

Uncovering the history of Australia’s modern hospitaller tradition

Knights Hospitaller were among the most revered Christian warriors in the Middle Ages. For a group of Australians, the call to knighthood – and the service it entails – is a present-day reality.

While they no longer wear protective chain mail or defend themselves with shields or swords, the members of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta, or simply the Order of Malta, make up the world’s oldest charity and a religious order of the Catholic Church.

The Order of Malta’s roots lie in the pioneering service of the Knights Hospitaller, a confraternity that regarded the poor and sick as their ‘lords’ and served pilgrims in the Holy Land. This tradition continues, surviving major upheavals over nearly a millennium.

Established in Jerusalem before the crusades and recognised by Pope Paschal II in 1113 as a religious community, the Order has drawn thousands of men and women since its inception, inspired by its mission.

The Australian Association of the Order of Malta consisting of more than 300 members (known as knights and dames), is among the youngest in the world, forming only five decades ago.

Australian Catholic University (ACU) Historian, Associate Professor Darius von Güttner, aims to bring new insights on this confraternity devoted to service.

Assoc. Prof. von Güttner will present the history of the Order and document the story of how one of the world’s oldest religious orders came to Australia.

This historical account of the Order of Malta will be developed into an online course, as part of a research project funded by ACU’s Stakeholder-Engaged Scholarship Unit (SESU).

“The story of the Order of Malta is fascinating,” Assoc. Prof. von Güttner said.

“It is the oldest Catholic charity, originating in the Middle Ages, and is still in existence today in an almost untouched form.

“The traditions of the Order, its prestige, mystique, and emphasis on hands-on community service and religious observance continue to be attractive today.”

Assoc. Prof. von Güttner said the Order of Malta in Australia continued the centuries-old tradition of caring for those in need through various initiatives, including youth camps for people with disabilities, the Coats for the Homeless campaign, community kitchens and vans, and an Emergency Relief Fund.

Since 2021, ACU and the Order of Malta’s Australian Association have partnered to develop community-engaged outreach programs for members of society who experience disadvantage and marginalisation.

The partnership has since established a Community Hub in Melbourne, providing volunteering opportunities for ACU students at a mobile community café and a state primary school.

Associate Professor Darius von Güttner is available for interview.

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