Order of St John for the better administration of such estates, given their spread. Mathew Paris, the English monk and chronicler, writing in the middle of the thirteenth century, described the estates possessed by the Hospitallers in England, as similar to the other secular manors, and indeed, being administered by brethren of noble birth, along the same feudal lines, there was little to differentiate them as such.

From the thirteenth century onwards, an aristocratic background was an essential prerequisite for an individual to become a knight Hospitaller. The Order was increasingly committing its resources to its military effort, due to its growing military commitments in Palestine and the crusading states. Recruiting nobles meant foregoing military training, as aristocrats were introduced to military training from a young age, as well as forgo equipping them. Indeed, according to Nicholson, there was such an urgent need for personnel that during the thirteenth century those joining the Order professed immediately, without a novitiate. As the Order developed into an organisation for sons of European aristocratic families, it responded to the patrimonial strategies of these elites, allowing members from these elites, who were generally excluded from patrimonial inheritance by virtue of primogeniture systems of inheritance, to continue enjoying an aristocratic way of life without being a burden on their families, by acceding to the different estates it held across Europe.

The expansion of trade in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the attempt to discover and assimilate the learning and values of classical Greece and Rome, attempts discernible in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, society opened itself to non-Christian world views, bringing into being new values different from the earlier Theo-centric medieval values that had inspired the Hospitaller Rule, and increasingly marked by secularist trends. Simultaneously, the expansion of trade brought about what Lisa Jardine defines as 'a culture of commodities' and an increasing preoccupation with worldly material goods.

The impact of the need to manage Hospitaller estates across Europe, the increasing aristocratisation of the Order, the laicisation of social and moral attitudes were corroborated by strengthening of the role of individual in society and what Marc Bloch calls the 'self-consciousness of the individual', a process discernible as from the eleventh century. Although the relationship between individual and society as such was seldom discussed by medieval theorists, Christian theology from the twelfth century increasingly emphasised the internalisation of devotion and ethics, putting an emphasis on the personal relationship between Christ and
the believer, and on the moral significance of intention. Thus, arguably basing himself on the Christian doctrine of personal responsibility. Innocent IV in 1245 proscribed collective excommunication arguing that a corporation, cannot commit a wrong because it is 'an incorporeal thing'. Aquinas, and eventually Mariglio of Padova and Bartholus distinguished between the collective and the individual while William of Ockham made general statements which clarified the nature of private property as something approximating to a personal right. The Italian Renaissance further strengthened the role of the individual asserting 'the dignity of man' and extracting the role of the individual from the 'theological context of salvation-history emphasising the aesthetic qualities of virtue as beauty of soul and inventiveness of spirit.

Correlated to the role and responsibility of an individual was the question of liberty and free will. This was a debate central to medieval and early modern Christian thought, including the reformation theological debates. Augustine held that man was fully free and responsible prior to the fall, but beset by inherited sin ever since. Aquinas held that human will is a rational appetite; whilst one can err, about the best choice, or fail to desire it, an individual chooses the best option in the circumstances. Duns Scotus added a second level, the will for moral rectitude or objective goodness though for him it is the personal will the total cause of all desires. William of Ockham, on the other hand, detached will from the intellect and rational desires arguing that man can knowingly reject happiness or choose evil knowingly, rejecting what reason natural inclinations counsel while God's commands determine whether an action is right or wrong. Martin Luther began the Reformation with a denial of free will arguing that justification could be obtained by faith alone; free will without God's grace is not free at all, but is the permanent prisoner and bond-slave of evil. For Calvin the individual's desire for well-being and self-preservation are attributed to God's grace which gives man his freedom. Human's will towards good rests solely upon God's will and not upon any merit in man and whatever it can do it is able to do only through grace. Catholic condemned both the teaching that the free will of man was lost through fall as well as that God's grace removes freedom from the human will, stressing that individuals must freely assent to and co-operating with God's grace. Following the Council, Spanish Jesuit philosopher Luis de Molina developed the doctrine of 'middle knowledge' which stated that while God has foreknowledge of how a human will choose to act in every situation, neither that knowledge nor God's grace define human free will because man is free if, whatever God's knowledge or allocation of grace, he 'is able to act and able not to act, or is able to do one thing in such a way that he is also able to do some contrary thing'. Francisco Suárez expanded on Molina's theory and presented the concept of 'congruism'. God does not cause man's free acts but rather He realizes his salvation by giving grace in the measure which He foresees will be in harmony with one's own will.

The Hospitaller interpretation of the 'vow of poverty' was heavily indebted to the notion of individual freedom of intent and the consequent responsibility of one's actions. Indeed, both Caravita and Zondadari stress the discretionary nature of defining what was appropriate to do or to consume. Words such as Zondadari's 'rifletter seriamente dicontinovo, la necessità di misurarsi, colia dovuta moderazione, con fini santi ed onesti, senza eccesso' all hint at the brethren's arbitrary judgment in establishing the parameters for interpreting the vow of poverty as well as the necessity to be responsible in their use of what were nominally the Order's

Ibid., 600-2.
Ibid., 591-4.
resources, and would eventually accrue to the Order on their death. The same applies for Caravita's extensive discussion to establish the principles for spending the Order's resources to assist one's relatives or in charitable deeds, establishing as benchmark the subjective 'one's status' or 'rank'.

In conclusion, one may argue that the Hospitaller interpretation of the 'vow of poverty' was a synthesis of a number of forces ranging from the practical necessity to administer properties spread across Europe and the need to attract nobles to its ranks suitable to the ongoing societal change of norms and values including the rise of the individual. The gradual evolution of how the 'vow of poverty' was interpreted within the Order reflected a corresponding change away from communal mores towards increasingly individualistic patterns of behaviour which was paralleled by an increasing recognition, amongst contemporary theorists, that one is free to act according to his will and thus responsible for his ways and means. At the same time the interpretation of that vow rested within orthodox precepts about property ownership; notions expounded by the main thinkers of the previous seven hundred years. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Council of Trent, which during its 25th session unequivocally prohibited professed members of religious orders from enjoying personal property, the Order felt that there was no need to modify its statutes or practices. It only emended its norms on administering the sacraments!}

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