



39. THE MILITARY-MONASTIC ORDERS

The events that occurred during the 11th century had important repercussions on the civil structure of Latin Christianity. The feudal system, which had shaped the structure of the Empire on the hierarchy of the initiatic paths of the warrior caste, had entered in crisis. The Roman Catholic Church, restored by the will of the Emperors, became the main rival of the Holy Roman Empire on the political and secular levels. The denial of the imperial sacredness, disseminated through bishoprics and parishes with the help of monasteries that by then had fallen subordinate to the papal authority, allowed the dissolution of the oath of loyalty that bound the imperial subjects to the Emperor. Driven by ambition, the great feudal lords exploited the situation to loosen their ties with the Empire. First were the sovereigns of the national kingdoms who took advantage of the moment to create domains under the direct ownership of their crowns. This was the first step towards the phenomenon known as 'absolutism'. Soon enough, also dukes and princes followed their example, bringing divisions and civil wars to the very heart of Christianity. Increasingly attracted by the temporal power, the rebellious vassals became oblivious of their sacred functions, particularly of the initiatic ones, which were the very reason for their magisterial position towards the nobles who wished to follow the initiatic path of chivalry.



1. The Lord of a castle initiates a knight

More and more rarely did the aspiring knights find true masters in castles and palaces. In light of this, some groups of knights gathered around a knight-master, forming orders on the model of the monastic ones, thus freeing themselves from the feudal system in force up until then¹. The first, and rather ephemeral, orders were the Saints Cosmas and Damian's Knights (~1030) and the Knights of the Tau (~1050). However, it was only at the outset of the Crusades that the most important chivalrous orders with initiatic functions in favour of the entire Latin Christianity were founded².

¹ It goes without saying that this innovation further weakened the bond between feudalism and initiation. Notwithstanding, many coming personalities, especially in the imperial sphere, not infrequently manifested great awareness and doctrine; occasionally making their social function coincide with the initiatic-knightly function of *Imperator*. Among these we will mention Frederick I Hohenstaufen, his grandson Frederick II and Henry VII of Luxembourg.

² Aristide Michel Perrot, *Storia degli Ordini Cavallereschi*, Milano, Tip. Libr. Pirotta, 1837.





Attacked in Anatolia by the hordes of the Seljuk Turks¹, Alexios I Komnenos, Emperor of the Eastern Empire, requested military assistance to the pope and to the Western Empire. Consequently, in 1095 Pope Urban II preached the First Crusade in order to free the sepulchre of Christ and the places of his earthly deeds from the infidels' yoke². Henry IV, who was then Holy Roman Emperor, weakened by the constant conflicts with his sons and the elector princes provoked by the political manoeuvres of the popes, was unable to take command of the massive expedition that was preparing to march towards the Holy Land. It was, therefore, not a coincidence that the lords who took advantage of the imperial absence were in large part Norman, French and German rebels.



2. The crusaders liberate Jerusalem

The very best of Western aristocracy flooded the Near East, easily liberating those territories of the Byzantine Empire from the Islamic invasion³. However, in the absence of a supreme sovereign authority, the various princes soon began to rival for the conquered territories. Naturally, no land was returned to the *Basileus*, as the leaders of the expedition were instead carving out new fiefdoms, resulting in dangerous fractures in the Crusaders' army.

With the liberation of Jerusalem (1099), the massive influx of pilgrims from all over Europe was resumed. Due to the rivalry among the leaders of the Crusade, the pilgrimage routes continued to be insecure and infested by bands of brigands and vulnerable to Turkish-Arab raids. To protect the pilgrims, three groups of knights decided to organize themselves into militias. The first of these Knightly Orders was that of the Holy Sepulchre (1099), which garrisoned the homonymous Basilica. The second Order was that of the Hospitallers of Saint John (1113). The third was the Order of the Solomon's Temple (1118). These last two devoted themselves to receiving the pilgrims arriving on the

¹ The Seljuks had already settled in Persia. In fact, having embraced Sunni Islam, they took control of the Abbasid caliphate (Peter Frankopan, *The first Crusade*, Rearsby (U.K.), W.F. Howes Ltd, 2012).

