

CONFERENCE ON THE CONSTANTINIAN ORDER,  
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HISTORY

**THE CONSTANTINIAN ORDER HAS ALWAYS BEEN  
INDEPENDENT OF ANY SOVEREIGN STATE**

The Constantinian Order is unique among Orders of Chivalry; it is the only Order of exclusively Catholic character which was not founded by a sovereign ruler and whose hereditary grand mastership was never united with the headship of any sovereign state. For only 160 years of its existence were the Order's Grand Masters temporal rulers and the Grand Mastership was always a separate dignity from the Crown. In modern times it is also the only Order with an hereditary Grand Master to have had its statutes approved and to have had Cardinal Protectors appointed by the Pope in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Uniquely, its decorations are authorised to be worn in Spain and Italy, as well as several other states, most notably Mexico and the Netherlands. Even the United States Department of the Army has included it on the list of decorations which US army officers may accept and wear, a privilege not extended to either the Sovereign Military Order of Malta or the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre.

The Order's legendary history claims a foundation by Emperor Constantine the Great in 312 or, failing that, by Byzantine Emperor Isaac II Angelus in 1190. Neither has any basis in historical fact but even these legendary histories do not pretend that the Grand Mastership was tied to the sovereignty of the Roman Empire and allow that it was delegated to others to pass by hereditary descent among their heirs. The Angeli, originating

from Drisht (then called Drivasto), in Albania, did not actually descend directly from the Angeli Byzantine Emperors as has often been asserted, but nonetheless through two important marriages could claim kinship with the Imperial Paleologui and Angeli families and close relationships with several other Balkan dynasties. Even more important, when the Angeli found themselves penniless exiles in Venice, driven from their home by the Ottomans, their familial relationships with the Della Rovere, Riario, Medici and del Balzo families were to prove invaluable. These connections enabled them to obtain crucial support for their chivalric foundation and acknowledgement of their claimed titles of Prince of Macedonia, and Duke and Count of Drivasto.

The Order's existence was certainly acknowledged by successive Popes from 1545 onwards and, in 1568 the Order's history and privileges, along with recognition of the hereditary grand mastership, were laid out in an important declaration by Monsignor (later Cardinal) Alessandro Riario, an Apostolic Protonotary, Papal Chamberlain and Auditor of the Sacred Chamber. This text was repeated in a Monitor issued by Pope Clement VIII in 1601 and again by Pope Urban VIII in 1623. In 1575 Riario, by then Patriarch of Alexandria, was appointed protector of the Order while the previous year Cardinal, and later Saint, Charles Borromeo, confirmed its privileges and offered his protection to the knights in the Archdiocese of Milan. In 1576 the Order's knights were granted the right to hold ecclesiastical benefices without Apostolic dispensation, the Order already being described as a "religion". Several cases in the 1580s and 1590s before ecclesiastical tribunals prosecuting false Byzantine princes who were pretending to be Grand Masters of the Order, found in favour of the Angeli claims. The hereditary nature of the Grand Mastership was expressly stated

in the earliest statutes, dating from the 1570s, and was confirmed by Andrea Angelo in his 1580 Testament.

The Order's international character was also a feature of its early history. In 1576 the Bishop of Lerida requested information from the Holy See about the Order, as Constantinian knights were present in his diocese, and the Order's status and the right to hold benefices was promptly confirmed by the Apostolic Chamber. The extent of the Order's expansion in Spain was further demonstrated in 1592 when Grand Master Paolo Angelo named two priests of the Archdiocese of Seville, both members of the Order, as his testamentary executors. Juan de Turiel, one of the two priests, in 1597 published a history and statutes of the Order, with formal approval by the King of Spain's auditor at the Sacred Rota and the *visum* of the *Congregatio Concilio*, repeating a 1596 Apostolic dispensation confirming the right to hold benefices. A Sevillian chapter house was established by the early seventeenth century and was still flourishing more than a century later when Francesco Farnese acquired the Grand Mastership. When at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was a royal inquiry about the status of the Order and its possible exemption from Philip III's prohibition against his subjects accepting foreign Orders, the rights of the Angeli to award it were accepted even though they were not themselves sovereigns.

As the Angelo Grand Masters owned only a modest property and church at Briana, near Nole in the Veneto, they were frequently short of money. Giovanni Andrea had invested heavily in the plan by the Gonzaga Duke of Nevers, later Duke of Mantua, to invade the Dalmatian coast in the hope that he might regain what he considered his lawful inheritance in Albania; when this plan proved a disastrous failure Giovanni

Andrea found himself in dire financial straits. In 1623 he found a wealthy patron in the person of Marino Caracciolo, Prince of Avellino, ready to grant him a pension in return for cession of the Grand Mastership.

