THE MALTESE Corsairs and
THE ORDER OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM

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Piracy flourished in the Mediterranean basin since the earliest times. It is known that the ancient Egyptians and the Greeks raided the Eastern Mediterranean in such numbers that the Phoenicians and, later on, the Romans had to maintain squadrons of galleys to police their trade routes and to keep the sea-robbers in check.

A vigorous revival of piracy occurred from the 11th Century onwards following the Crusades which imparted a new life to the Mediterranean through the establishment of trade relations between Europe and the Levant. This flow of commerce between East and West attracted the lawless elements of all nationalities and creeds so that the Middle Sea was soon seething with bandits, outlaws and thieves.

Christian corsairs from the West ventured eastward to plunder Turkish ships and possessions in the Levant, while Moslem sea-robbers from the Barbary coasts attacked European shipping and ports. On many occasions these Moslem raiders descended on Malta and Gozo, while Christian marauders, too, did not scruple from making occasional inroads on our Islands (1). The havoc wrought by all these sea-robbers is perpetuated in our written records, traditions and legends; but it is not so well known that concurrently with the ascendency of Moslem pirates in the Middle Sea the Maltese Islands became themselves the thorny nest of many a Maltese corsair who preyed on Turkish and Moorish commerce. Indeed a modern Maltese historian re-

marks, in this respect, that our ancestors appear to have been sinners as well as sinned against (2).

It seems that the Maltese began taking to the sea as corsairs during the occupation of Malta by the Arabs in 870 A.D. Until then, their main occupations had been agriculture, the breeding of live stock and fishing. The exercise of piracy by Maltese seamen continued, after the expulsion of the Arabs from Malta, throughout the successive dominations of the Normans, Swabians, Angevines and Aragonese.

Far from being condemned as a nefarious calling, piracy received the encouragement and the patronage of the government of the day as it helped materially to keep the Moslems at bay and also to contribute, by means of the captured goods, to the victualling of the Islands which even in those remote times had to rely on outside sources of food to feed the inhabitants in spite of the existence of a much smaller number of mouths than prevail to-day. By the 10th Century the Maltese pirates shared with the Greeks, the Sardinians and the Genoese, the reputation of being “the worst members of the fraternity of rovers” (3).

Noble families from Sicily came to settle in Malta on account of the great opportunity for the exercise of the “course” against the Moslems, arming galleys, galleots and other boats for this purpose. Several of them became the possessors of riches and the owners of numerous slaves while the men who manned their ships became expert seamen and pilots (4).

A feudal lord of Malta of the 13th Century — Count Henry of Malta or Enrico Pescatore as he was also known — organised and led piratical expeditions like his subjects. This Genoese count did not limit himself to attacks on shipping, especially of the Venetian Republic, but having put together a number of ships invaded the Island of Crete and proclaimed himself its lord in 1206. He fortified Crete with fourteen towers but he was defeat-

(1) G. A. Vassallo, Storia di Malta (Malta, 1854), p. 189.
(3) S. Lane-Poole, The Barbary Corsairs, (London, 1890), p. 24.
(4) G. F. Abela, Descrittione di Malta, (Malta, 1647), p. 447.
ed by the Venetians and ultimately driven away from that Island in 1208 (5).

By 1371 the corsairs of Malta had become notorious. Their offensive powers had increased to such an extent as to draw upon them the wrath of the Genoese who by means of ten galleys raided the Island as a reprisal for the Maltese corsairs' attacks on Christian merchant shipping (6). In spite of this occurrence, Maltese piracy continued to receive official support. The state exempted Maltese corsairs from the payment of the custom dues on wheat and other foodstuffs consumed by their crews. This privilege stirred ship owners to greater efforts so that by the turn of the 15th Century the corsair fleet of Malta became so important and the practice of piracy so profitable that it was no longer deemed necessary to give it any further protection. Indeed, during the reigns of King Martin I and King Martin II of Sicily (1402-1410), the privilege of the tax-free importation of foodstuffs for corsair crews was withdrawn while a levy of twenty per cent, in favour of the Sicilian Admiralty, was imposed on the booty. These innovations, however, had a detrimental effect on corsairing so that in 1409 the Malta Municipality, in an attempt to prevent the undoing of the corsair trade and to safeguard the interests of Maltese pirates against the rapacity of their royal suzerain, pressed for the repeal of the provisions enacted by the Martins.