² Certain romantic literature has indulged in possible 'initiatic' exchanges between Christian chivalry and the *futuwwa* of Islamic Sufism (Pio Filippini Ronconi, *Ismaeliti e "Assassini"*, Il Cerchio, San Marino, 2004). In fact, there is no record of these exchanges, neither from Western nor from Islamic sources. The doctrinal influences exercised by Sufism in favor of the Christian knightly initiation are just as fleeting, as will be seen when we discuss Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore*. As for the supposed influence exerted by the Ismaelites, the Nizaris, the Druzes or by other similar groups, this is to be a matter of grave suspicion, considered the heterodox inspiration of these Middle Eastern sects. At most, there is often to recognize a mutual chivalrous behavior, which, however, can be explained by the mentality of that time, inadequate to prove anything else.

³ Jacques Le Goff, *Medieval Civilization*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1988, pp. 69-70.





shores of Palestine and to escorting them safely to Jerusalem. The Templars formed the vanguard, the Hospitallers the rear-guard¹. In all three Orders the knights could also assume the priesthood, becoming canons according to the rule of Saint Augustine². The Order of the Temple soon obtained the transmission of the Benedictine monasticism from Saint Bernard, who also wrote the rule *De Laude Novae Militiae* (1129).



3. Hospitaller (left) and Templar knights (right)

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was the last of the great figures of Latin monasticism and the last of the Fathers of the Church. Born into a family of the high Burgundian nobility³, at the age of twenty-two he became a Cistercian Benedictine monk. Far from being a mystic⁴, Saint Bernard was one of the last initiates in Latin monasticism, well aware of both the depth of the esoteric doctrines that he had received and of the sad historical period in which he lived.



4. St. Bernard gives the Rule to the Templars

¹ It is interesting to note that in India the *Nāgā bābā* order of *saṃnyāsīn* fighters perform a similar function of protection for the pilgrims. To be precise, the vanguard is composed of the śaṃkarian *Nāgā*, while the rāmānujan form the rearguard. Due to the greater prestige of the vanguard, scuffles often occur when the rāmānujan *Nāgā* try to supplant the other order. Similarly, the Hospitallers often tried, sword in hand, to supplant the Templars in the vanguard.

² In truth, the Hospitallers initially followed the rule of Saint Benedict, but soon assumed the Augustinian canonry, a less strict monastic rule.

³ He was third cousin of the Duke of Burgundy. Recently we read an ecclesiastical biography of the Saint that traces his origins back to a family of the small nobility. Evidently, in the eyes of today's proletarian church such illustrious origins must be a matter of shame. Something similar has happened for Dante, who is often passed off as a Florentine bourgeois.

⁴ René Guénon, *Saint Bernard*, Paris, Les Éditions traditionnelles, 1929.



His doctrinal authority and his holiness of life led him to perform very high initiatic functions, as well as, external actions of great responsibility in an attempt to straighten the situation in which Catholicism had plunged¹. His authority was recognized by popes and Emperors, by bishops and Kings, by monks and knights. He was often distracted from the contemplative life to settle disputes between sovereigns, popes and bishops, spiritual authority and temporal power.

Well aware of the state of retraction of the Catholic monastic initiation and of the crisis of feudal chivalry, he wanted to commission the Order of the Temple to become the new chivalry (*Nova Militia*) for the transmission and the defence of initiation in the Latin context². He brought together in the Order of the Temple the two transmissions (*paramparā*) that he, as a monk and a knight, had united in his person. Therefore, the Temple became the ark that for a couple of centuries preserved all the Latin initiatic paths from the investigations, abuses and persecutions carried out by the secular powers at the service of papal hegemony. In fact, the Templars enjoyed complete autonomy from both the Empire and the papacy, as was the case in ancient times for monastic orders³.



