



The Royal Arms of Portugal

(wood engraving from the *Definições e Estatutos dos Cavalleiros, e Freires da Ordem de Nosso Senhor Jesus Christo*, Lisboa, 1746)

Order of Christ and the Croce di Cristo

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1 - The extinction of the Temple and the origins of the Military Order of Christ

The attitude of the Iberian Kings towards the accusations brought against the Order of the Temple, by King of France Philip IV, was one of caution.

Particularly, King D. Dinis I of Portugal, initially defended the Order against the pretensions that some bishops and monastic orders had over the Templars' properties. But later on, wishing to secure the Crown's interests over the vast and strategic possessions hold by the Order in Portugal, lawsuits were promoted by the king's Courts recognizing the Crown rights over important Templars' holdings, estates and castles.^[1]

Nevertheless, the Pope's order to arrest the knights was never carried out in Portugal and by early 1310, King D. Diniz I signed a pact with his father-in-law, King D. Fernando IV of Castile, so as to protect the Templars' properties in their Kingdoms against any action which could hurt the interests of both Crowns. The King of Aragon, Jaime II, later joined the pact.

And so, the Iberian Kings' ambassadors sent to the papal court spoke as one voice opposing the transfer of the Templars' properties to anyone without the consent of the monarchs.

That is why, after the extinction of the Order of the Temple by Pope Clement V ^[2] (by the bull *Ad providam*, of May 2nd, 1312) the Temple's estates and properties were transferred to the Hospitallers, except those situated in the Kingdoms of Castile, Aragon, Majorca and Portugal.

The negotiations continued and this gave rise to the creation of the Order of Montesa, in the Kingdom of Valencia and the Order of Christ in Portugal.

Thus the Military Order of Our Lord Jesus Christ was founded in 1319 by King D. Dinis I, with the approval of Pope John XXII given by the Bull *Ad ea ex quibus*, on March 15th to succeed to the Order of the Temple within the kingdom of Portugal and of the Algarves.

The Crown's interests were henceforth guaranteed and a new militia without an international obedience was created to carry on the Temple's mission. The new Order was given the Cistercian Rule, under the Order of Calatrava version, and the power of Visitation was invested upon the Abbot of the Alcobaça Abbey. Under the King's recommendation the Pope appointed as its first Master D. Gil Martins, former Master of the Military Order of Avis.

By 1420, after the death of the last elected grand-master D. Lopo Dias de Sousa, the Order's administration and governorship was given to King John I's son, Prince Henry, Duke of Viseu and Lord of Covilhã. From this time onwards, the administration of the Order was never to leave the hands of a member of the Royal family, till 1551.

Through the late XIVth and XVth century the Order of Christ, like all the other Iberian military orders suffered an evolution which in the end led to a relinquishment of the primitive vows [3], as far as the lay knights were concerned, and to an ever growing life of great lords enjoying the fruits of the Order's vast domains, forgetting the initial main mission and *raison d'être* of fighting the infidel and defending the Holy Church.

But nevertheless, the Order kept in essence its religious military nature, with lay knights and religious friars, even after its grand-mastership was vested *in perpetuum* in the Portuguese Crown, in the reign of King John III (1551), as it had happened earlier on in Castile under King Charles I (Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor).

2- Papal awards of the Order of Christ "motu proprio"

There is historical evidence that by the middle of the XVIth century, Popes begun to confer a *Croce di Cristo* which was awarded by papal brief to reward services to the Holy See. The cross was distinctive from the Cross then born by the knights of the Military Order of Christ.

Confusion arose when some clerks at the Brief department in Rome begun, abusively and erroneously, to append the expression *Cujus Ordinis Magnus Magister est Rex Lusitaniae* in the text of the papal briefs conceding the *Croce di Cristo*. Some recipients then started to wear the insignia of the *Portuguese Military Order of Christ* convinced as they were that they had been made knights of the Portuguese *militia*, giving rise to the confusion between the *croce* and the order of Christ.

The changes made in the military orders during the XVth-XVIth centuries under papal approval, did not formally altered the order's religious nature - however different from the primitive medieval statutes - and they continued to be under the pope's guidance or rule in the spiritual sphere. Its ambiguous status laid, namely, in the fact that in the same organisation - essentially a religious one - there existed two types of members:

- a) lay friars (the knights and commanders) who enjoyed revenues from the order's properties, which were to all effects ecclesiastic revenues; and
- b) religious brothers, whether living at the Convents or as secular priests performing the other duties assigned to the order's churches and ecclesiastic dignities and offices.

But the orders, as such, still owed obedience to Rome, and the Popes always considered themselves as the Supreme Heads of these militias. On the other hand, by the middle of the XVIth century, secular orders of chivalry became common in the princely Courts of Europe and were highly sought after as a sign of nobility and social status.

These circumstances might have convinced members of the Curia in Rome that the Pope had the right to appoint knights to a military order created under a papal bull.

The erroneous practice went on, and in several books written on military orders in the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries, became common the view that the pope had the right to confer habits of the Order of Christ, since the bull of foundation of 1319. (see comment on article, [in the «Catholic Encyclopedia»'s Link](#)).

