

## Our Heritage Saved...: Victory Church – a tribute to Grand Master la Valette

by Victor J Rizzo

Grand Master Jean Parisot de la Valette died on 21 August 1568. After four hundred and forty years to the day, there is still no monument to the Grand Master in the city he conceived, now listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

According to his wishes he was buried in Victory Church, the first building in Valletta built at his specific request. By the order of Grand Master Jean de la Cassiere, his remains were later moved to the Grand Masters' vault in the new Conventual Church of St John in 1579.

Victory Church was built on the spot where a religious ceremony was held with great pomp on 28 March 1566 to inaugurate the laying of the foundation stone of the new city. A decorated altar was



erected and, on the arrival of Grand Master la Valette, Mass was celebrated with the accompaniment of music and the firing of shots from all the fortresses. An inscription made in 1924 was affixed to one side of the church

to commemorate the foundation stone of Valletta.

The original smaller chapel, constructed in 1567, is attributed to the Maltese military architect Gerolamo Cassar. Built in a traditional basilica plan, with a barrel-vaulted ceiling and two side altars, the church was dedicated to the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin. It was commonly known as the church of Our Lady of Victory in memory of the victory over the Turks on 7 September 1565 – the eve of the day the birth of the Virgin Mary is commemorated.

The vault paintings by the accomplished Maltese artist Alessio Erardi (c.1671-1727), depicting episodes from the Life of the Virgin, were commissioned by Grand Master Ramon Perellos in 1716.

Our Lady of Victory Church served as the Conventual Church of the Order until 1577, when the new Church of St John was completed. In 1617 it became the Parish Church of the Order in Valletta.

Reconstruction in 1690, under Grand Master Perellos, included a bust of Pope Innocent XII above the central window of the façade. In 1752, Fra Montelieu, Bailiff of Majorca, enlarged the church by adding an apse behind the main altar, extended the nave, built a new façade and a bell-tower.

The church suffered a lot of deterioration over the years, both to its structure and to the paintings. Being one of the most historically important buildings on our island, Din I-Art Helwa was always concerned by the state of the building and its artistic treasures.

In 2000, the Restoration Unit within the Ministry for Infrastructure and Resources entered into a joint venture with Din I-Art Helwa, the Valletta Rehabilitation Project, and the Museums Department to carry out restoration work on the structure aiming to re-establish the church to its former glory.

Repairs commenced at roof level on the bell tower and the decorative elements at the top of the façade which were in a perilous state and in part missing. This included the finials and frontispiece. Works, completed in the summer of 2001, were sponsored by Computime Ltd. as part of their 20th anniversary.

The restoration of the external structure was completed in 2004. The contribution by Din I-Art Helwa was possible thanks to a generous sponsorship by Pricewaterhouse Coopers.

The Valletta Rehabilitation Committee has embarked on an ambitious project to restore the vault paintings in consultations with Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London.

The intensive conservation process is on a very large scale.

The results obtained so far are astonishing. Din I-Art Helwa is eager to participate further in this task.

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Be a guardian of Malta's heritage by becoming a member of Din I-Art Helwa. For more details send an e-mail to [info@dinlarthelwa.org](mailto:info@dinlarthelwa.org) indicating your name and forwarding address, or visit our website [www.dinlarthelwa.org](http://www.dinlarthelwa.org).

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