His Angelo cousins, however, immediately challenged this and petitioned the Holy See for redress; following an investigation which determined that the Grand Mastership was inalienable from the direct male line of the family, the cession to Caracciolo (who, in any case had not paid Giovanni Andrea what he had agreed), was annulled in 1627 and Giovanni Andrea was restored to his position. This decision set an important precedent and confirms that a variation of the succession to the grand mastership required specific authorisation of the Holy See.

Giovanni Andrea was still impoverished, reliant solely on the modest revenues from Briana, so was forced to appoint a Grand Master Vicar, Count Majolino Bisaccioni, a notable figure in the military and diplomatic history of northern Italy in much of the second half of the seventeenth century. When Giovanni Andrea died in 1634, his cousin and immediate male heir Angelo Maria, assumed the title of Grand Master, but Bisaccioni continued to exercise the de facto Grand Mastership, only finally surrendering it to Angelo Maria in 1653. Giovanni Andrea's Testament had named his cousins Angelo Maria and then Angelo's brother Marco as heir, should the former die without male issue (as proved to be the case), he then declared that the subsequent heirs were the *heredi legitimi et di legitimo matrimonio della Casa Angeli Flavio Comneno*.

With Angelo and Marco's death without male heirs, the last two Angeli, Girolamo and Gian Andrea, likewise had no surviving male issue and the latter decided to look for a suitable successor as Grand Master who might insure him a comfortable retirement.

The Order's position was now secure; the Angeli had benefited from decrees of Emperor Ferdinand III of 1630 (negotiated by Bisiccioni), of the Elector of Bavaria in 1667 and 1669 and a further decree of King Jan Sobieski of Poland in 1681, confirming the privileges of the knights. Some knights had distinguished themselves at the Siege of Vienna when the Ottomans were finally driven back from further conquests in Europe. There was frequent correspondence between the Emperor Leopold and the Angeli Grand Masters from the 1660s through 1680s in which the Emperor addressed the Angeli as Princes, treating them as if they were fellow sovereigns, while senior members of the imperial court were granted membership. There were chapter houses in Seville, Modica in Sicily, and Munich and congregations of knights in Vienna, Milan, Venice and Rome with smaller groups in Croatia and Poland. Fortunately, Gian Andrea's emissary was able to find a willing purchaser of the Grand Mastership in the person of Francesco Farnese, Duke of Parma. Francesco was enormously wealthy as well as enormously fat and, unlike Gian Andrea, could also properly claim to be a direct descendant of the Angeli Emperors which, in the Duke's eyes, further reinforced the justification for acquiring the title from whom he believed to be the last male prince of this illustrious imperial house. The cession, in January 1698, was confirmed by the Emperor, Leopold I, and Pope Innocent XII the following year – in both cases these confirmations, like the cession by Gian Andrea, were to Francesco and his family, not as reigning Duke of Parma.

In many ways Francesco's Grand Mastership marked the apogee of the Order; in 1701 the Cardinal Protector, whose family like the Angeli was of Albanian origin, was elected Pope as Clement XI. The new statutes granted by Duke Francesco in 1705 promptly received Papal approval and, following the Order's

bold participation in Prince Eugène's campaigns in the Balkans, the Order was confirmed and approved in the 1718 Bull *Militantis Ecclesiae*, so well analysed by our confrere Avvocato Dottore Marini Dettina. Aside from once again confirming the hereditary nature of succession to the Grand Mastership in the Farnese family, this Bull established the Order as a prelature *nullius diocesis*, conferring upon the Grand Master quasi Episcopal privileges which, by a further Papal Brief of 1724, were to be exercised on the Grand Master's behalf by the Grand Prior of the Order. No other hereditary Grand Master of a religious military Order was ever accorded such extensive ecclesiastical authority.

When Francesco died in 1727 his brother Antonio briefly succeeded but, like Francesco, was obese and infertile; his death without a direct heir in January 1731 led to the succession of the Bourbons who still govern the Order today. On 24 September of the same year, Charles' right to succeed to the Farnese allodial fiefs, which implicitly included the Constantinian Grand Mastership, was confirmed by the Pope. This succession, however, was not the consequence of succeeding to the Duchy of Parma, but as direct heir, through his mother, of the Farnese. In 1736 when Charles of Bourbon, now firmly ensconced on the throne of Naples, gave up Parma to Austrian rule, he did not forfeit his Grand Mastership nor his control of the Order's assets in Parma, which were duly acknowledged by Austria in the convention of Vienna of 28 August 1738. Charles's first minister, Montealegre, informed the Order's Grand Prior, Lampugnani, in a letter dated 29 May 1736, that "*the King intends to retain and conserve for himself the grand mastership of the Order with full jurisdiction, prerogatives and faculty ... for the incontestably clear reason that the said grand mastership is not annexed or connected to the duchy of Parma*