And every time the Portuguese Crown protested against this practice, Rome argued vaguely that it was founded in some bull given at the time of the Order's *secularisation*, that it derived from a previous agreement made with the Crown of Portugal.

But no documented evidence has ever been produced or found, proving that this practice was ever negotiated or acquiesced between Rome and the Portuguese Crown.

On the very contrary, from several documents from the archives of the Order or from those of the «Mesa da Consciência e Ordens» [4], evidence points out towards a systematic refusal of the Portuguese Crown to recognize or accept as valid such a practice.

Furthermore, there are several examples of knights having been admitted to the Order in the XVIth and XVIIth centuries through the established statutory procedures under a request of the Pope addressed to the King of Portugal as grand-master of the Order.

3 - The position assumed by the Crown of Portugal

In late XVIth century, already under the Spanish Dual Monarchy, D. Jorge de Ataíde - president of the «Mesa da Consciência e Ordens», in a report to the King in Madrid, commenting on the fact that the Pope had given in Rome, the "habit" of the Order of Christ to a certain Papirio Picedi, recommended that the King should protest at once and request the Pope to abstain from such practices [5].

Another known example of this controversial papal practice, dates from the XVIIth century, when after a papal brief a habit of Christ was given at Valladolid by the local bishop. The «Mesa da Consciência e Ordens» having heard of it, immediately reacted (February 20th, 1627), considering the fact a very serious one and at once recommended that the King should prohibit the false knight from wearing the insignia within its realms, and that the Bishop should be censured for having carried out a papal brief without the King's consent [6].

Again in the XVIIIth century, it is also recorded an incident that took place in the reign of King John V, involving an Italian architect named Giovanni Servandoni, who had been called to Portugal, in 1745-1746, for the drawing of the plans for the construction of the Royal Palace and Convent of Necessidades [7], in Lisbon.

Servandoni, who had allegedly been made by the Pope a knight of the Order of Christ, unduly bore the insignia of the Order in Lisbon. However, King John V, considering that the only legitimate "fons honoris" was the king of Portugal, being as he was the Order's Grand-Master, forbade Servandoni to wear the insignia and had him arrested.

As late as 1825, the Portuguese Crown sent its protest to Rome reacting to the Pope's award of the Order of Christ "motu proprio" to several people, considering it unlawful and requesting the immediate cessation of that practice [8].

Notes:

[1] Fortunato de Almeida, *História da Igreja em Portugal*, vol. I, reimpr., Porto-Lisboa, Civilização, 1967, pp. 152-156;

[2] Upon the pressures by Philip IV, the Fair, King of France, the Pope had gathered a Council at Vienne to pass judgement on the Knights Templars, but the bishops refused to judge them without hearing the accused. So, under Philip's growing pressure Pope Clement V decided "motu proprio" the suppression of the Order, by the bull *Vox in excelso* (March). For a modern account of the abolition of the Temple cf. BARBER, Malcom, *The New Knighthood*, Canto, 1995, pp. 280-335.

[3] The primitive vows of poverty and of chastity (in the Orders of Christ and Avis) were transformed by the end of the XVth and beginning of the XVIth centuries with Papal approval.

[4] It was simultaneously a High Court of Justice, a Royal Body with consulting powers and charged with the administration of the properties and governing of the affairs of the Military Orders. It was created in the reign of King John III, and abolished by the Liberal reforms, in the beginning of the XVIIth century. The process of admission to the Orders and the nomination to the Order's lay and ecclesiastic offices, run before this Court, which also enquired as to the applicants' nobility, age, social status, "purity of blood" and all the other conditions of admission. The process, in case of acceptance, ended with a recommendation to the King grand-master, who then would have the proper documents drawn up for admission. The importance of this body, of which little is still known today, is that it "controlled" the complex process of admission to the Orders and had an important role, though not decisive, in the conferment of "*dispensas*" exemptions) - some of the conditions of admission could be dispensed by the King or by Rome, upon the applicant's request.

[5] cf. Fernanda OLIVAL, *Para uma Análise Sociológica das Ordens Militares no Portugal de Antigo Regime (1581-1621)*, I Vol., (Master's degree thesis at the University of Lisbon), Lisboa, 1988, unpublished, p. 148, note 72.

[6] in ANTT, *Mesa da Consciência*, L.º. 29, fl. 99; this information was kindly given by our friend Dra. Fernanda Olival, a scholar in the modern history of the military orders, to whom we wish to express here our gratitude and valuable comments on the subject. Dra. Olival, lecturing at the University of Évora, is presently preparing a doctoral thesis on the military orders, and has written many crucial papers on the subject.

[7] Cf. Marques POLIANO, *Ordens Honoríficas do Brasil*, Imprensa Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, 1943, pp. 68-69; Ambassador Dr. Miguel H. CORTE-REAL, *O Palácio das Necessidades*, Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros, Lisboa, 1983, p. 18.

[8] *Diplomatic Note* by the Count of Funchal, Portuguese Ambassador to the Holy See, addressed to the Cardinal Secretary of State, July 6th, 1825.

Related Links:

[G. Stair Saintry's *The Supreme Order of Our Lord Jesus Christ*](#), with the "traditional", though erroneous, point of view on the origins of the Papal Order

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