

## The Piccolo Soccorso

The arrival of the *Piccolo Soccorso* reinforcement from Sicily on 3 July 1565 under the command of Chev. De Robles gave a measure of reprieve to the Grand Master who led the newly arrived Knights to St Lawrence Church for thanksgiving prayers. Following two furious attacks on Fort St Michael and on *I-Ixprun* (now Senglea Point) between 25-28 July 1565 which were successfully subdued, other thanksgiving services were held when more Turkish banners were presented to the Church. During those religious functions, the capuchin Fra Roberto d'Eboli delivered eloquent sermons.

August was the worst in the annals of the siege when fierce assaults were launched against Birgu and Fort St Michael. During one such onslaught, a message was sent to the Grand Master beseeching help and prayers. The messenger found the Grand Master already engaged in prayer at St Lawrence Church.

St Lawrence Day on 10 August 1565, the feast of Birgu's patron saint, was another day of fierce and incessant fighting at Birgu and at Fort St Michael in Senglea. While the attack was repulsed, the corpse of Admiral De Monte, the Knight Commander of Fort St Michael, was on that day brought to the church for the funeral rites. This brought great sorrow and sadness to the defenders and all sobbed for his loss. This touching scene was soon to be repeated as two other Knights followed his fate as their bodies were laid to rest at the Church crypt.

Some time later, the congregation again gathered at St Lawrence Church, this time to hear the Grand Prior read from the church's pulpit His Holiness Pope Paul IV's Bull, that had just reached Birgu from Rome, that a Plenary Indulgence was granted to those who were fighting bravely in defence of the Christian Religion.

## Storming of the Post of Castille

On 20 August 1565 Fra Roberto d'Eboli initiated a *Triduum* of continuous prayer to the Blessed Virgin, and it was during this celebration that a terrific noise was heard coming from the direction of the Post of Castille at Birgu. It was afterwards learned that a portion of the bastion had collapsed and the Turks had made a fissure and were passing through. Instantaneously, Grand Master De La Vallette rushed to the Post of Castille to join the defenders. On 29 August 1565, while Fra Roberto d'Eboli was delivering a sermon, he claimed to have had an extraordinary vision where St John the Baptist and St Lawrence were imploring the Heavenly Queen on their knees to intercede for the deliverance of the Islands from the Ottomans.

Indeed, good tidings soon followed as the lookouts from the watch tower in Birgu square reported sighting the fleet of His Sicilian Majesty with a sizable relief force led by Don Garcia De Toledo. The advent of support was a sign of the approaching turn of events of the siege. On 7 September 1565 the bells of St Lawrence Church, which until then were silent, burst into a loud pealing announcing the victory as the enemy fled in disarray. This was vividly described by Chev. Francesco Balbi, the chronicler of the siege, who witnessed the joyful event. As a gesture of gratitude to the Blessed Virgin for her intercession during the siege, Grand Master De La Vallette presented his Battle Sword and Hat to the holy icon of Our Lady of Damascus in the Greek chapel dedicated to her at Birgu.

## Victory

On that happy occasion, the Grand Master led a procession from Birgu square to St Lawrence Conventual Church and attended a High Mass in which a solemn *Te Deum* was intoned. The sacred icon of Our Lady of Philermos dominated the main altar. The reinforcements sent from Sicily entered the ruined city of Birgu on 14 September 1565 and proceeded rightaway to St Lawrence Church. Five months later, the Grand Master and the Knights were again in St Lawrence Church at the start of a Grand Council of the Order. During that meeting held at the Magisterial Palace the Order drew up a perpetual programme to commemorate the Great Siege victory and also to build a new city. A biblical inscription in Latin on a marble tablet was installed over the Main Gate of Birgu which read *Thou hast overshadowed my head in the days of war Ps. 139*). Grand Master De La Vallette renamed the city of Birgu with the name it deserved: Vittoriosa. Some 50 years later, another Grand Master caused a Victory Monument to be built at Vittoriosa square.