In advocating these protective measures, the Municipality did not then foresee that in the long run they were destined to create a new set of difficulties which far from inducing the Municipality to continue to promote the "guerre de course" obliged it to take steps in the opposite direction. What brought about this change of policy was the circumstance that owing to the Islands' strategic position in the main stream of Mediterranean commerce and to the security of their harbours, the Maltese Islands became the lair of sea-robbers that lurked in the creeks and inlets to spy and swoop down upon the defenceless merchant shipping that passed in their vicinity. Other sea mercenaries, who were wont to lend their services as auxiliaries in the maritime conflicts that tore rival Christian powers, also made the Islands their base. The consequence of this maritime development was that many of the Maltese manhood, stirred by a spirit of adventure or attracted by the prospects of wealth, abandoned their peaceful agrarian pursuits to join these adventurers of the sea; but far from returning to Malta laden with riches most of them never saw their native shores again and disappeared without leaving a trace as to their fate.

This exodus of men brought about such a serious depletion of the male element of the population that the Municipality became gravely alarmed (7). When one considers that over-population has been Malta's sore problem for the last one hundred years, it becomes hard to realise that five centuries ago the difficulty facing the government of those days was how to prevent the whittling down of the Islands' male inhabitants and how to maintain a sufficiently large population. In their efforts to stop this human denudation, the municipalities of Malta and Gozo sent ambassadors to the Viceroy of Sicily in March 1438 to solicit his aid in checking this migratory movement. The Viceroy allayed their anxieties by a decree which debarred the Maltese from fitting out corsair galleys without first obtaining the licence of the municipalities (8). The need for the preservation of the Islands' manhood was, however, still acute two years later when King Alfonso disallowed the male inhabitants from enlisting as sailors on foreign ships. Even so, the critical loss of men through the outbreak of disease, the incursions of the Moslems and misadventures at sea did not cease so much so that in 1449, in a further attempt to stem the drain on its population,

the Municipality was constrained to prohibit completely the exercise of piracy which, in spite of its hazards, had not ceased to be the most favoured occupation of the Islanders. The problem had not yet been satisfactorily solved by 1475 (9) but subsequent years witnessed an improvement in the demographic situation so that in 1489 the Maltese Municipality asked the Viceroy of Sicily to allow Maltese corsairs to re-arm “with the help of God” (10), the prohibition on corsairing being finally removed by the Viceroy in 1494 (11).

One of the earliest Maltese corsairs known by name belongs to the 15th Century. He was the sea-captain ‘Michele da Malta’ who, in 1465, was sought as an ally by the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem which was then still in possession of Rhodes. Two years later, however, these friendly relations became strained because Michele took to sweeping the sea round Rhodes with his armed galley and galeotte and preying on the Christian merchantmen of Cyprus, Rhodes and the neighbouring islands. In these forays he was aided and favoured by King James of Cyprus who allowed the corsair to take shelter in the harbours of his kingdom and also shared the booty with him. When, finally, Michele attacked and seized a galeotte of the Knights of St. John and a Venetian ship in 1467, the Knights determined to destroy him and a galley was specially equipped to hunt him down. He was discovered on the high seas while on his return to Malta loaded with spoils and towing the captured ships. During the long and fierce engagement that ensued he was shot dead and his men were hailed as prisoners to Rhodes (12).

The granting of the Maltese Islands as a fief to the Order of St. John of Jerusalem in 1530 was followed by a flourishing period in Maltese piracy. Since many years prior to its advent to Malta, the Order had issued privateering commissions to individual knights to engage in the “guerre de course”, reserving for its treasury three-fourths of the profits made (13). Indeed, while at Rhodes they had already earned the reputation of being the “Christian corsairs of the Levant” (14). As the Order’s traditional enmity with the Moslem was at its height when it settled in Malta, official sanction was readily given to Maltese corsairing as such practice tallied admirably with the Order’s aggressive policy towards the Moslems.

Grand Master Pietro del Monte (1568-72) granted a general licence for the fitting of corsair ships under the flag of the Order subject to an impost of nine per cent on the booty captured (15). Under the protection of the Order’s navy Maltese corsairing came to form a kind of “institution” or “industry” that was eventually organised on well defined business lines and that was made to fit into the moral, social, legal and economic framework of the community.

