



The Military and Hospitaller Order of St Lazarus of Jerusalem

50th Grand Master: H.E. Don Francisco de Borbon Graf von Hardenberg

GRAND PRIORY OF THE MALTESE ISLANDS

Incorporating the Commandery of Gozo

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Grand Prior's Message

Saint Lazarus of Bethany – Patron Saint of the Order

Feast day 17th December

The earliest available statutes of the Order of Saint Lazarus, currently held at the Benedictine Monastery in Seedorf, Switzerland, include a religious calendar around which the religious functions of the community centred. Important feasts for the community are transcribed in red, in contrast to the regular ones that are transcribed in black. These important feasts include the feast day dedicated to the Patron Saint of the Order – St Lazarus of Bethany – celebrated, then as today, on the 17th December. Another feast day dedicated to St Lazarus of Bethany celebrated by the community was the supposed day of his birth on the 29th October – when, according to the prevalent statutes, a vigil was to be held. There was, in the community's religious calendar, no mention whatsoever of the feast day of Lazarus the Beggar of the parable that falls on the 21st June.

What has always intrigued me is the reason behind the association of the feast day of St Lazarus with Advent. I would have thought that the feast day commemorating the 'friend of Jesus' who was resurrected from



death to be related and of special relevance to Jesus Resurrection in Easter. After all his resurrection did take place a few days before the Good Friday events. However, the early Christian Church has associated 'Jesus friend' St Lazarus with the birth of the Christian Sun – Jesus, nine days before Christmas. What is the relationship between death and resurrection and the birth of Jesus?



The Advent period sees the onset of a new religious calendar. The period invites each and every one of us to prepare ourselves for the rebirth of Our Lord Jesus Christ. This rebirth should not simply be a commemoration of an event that took place over 2000 years ago, but rather it should serve as an occasion to allow Jesus to be reborn within us and to change our relationships with those around us - To love our neighbour as Jesus loved us - unconditionally. The period generally serves

for us to make New Year's Resolutions to address our faults and better ourselves - to become more conscious of those who are suffering around us. The Birth of Jesus must theologically be linked to his eventual death and resurrection - there would, after all, have been no scope in God's plan to let Jesus be born if not for Him to die for us and give us hope of eternal life after our death. The linking of the feast of St Lazarus with Christmas should serve to remind us that after death there will be a rebirth. Thus, in our day-to-day life, we should at this time let our faulted selves die to be reborn in a better mould.



St Lazarus of Bethany has served as the Patron Saint for lepers. The relationship was based on the fact that St Lazarus was after his resurrection by Jesus was considered as "the living dead", as were also the victims of leprosy before effective treatment was developed. The ravages of leprosy on its victims included the gradual destruction of the individual's features and limbs - a destruction that emulates the decomposing process - a factor that caused society to shun these individuals and to exclude them from the community. The original brethren of the Order of Saint Lazarus put away this general aversion towards lepers and established institutions where these victims of this dreaded infection were cared for.

These Lazarite brethren, often coming from noble families, adopted the inverse attitude of the rich man in the parable told by Jesus - the Parable of Poor Lazarus. The rich man in the parable did not undertake to directly increase the suffering of Lazarus, he simply ignored him completely. While indulging himself, he was indifferent to the suffering of those around him - the suffering of Lazarus whose wounds were being cared for by the stray dogs rather than the

community in which he lived in. The sin of the rich man in the parable was not a sin of commission but rather one of omission. He simply did not care!

There are so many individuals who are suffering in the world today, in the Maltese Islands, in our community. Let us become attuned to their suffering and in the limits of our resources help reduce the suffering of these individuals in need. Let us love our neighbour as Jesus loved us. Let us use this Christmas to bring about a rebirth within us - a rebirth that sensitizes us to the suffering around us. Let us emulate the Good Samaritan of the parable who went out of his comfort zone to help those in need. Let us endeavour not to be accused of sins of omission.

**May I take the opportunity to wish all of you
a contemplative St Lazarus Feast Day,
a joyful Christmas,
and
a New Year personal renewal.**