5. The Charge of the Templar Knights

The legendary military prowess of the Templars, their severe asceticism and their crusade activities at the frontier of Christendom in the attempt to reconquer and submit vast areas invaded by Infidels, the Holy Land, the Iberian Peninsula and Eastern Europe, have long gone down in history. To this end, the Order of the Temple gave origin to local filiations, equally famous for their self-denial and courage, namely the Orders of Alcantara, of Calatrava and of Santiago in Spain, as well as, the Teutonic Order and Livonian Brothers of the Sword in Germany.

If on one hand these adaptations preserved the initiatic tradition, on the other hand marked the failure of the Carolingian and Ottonian project to establish a comprehensive Western Tradition. The four-caste social system was never brought to fulfilment. Only the aristocracy was stably structured by birth-right, while the other social classes remained confused in their characteristics, completely inadequate to constitute an organic society. The priesthood could be accessed by individuals from the most diverse origins. The clergy never identified itself institutionally with wisdom, but instead represented a bureaucratic hierarchy of functionaries of the temporal power of the popes. Monasticism, which for

¹ Previously, only Saint Boniface exerted the same charisma and undisputed authority in the religious, political, initiatic and cultural domains. In some ways, such personality can be compared in modern India only to that of *Svāmī Kārapātri* (*L'Uomo e il sacro in India: Svāmī Kārapātri*, a cura di Gianni Pellegrini, Venezia, *Indoasiatica* 5/2009, Cafoscarina).

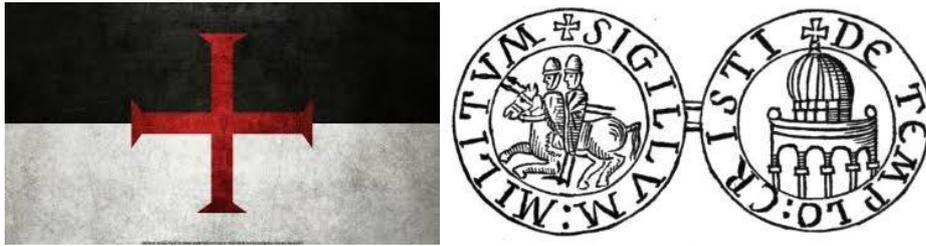
² San Bernardo, *De Laude Nova Militiae*, I Quaderni dell'Excalibur, Roma, Ist. Romano di Ricerca Interdisciplinare, 1977.

³ Over the time, the Order of the Hospitallers became increasingly subject to papal authority. Differently, the Order of the Holy Sepulchre operated, since its establishment, under the dependence of the Catholic patriarch of Jerusalem, and only from the XV century under that of the Pope of Rome. This Order, rooted in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, participated to a lesser extent in the war events and remained always in the shadow of the other two more prominent Orders.





centuries had been the repository of knowledge, became secularized between the 10th and 11th century, thus becoming a useless duplicate of the secular clergy. The new mendicant orders of the Dominican and Franciscan friars devoted themselves only to activities of social utility¹. Only in the Universities was theology cultivated, but of a philosophical nature, completely detached from authentic gnosis. The members to the third state, the citizens or bourgeois, were censured as such only based on their wealth. A loss of wealth corresponded to a loss in social status. Inversely, had a commoner enriched himself, he could have obtained the citizenship. This made possible to move from one craft guild to another, thus encouraging competition, the struggle between classes and the social chaos that later came true in Western civilization.



6. 6. Banner (*Beau Séant*) and seal of the Templars

The initiatic domain, which was previously present within all the social components, became even more withdrawn in an esoterism that was increasingly seen with malevolence by the representatives of the external religion. Nevertheless, thanks to the Order of the Temple, the Latin world was still able to produce some grandiose monuments of initiatic wisdom.

Gian Giuseppe Filippi

¹ *Gli ordini mendicanti e la città. Aspetti architettonici, sociali e politici*, J. Raspi Serra (a cura di), Milano, Guerini Studio, 1991.