Before the advent of the Order in Malta, when the Island was a county of the Vice Admiral of Sicily, this official exercised a measure of control over Maltese corsairs, issued licences for the “course” and received a share of the booty. He defined their sectors of activity, imposed, in certain instances, the restitution of captured spoils to their rightful owners and ordered the arrest of corsair crews guilty of sacking Christian vessels and the confiscation of their ships (16). Thus a certain amount of regulation over Maltese corsairing had already been established long before the Knights set foot on the Island but it was only during the Magistrership of Grand Master Alofus de Wignacourt that a set of local laws for the control of corsairing was evolved. Severe penalties, ranging from the imposition of fines to the infliction of capital punishment, were laid down for the infracture of these laws.

(10) Vassallo, op. cit., p. 288.
(14) Lane-Poole, op. cit., p. 66.
A special tribunal, called the Magistracy of Armaments, was set up on the 17th of June 1605 to take cognizance of all matters pertaining to corsairing. Such a step had become inevitable as the prizes and booty taken by the corsairs were reckoned as one of the main sources of revenue that went to fill the national coffers. The first ordinances of the new tribunal were published in the same year but they were not printed until 1658.

A commission from the Grand Master for the exercise of the “guerre de course” became an essential requisite. The issue of Letters of Marque or privateering commissions was a recognized procedure among the maritime states of the period. These “Letters” conferred a certain legal status on the privateer and empowered him to wage a sort of private war under the protection of the nation granting him the commission. This policy was not restricted to the Mediterranean; in fact it was followed by Queen Elizabeth of England although it was later on abandoned by James I.

In Malta the Letters of Marque or Letters Patent, as the official language of the period alludes to them, were drawn up in Latin and were registered in the “Libri Bullarum” for preservation in the archives of the Order’s Chancellery. Besides the name and surname of the patentee and his rank or status, the licence contained the name of the vessels with which the corsair was empowered to conduct his sea-forays. It also specified the area of his operations. The duration for which the licence “ad exercenda pyricam” was valid varied from a few months to a number of years and envisaged the possibility of renewal. The licence was not allowed, at times, to enrol as crew the seamen having round the Port of the Galleys at Birgu, Senglea and Bormla and especially those who were already in the employ of the government. The reason behind this prohibition was, apparently, to ensure a sufficiently large pool of seamen for the Order’s fleet in case of an emergency. On the other hand the licensee could rely on the Grand Master to ensure that no member of his crew deserted him when on the point of departure for one of his forays. Indeed, crews were ordered, by proclamations in the name of the Grand Master, to embark within twenty-four hours under penalty of rowing in the galleys for a period of five years.

The corsair did not always own the vessel. Sometimes he undertook the expedition in partnership with others, in which case he was obliged to declare the name of his creditors and to register the amounts of money due to every one of them with the notary of the Magistracy of Armaments in order to facilitate the settling of disputes concerning the sharing of prizes. Arms (such as muskets, pistols, swords, etc.) could be borrowed from the government by the corsair after the latter had guaranteed to return the weapons or to make good their loss. To obtain other equipment for his vessel the corsair had, at times, to resort to the money-lender, to whom, during the 17th Century he was made to pay as much as 15 to 20% interest every six months. This practice threatened to bring about the “total ruin of the corsairs” with “very great prejudice to the public” until the Grand Master intervened and saved the situation in 1662 by prohibiting the imposition of exorbitant rates of interest. Because of financial reasons, corsairing suffered another temporary setback in 1679 when sea-captains were unable to obtain the money needed for the equipment of their vessels so that none of the thirty corsairs, who during the previous ten years had become “the terror of the Levant” was able to put to sea.