*and Piacenza, but in fact, and particularly to the Most Serene House of Farnese, as made clear in the Papal Bulls and consequently His Majesty will not cede this ... because of His Majesty's incontestable rights to the grand mastership of the Order.*

When Parma was recovered for the Bourbons in 1748, some among the Parma nobility hoped that their new Duke might also acquire the Constantinian Grand Mastership. Duke Philip, however, made it clear in several communications – three from 1749, one from 1751 and another in 1753 - that he recognised the rights of his brother to the Grand Mastership. When Charles succeeded as King of Spain on 10 August 1759, he was required to surrender all his Italian dominions to the next in line after the heir apparent, in a secondogeniture system that also governed the successions to Tuscany and Modena. On 6 October 1759 he duly ceded them to the Infante Ferdinand, his third son, the eldest being mentally incapacitated while the second became Prince of Asturias. This cession, however, did not automatically include the Constantinian Grand Mastership; it was not until ten days later on 16 October that an act, never previously published and of which I recently discovered an original copy in the Farnese archives, was directed to the Grand Prior in Parma, stating that it *“hereby designates the grand mastership of the Constantinian Order to His Majesty Ferdinando IV, King of the Two Sicilies as First Born Legitimate Farnese [heir], in the Italian States, Rights and Titles although third born by nature. By Royal Order of His Majesty my Lord and Grand Master, I am notifying and informing Your Illustriousness of such Cession and Respective resignation, and instruct you in your capacity as Grand Prior to inform the Congregation of Grand Crosses of such Cession and Resignation and that it will be included in the norms and successive regulations of the administration of the*

*Constantinian Order.*” This cession is a crucial element in demonstrating that an act that was concerned with the abdication of the temporal sovereignties in Italy could not thereby implicitly include the Grand Mastership of the Constantinian Order. The cession to Ferdinand was then confirmed in a papal Monitor dated September 1763 directed to Ferdinand as Grand Master.

In 1768 Ferdinand transferred the Grand Prioral church to Naples, first establishing it in the Church of San Ferdinando, opposite the Royal Palace, before obtaining the incorporation of the defunct Monastic Order of Saint Anthony Abbot into the Constantinian Order in 1777. While the Steccata Church in Parma remained a capitular church it was now only the seat of a Vice-Grand Prior, much to the annoyance of the new Duke of Parma who, nonetheless, was unable to find support in Rome, Paris or Madrid for his desire to obtain the Grand Mastership himself. In 1796 King Ferdinand issued a highly significant declaration, stating that “*In his (the king's) royal person there exists together two very distinct qualities, the one of Monarch of the Two Sicilies, and the other of Grand Master of the illustrious, royal and military Constantinian order, which though united gloriously in the same person form nonetheless at the same time two separate independent Lordships.*” This declaration was added in an appendix to the statutes to make it clear once again that the Order existed independently of Ferdinand’s sovereign status. It was no isolated act; throughout his reign the King’s decrees were issued in his capacity “*comè Gran Maestro*” and, notably, no reigning King of the Two Sicilies ever wore his insignia as Grand Master, an ecclesiastical office, along with the Two Sicilies Orders of which he was Grand Master as sovereign. When a Venetian knight, Andrea Meyer, established a commandery in the republic, the Spanish ambassador, who represented Neapolitan interests there, wrote stating that he did so “*not as an ordinary Venetian but as a dependent of the Sovereign of the Two Sicilies in his quality as*

*Constantinian Grand Master.”*

With the downfall of the Two Sicilies monarchy and the triumph of Italian nationalism, the Constantinian Order entered a new era. In a correspondence over the status of the Order between the Nuncio in Naples and the Cardinal Secretary of State in 1860, before the Bourbon monarchy fell, the Nuncio wrote on 15 June of the same year, that the pretension the grand mastership was attached to the duchy of Parma was without merit, because the *“Royal Family of Naples is the heir of the Farnese family and has for more than a century been in peaceful possession of the Constantinian grand mastership.”*

With the departure of the King and his court for Gaeta, Naples was occupied by the forces of the dictator Garibaldi who, on 12 September 1860 declared the properties of the Order to be *“bene nazionali”*. On 25 September 1861 the Italian government requested an opinion from the newly formed Council of State as to whether *“it was possible to abolish the orders of chivalry and especially the Constantinian Order, and how to resolve the commanderies of this last”* to which the response was given *“In regard to the Constantinian Order, it has already been decreed by the Dictator that its benefices have been applied to the national domain, but that decree did not take the life of the Order itself.”* On 11 July 1871, the Italian Court of Cassation ruled that merely because the Bourbon dynasty had been deposed and a new government installed *“such a proposition, not conforming to any law, cannot be otherwise justified ... [no initiative of the civil monarchy] could either bring down or abolish the Constantinian Order.”* During the remainder of his life in exile Francis continued to award the Order and, following his death in 1894, his successor, the Count of Caserta assumed the title of Grand Master.