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# Vittoriosa

## ST LAWRENCE CHURCH

### ITS CONNECTION WITH THE GREAT SIEGE OF 1565

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## San Lorenzo a Mare

St Lawrence Church is closely connected with the Great Siege of 1565, a crucial event in the history of Malta. The Church had been already the parish church of Birgu for more than 400 years before the Order of St John established it as its Conventual Church in 1530. It was until then known by the inhabitants as *San Lorenzo a Mare* because of its proximity to the wharf.

## Conventual church

The church existing at that time was not very old, having been reconstructed in 1508, with a statue of St Sebastian being added to its facade in 1515 as thanksgiving for the deliverance of the city from a fatal epidemic. It was a simple Siculo-Norman structure with a low wooden roof. In Easter of 1532 the church accidentally caught fire and Grand Master L'Isle Adam build a new Gothic temple in its place, bearing the coat of arms of the Grand Master and the Order. The new church incorporated chapels for the eight langues of the Order.

Adjacent to the new church a chapel was built where the holy icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Philermos brought to Malta by the Order from Rhodes was venerated. The sacred relics of the Order, the *Tolo*, were safely conserved in this chapel. Another holy icon of the Blessed Virgin also brought from Rhodes, that of Our Lady Damascene, was placed in another small church close by belonging to the Greek community at Birgu.

Near the high altar of St Lawrence Church there was the royal throne of the Grand Master. The church was administered by the Grand Prior of the Order who enjoyed various episcopal privileges. The clergy in this church continued to celebrate in this inherited special rite until 1935 when these privileges were suppressed following a Regional Council held in Malta.



## Onset of the siege

The first occasion that St Lawrence Church is mentioned in the Great Siege records was on Thursday, 17 May 1565 when the Ottoman fleet consisting of 180 galleys and carrying an army of 40,000 troops was sighted from the watch tower that stood in the square of Birgu. Grand Master Jean De La Vallette on that day summoned all the forces numbering some 5,000 to attend a religious service. He urged them to face the imminent invasion with courage and allocated them to their defence posts.



St Lawrence Church was the main place of worship where the Knights met and prayed throughout the siege. On 25 May 1565, as the Turkish attack of Fort St Elmo was being set, the Grand Master appealed for volunteers and gathered them in the church for prayer before they faced the enemy in the oncoming confrontation.

## Fra Roberto d'Eboli's preachings

On 27 May 1565, Fra Roberto d'Eboli, a capuchin who had arrived in Malta just before the start of the siege and who had joined the defenders within Fort St Elmo, was wounded and brought to Birgu's *Sacra Infermeria*. He brought with him some Turkish banners captured during one of the assaults on Fort St Elmo. These banners, as was customary, were presented to the church. The body of Fra De Medran, who was among the first to be killed, was brought from Fort St Elmo to St Lawrence Church for the funeral service, followed by his burial in the church crypt. This lied beneath the church and was the reserved burial place for the Knights. The wounded capuchin, conscious of the need for prayers, initiated at St Lawrence Church the forty hour Eucharistic adoration still known as *kuranturi*.

Thursday, 21 June 1565 was the solemn feast of Corpus Christi. In spite of the desperate fighting going on at Fort St Elmo, all the Knights gathered at the Conventual Church to honour the Blessed Sacrament. A high Mass was officiated by the Grand Prior who also distributed Holy Communion. The procession in which all took part did not proceed the usual way because of the war peril. The Grand Master himself was among those carrying the canopy under which the Holy Sacrament was borne. That evening, as was the practice for the Order, the Grand Master gave a banquet to the poor.

## Fall of Fort St. Elmo

Three days later was the feast of St John the Baptist, but although he was the patron saint of the Order, the celebration was held in deep sadness as it coincided with the fall of Fort St Elmo. At the conclusion of the Mass, after the *Ite Missa est*, the Grand Master delivered a moving speech of encouragement to those present. Afterwards, a check-up of the forces was made at Birgu square.

When heavy attacks subsequently assailed Birgu and Fort St Michael, the Grand Master, doubting the arrival of the requested assistance from the Sicilian Viceroy, often assembled everyone at the Church of St Lawrence to pray for the deliverance of these Islands. He himself was a staunch devotee of Our Lady of Philermos then worshipped at St Lawrence Church.