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(18) A. Micallef, Dritto municipale di Malta compilato sotto De Rohan, (Malta, 1843), p. 143.
(19) Royal Malta Library, Archives of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, 520, fol. 173r; Arch. 530, fol. 131t. (Hereafter these records will be designated as R.M.L. Arch.).
(20) R.M.L. Arch. 460, fol. 311r.
(22) R.M.L. Arch. 660, fol. 332.
(23) R.M.L. Manuscript 740, fol. 68.
Corsairs authorised to hoist the colours of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem paid a sum of money known as "flag duty" (25) and were only allowed to raid Moslem men-of-war and trade ships. Unauthorised change of flag was punished with death. A proclamation issued to a corsair on the 30th November 1739 runs as follows (translation from Italian): - "Captain Bartholomew Gofre known as Golan by command of His Serene Highness you are forbidden to change flag under penalty of death; the crew, both collectively and individually, are intimated under penalty of death that should the captain change flag they are to tie him, to bring him straight to Malta, to disown him as captain and to obey the senior officer who does not contravene these commands." Captain Gofre was also ordered to convey the same instructions to all the captains and crews he met at sea and to direct his clerk to preserve a note of such encounters giving the date and place (26).

All Christian vessels, except those sailing without the licence of their government, were immune from assault by Maltese pirates, special emphasis being made on the ships of His Catholic Majesty and of the Venetian Republic, while corsairs "discurrentes per mare Ecclesiae Romanae" were liable to the penalty of excommunication which was also incurred by their "defensores et receptores et fatores" (27). In the mid-seventeenth century complaints were received by the Grand Master that corsairs under the flag of the Order were operating against the Turks in the waters bordering the Holy Land and that as a consequence the irritated Turks were venting their wrath on the Christian inhabitants of that country. As, since at least 1647, the sea near the Holy Land was a prohibited area to corsairs flying the Order's flag, the Grand Master issued a decree ordering them to clear out of those waters and offering a reward of one hundred scudi to any one revealing the names of corsairs disobeying his orders (28). In 1673 Maltese corsairs were also debarred by a decree of the Grand Master from searching French ships carrying the goods of Moslem merchants (29).

The Jews, in accordance with Papal instructions, were also to be respected (30). British maritime commerce, on the other hand, was in the late 16th Century, and for years afterwards, considered to be fair game as it was known that British ships supplied the Barbary States with arms and other goods. For this reason Maltese ships had orders to attack British shipping. A British ship was, in fact, captured by Maltese corsairs in 1581 and another in 1583 (31). In 1604 it was the fate of two Maltese ships to be raided by two British vessels and conducted to the Island of Milo in the Greek Archipelago. It so happened, however, that a few days later the Grand Master's galleon "St. Louis", which was operating against grain ships in Greek waters, discovered the two British ships and after a bloody encounter forced them to surrender with their prey (32). In June 1664 a British vessel sailing without proper licence and carrying goods to the Barbary coast was intercepted by the Order's navy after leaving Leithorn and towed to Malta (38).

The ships of other Christian nations were occasionally attacked contrary to the injunctions of the rules of the Magistracy of Armaments. Edward Brown, a London Merchant, who made a tour of Sicily and Malta towards the last quarter of the 17th Century narrates how a Maltese corsair assaulted and captured a French ship in the Eastern Mediterranean. The learned French traveller, M. Thevenot, while returning from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land "was taken on Board a French Saixe, almost in Sight of the Coast by Syria by a Maltese Caper, that is a Corsair, fitted

(28) R.M.I. Arch. 129, fol. 146.
(30) R.M.I. Arch. 480, fol. 260.
(31) Dal Pozzo, Historia della Sacra Religione, (Venona, 1703), I, pp. 221, 234.
(32) Ibid., I, p. 487.
(33) Ibid., II, p. 313.
out from Malta, not one of the vessels of the Order. These pirates not only seized the vessel and cargo but strip the passengers and amongst others M. Thevenot stark naked and next day sent him ashore with only a few rags to cover their nakedness. The port they landed them at was Acre, or Ptolemais, where there happened to be two or three French merchant ships in the harbour. The Turkish Aga thereupon applied instantly to the French Consul and told him, since this insult had been offered to his Master’s Subjects almost within Sight of the Place, he must insist on his giving Orders to the French Captains to give Chace to the Corsair, offering to accompany them in Person with three or four small arm’d Barks. The Consul could not avoid complying with this Request, the French Captains spent the night in putting their vessels in order and in the grey of the morning stood to sea with the Turkish Barks. As soon as the Corsair saw them, her crew cut the cables and crowded all the sail they could; they chaced them however some hours, and the Turkish Barks fired at them tho’ to no purpose; at length they gave over, and returned to port.” (34).