On 15 June 1901 Caserta wrote to the Cardinal Secretary of State, Rampolla, *“as Farnese heir”* and as such Constantinian Grand Master, requesting Papal consent for the appointment of a new Grand Prior (the previous holder of this title having died in

1862 and not been replaced). Although this was forthcoming until 1908, the election of Pope Pius X proved to be of great importance to the Order. On 7 March 1910 Domenico Cardinal Ferrata, bishop of Frascati and a leading figure in the Vatican, was appointed Cardinal Protector, and in 1913 was given responsibility for organising the 1600<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the edict of Milan. Ferrata resigned in November to take up the position of Secretary of State and was succeeded on 3 December 1913 as Cardinal Protector by Paolo Cardinal Cassetta, a brilliant jurist, who represented the Pope at the consecration of the Constantinian Chapel in Santa Croce al Flaminio in 1915. Following Ferrata's death in 1919, a new Cardinal Protector was appointed by Benedict XV, Amadeo Ranuzzi dei Bianchi, from a distinguished Bolognese noble family, the last to hold this post.

By 1924 pressure to settle the Roman question was building and sympathisers with the Mussolini government perceived the Constantinian Order, headed by the Count of Caserta, the last survivor of those dynasties that had once ruled in Italy to have fought in the campaign against unification, to be an obstacle in the process of reconciliation between the Pope and Savoy Monarchy. A request of the royal Procurator in Naples, however, in the same year failed to support those who wished the Order suppressed as this important officials declared that the Order continued to survive as a legitimate and legal institution. The Order's cause was not helped, however, by the then Grand Prior, who was perceived by many within the curia to be somewhat arrogant, and a hostile report written by a senior official of the Department of General Ecclesiastical Affairs gave the Holy See an excuse to "temporarily suspend" the post of Protector and certain of the special ecclesiastical privileges accorded by Pius X. The Count of Caserta attempted to save the situation by persuading his second son, the Infante D. Carlo, grandfather of our Grand Master, to assume the Grand Mastership but the discussions over this had not been resolved when the Spanish monarchy fell in April 1931. The Order, while

no longer under official protection of the Holy See was nonetheless held in high favour in some quarters; the Secretary of State, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, who had himself been admitted to the Order in 1913, remained sympathetic and received delegations of knights after his election as Pope.

The continued autonomy and legal existence of the Order, however, has never been denied; the Order, unlike so many other institutions, has never been suppressed or abolished by the secular authorities. Italy has evolved a definition of the non-state Orders awarded by the heads of formerly reigning house as “non-national” Orders, an interpretation of law 178, of 3 March 1951, which was further defined in a decision of the Rome Tribunal, in 1962. The status of the Constantinian Order as a non-national Order was the first to be examined by the Italian council of state, which confirmed in an opinion of 26 November 1981 that it did meet this standard. An advisory note of the Italian ministry of foreign affairs, of the 29 July 1999, further defined the non-national Orders as firstly, national Orders of a foreign state; second Pontifical Orders awarded by authority of the Pope; third dynastic Orders of which the grand mastership is hereditary in a reigning family; and fourth, dynastic Orders of which the grand mastership is hereditary in a non-reigning but formerly sovereign family, provided the Order was founded when the dynasty was reigning.

It is mistaken, however, to describe the Constantinian Order as a dynastic Order, even though its Grand master is also the Head of a former reigning house, but rather it should rather be categorised as an autonomous Order whose Grand Mastership is the private family inheritance of the “Bourbon family as heirs of the Farnese” and not in any way dependent on the royal status of its Grand Master. The Italian government, irrespective of this subtlety, recognises the status of the Constantinian Order as a non-national Order, authorising the decorations awarded to Italian citizens by the Infante Don Carlos, as well as the junior line claimant, to be worn officially. It continues to exist as an autonomous legal being, capable of owning and acquiring

property, governed by its own statutes, approved by successive Popes, and independent from state control, although never claiming sovereignty. Long may it continue.