The Greek Archipelago, through which flowed much of the seaborne commerce between the Levant and the West, was one of the favourite haunts of the Maltese corsairs. As Greek ships carried a good part of this trade their position in the piratical world often gave rise to dispute. Greek Christians enjoyed the protection of the Order and Maltese corsairs were enjoined to abstain from plundering their ships and goods. In practice, however, these injunctions were not always scrupulously observed. In fact we find repeated official warnings and decrees from the 17th Century onwards exhorting Maltese corsairs not “to molest, disturb and harm” the inhabitants of the Greek Islands professing the Christian religion. In August 1726, for instance, Grand Master Ant. Manoel de Vilhen a felt the need of reminding seafarers corsairing under the Order’s flag of the instructions contained in the decree of the Venerable Council of the Order of the 14th April 1707 in virtue of which Greek Christians were granted immunity from piratical attacks on the part of Maltese corsairs. He also renewed the punishments meted out to transgressors and which ranged from the imposition of a fine to the infliction of the death penalty (35). It seems, however, that Maltese corsairs were not always to blame for attacking the Greeks for the latter, though plying in ships owned and manned by Christians used to carry Moslem merchandise and to hoise the Turkish flag when sailing in Greek waters under Turkish control (36).

To secure adherence to the laws of the Magistracy of Armaments the corsair was sometimes made to deposit a sum of money as surety of compliance with his obligations (37); but, although Maltese corsairs were usually “honourable” and “respectable” captains (38), they did not always conduct their “trade” in accordance with the law. Indeed discipline had become so lax in 1679 that the Grand Master had to send one of his Knights to the Levant to recall to Malta all corsairs sailing under the Order’s flag and to compel them to register the amount and nature of their spoils with the Magistracy of Armaments and to settle their debts with their creditors. The Servant-at-Arms Fra M.A. Auger disobeyed these instructions and was deprived of his habit (39). When the hunt for Moslem shipping proved fruitless, Maltese pirates did not shrink from ravaging and sacking the coasts and islands of the Eastern Mediterranean carrying away the inhabitants to Malta to sell them as slaves (40).

Corsairs were allowed to join the Order’s navy to participate in its warfare against the Turks while occasionally they were hired as auxiliaries to augment the official marine as was done in 1658 when the Order went to the aid of the Venetians (41).


(35) R.M.L. Arch. 530, fol. 140; Arch. 480, fol. 252.
(36) R.M.L. Manuscript 1213.
(37) R.M.L. Arch. 480, fol. 236; R.M.L. Miscellanea 491, Extract 7.
(38) R.M.L. Arch. 530, fol. 140.
(39) DAL POZZO, op. cit., II, p. 460.
(40) ROSSI, op. cit., pp. 62, 75, 77.
(41) DAL POZZO, op. cit., II, p. 267.
On his return to Malta at the end of his forays, the corsair registered the quantity and nature of his spoils with the Magistracy of Armaments and his prizes were shared with the owners of the vessel, his creditors and his crew. Captured ships and slaves were, however, sold by public auction the government claiming first preference in the purchase of slaves required for the public service. The welfare of captured slaves was secured by law which prohibited corsairs from beating or otherwise ill-treating their captives during the voyage. Female prisoners received special protection from the Tribunal. The corsair or his crew who failed to respect the honour of these defenceless women forfeited all rights of property over them and the outraged slave became a free woman in the eyes of the law.

While every facility and protection was offered by the Order to Maltese pirates sailing under a commission of the Grand Master, corsairing on the part of aliens with the aid of the Order's subjects was not permitted. Thus Maltese seafarers, even when domiciled abroad, were debarred from joining the crews of corsairs operating under a foreign flag while local artisans and merchants caught fitting out foreign boats for the "guerre de course" or providing them with supplies were condemned as oarsmen on board the galleys for ten years.

Death by hanging was the punishment reserved for Maltese pirates corsairing under the Turkish flag against Christian ships, such an act being considered as one of high treason (42). We know of at least one such Maltese renegade — Ganga Rossa by name — who scoured the Mediterranean plundering Christian shipping and who was finally captured by the galleys of the Order in 1536 and hanged on the shores of Rinella (43). His, however, is no unique instance of a Christian turning Moslem; indeed some of the most famous pirates sailing under the banner and protection of the Crescent were actually Christian renegades such as the French Ibrain Rais (4) and Barbarossa, the Calabrese brothers Ochial and Jussuf and the Sicilian Cicala (45); besides others of Venetian, Greek and Spanish extraction (46).

None of the Maltese corsairs ever rose to the prominence achieved by such Moslem sea-robbes as Barbarossa and Dragut (who met his death in Malta through a splinter wound in his head in 1565). The romantic and turbulent episodes that colour the careers of these notorious pirates are absent from the deeds of the Maltese corsairs who led less adventurous and villainous lives and who operated on a more modest scale and, more often than not, in accordance with "business" rules under the aegis of the law. In spite of their lack of glamour they constituted a formidable barrier to Moslem expansion in the Mediterranean. Indeed the fear of being captured by Maltese corsairs or the warships of the Order induced Turkish merchants to entrust their goods to any nation who happened to be at peace with Malta to ensure their safe delivery. More often than not the favoured nation was France as this was the power which had the greatest influence on the Order (47).

It would be tedious to enumerate the Maltese corsairs known to us but it may not be out of place to mention a few of them. Paolo Micciolo and Martin Mula operated very successfully in the 16th Century (48). Captain Daniel (1669) (49), Paolo Bezzina (1686) (50) and Albino Portuguese (1696) (51) belong to the 17th Century; in the following hundred years we hear of Captains Leonardo Sacco (1716), Giovanni Borg (1716), Antonio Rizzo (1726), Aloisio Seychell (1726), Gio Battista Rizzo (1729) (52), Luca Bartolo (1738) and Paolo Spiteri (1739) (53). Besides these surnames, almost all of which are still met with in Malta, we

(42) Del Diritto Municipale di Malta (Malta, 1784), pp. 236; 250.
(43) VASSALLO, op. cit., p. 383.
(44) DAL POZZO, op. cit., II, p. 23.
come across others qualified as being Maltese in the Letters of Marque of the 17th Century but which have a marked foreign flavour and which no longer exist to-day such as Mighot, Dell’ Occhio, Maldinato, Di Milo, Gaione and Dorese (54).

A number of foreigners also held privateering commissions from the Grand Master such as Paolo Caminiti (1620), Jacques Sarasin (1621), Andrea Joffre (1621) (55), Francesco di Lazzaro (1716), Francesco Sicard (1716), Jacobo Balester (1726) and a host of others with the French element predominating in the second decades of the 17th Century (56).

A Corsican corsair, Guglielmo Lorenzi, who operated under the Order’s flag, has left an indelible mark on our history not only as a pirate but also as a staunch friend of the Maltese. He had come to Malta in his early youth, made a name for himself as an intrepid sea-captain and in 1737 joined the Imperial Russian Navy. Eventually he was given command of a squadron and fought against the Turks. Having retired from the Russian Navy with the rank of colonel, he returned to Malta. In 1799, during the Maltese insurrection against the French, he organised a force of men from among the insurgents with the scope of capturing Valletta from the French in a surprise morning attack. His attempt failed and he was taken prisoner by the French and shot (57).

The ships in which Maltese pirates swept the sea in the piracy season — spring and summer — were of all kinds. They included galleys with 25 to 30 benches of oars, galelettes of 14 to 17 rowers' banks, brigantines of 13 to 14 benches, frigates of 11 benches, caiques of 6 to 8 benches, “feluccas”, “tartanes”, “polaccas” and “petaccos” (58). Some of these vessels carried from 3 to 5 pieces of artillery. The strength of the crews of the smaller vessels varied from 8 to 32 men (59). At times the losses of these crafts through mishaps at sea or through capture by the enemy were so heavy that the Order's Government had to enforce the temporary prohibition of corsairing on the part of brigantines and smaller boats (60).

The names of these crafts have come down to us, as befitted a Catholic country governed by a religious brotherhood owing allegiance to the Holy See, the vessels were nearly all named after saints or after some principal tenet of the Catholic Faith. Thus we meet with “The Blessed Virgin of Mount Carmel”, “Saint Joseph”, “The Blessed Viaticum”, “The Holy Souls of Purgatory”, “Saint Paul”, “Saint Francis of Paola” (61), “Saint Louis”, “Saint Leonard”, “Our Lady of Loreto” and “Saint Egidius” (62).

(To be continued)