Eyes on the Future

Current Ops and Future Plans for SJEHG

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MESSAGE FROM THE PRIOR

Our U.S. Priory was honored recently to welcome and host CEO of the St John Hospital Group, Dr. Ahmad Ma’ali, who presented the latest news and progress from the Holy Land. We worked Ahmad hard during his brief visit as he presented at our leadership retreat, followed by well attended gatherings in Charleston and Washington, DC.

Speaking of progress, on my visit to Gaza last September you may recall that I met 17-year-old Abdullah who was the first patient of our “cataract blast” campaign. Many Confrères have asked how he is progressing, and I am pleased to report the latest update from the Hospital:

Abdullah currently lives in Gaza strip in Al-Shojai with his mother and five brothers. He was suffering from problems in pronouncing letters and a decrease in visual acuity, which affected him during school. He struggled with writing and reading; therefore, he was prone to being late with his homework.

Abdullah’s mother said that she had noticed him since he was 4 years old that he was suffering from allergies, redness and itching of both eyes, she reached St. John’s Hospital, and Abdullah was diagnosed with Keratoconus in both eyes.

The decision was made to perform a corneal graft in the left eye, and on January 29, 2020, Dr. Abdullah Abu Hantash performed the surgery.

Prior to surgery, the fingers were being counted. Soon after the procedure, he gradually got better until his left eye’s visual acuity reached 20/63.

The US Prior, Chairman, and CEO met Abdullah and his mother during their visit on September 4, 2022, and it decided to cover the expense of his treatment as part of the US Initiative. After having cataract surgery, the left eye’s vision improved to 20/30.

He will receive priority once the PKP surgeries resume because he is currently scheduled for right eye surgery.

Abdullah said, “I became like the rest of my friends, I sit in the back seat as I want in class, I do not find it difficult to play football. I am even able to walk on my own without the help of anyone, I am no longer embarrassed to bump into anything.

I hope that St. John’s Hospital will help me in conducting the corneal transplantation in the right eye as soon as possible.

Abdullah’s said, “I would like to thank the US Prior, the St. John Group Chairman, doctors and nurses for their kind treatment with us and especial [sic] thanks to the Director of St. John’s Hospital, Dr. Walid Shaqura.

We will continue to follow Abdullah as he progresses to adulthood and a full life, thanks to your generosity. Saving eyesight and saving lives indeed!

Our country, our vets and our vulnerable need YOU! Join your fellow Confrères on Saturday May 20th for our first annual NATIONAL DAY OF SERVICE. Sign-up for various volunteer activities with your Regional SJVC Coordinator.

Our Women’s Forum hosted a great presentation by Confrère Kitty Harvey, CSJU, who is the author of a book on perspectives on the Middle East. If you missed it, it can be viewed here.

In mid-March I attended TEC (The Order Executive Committee) and OHAC (Order Honors and Awards Committee) meetings in London. While there I took the opportunity to interview on camera our Order Prelate, Bishop Tim Stevens, our Sub-Prior, Steve Evans and Chancellor of Australia, Cam Oxley.

We discussed their roles and responsibilities. You may view these videos by clicking on the links above, or by visiting the Priory Dashboard, where the videos have been added to our growing library of St John worldwide information.

During my visit, our Lord Prior, Prof. Mark Compton, had an audience with HRH King Charles III. Mark reported that the King was very interested and engaged with the Venerable Order and its work. We all look forward to the coronation of HRH King Charles III, our Order’s Sovereign head, on May 6th. While global time differences will necessitate early mornings or late night challenges to television viewers around the globe, this certainly will not stand in the way of worldwide celebrations. A number of our regions are planning special commemorative festivities with local Confrères. If there is not yet one arranged in your area, maybe you might consider offering to host?

And another very welcome celebration. Please welcome to our Washington, DC National Office team Mi Ae Taylor, Program Associate, who joined the staff on March 27th, and Carey Hollensteiner, Member Services and Events Director, who joined the staff on April 3rd.

Michele is delighted to have colleagues in the office working to continue the progress of the U.S. Priory in our mission to serve our Lords, the sick and the poor through the work of SJEHG and our SJVC.

Pro Fide, Pro Utilitate Hominum,
Nigel G. Heath, KStJ
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DR. AHMAD MA’ALI ON THE CURRENT OPERATIONS AND FUTURE PLANS FOR SJEHG

Providing financial support to the St John Eye Hospital Group (SJEHG) has long been a main focus of the U.S. Priory. Members who have taken a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to see the work happening there know what a special place it is. Hospital CEO Dr. Ahmad Ma’ali, CStJ, recently visited the United States to bring a little bit of the Hospital to our Members.

While sharing some of the obstacles facing the Hospital today—from political unrest to potential wage increases for employees to the relationships with local government agencies, Dr. Ma’ali also shared hope. “It’s really about celebrating the achievements at the Hospital, and most of the achievements the Hospital staff are proudest of have had great support from the U.S. Priory,” Dr. Ma’ali said.

His first stop was the Priory’s annual Leadership Retreat in Florida. Speaking to Regional co-chairs along with national and Regional committee members, Dr. Ma’ali highlighted some of SJEHG’s major achievements such as establishing a second outreach service, opening a new clinic at Kufor Aqab, and becoming re-accredited by Joint Commission International. Through all of these efforts, the Hospital has continued its charitable mission. As Dr. Ma’ali said, “From 1990 when I started at the Hospital and worked my way through the administration, no patient has been turned away because they couldn’t pay.”

Dr. Ma’ali also highlighted some of the future plans the Hospital has been considering. This includes a genetics laboratory being developed in partnership with Hadassah Hospital with support from the European Union, and the creation of an eye tissue bank. These initiatives would allow Hospital staff to screen for inherited retinal diseases to make treatments more effective, while limiting their reliance on foreign donations of eye tissue for patients. These programs can smooth out some of the operational issues the Hospital faces.

“You can never be sure of your plans at the operational level,” Dr. Ma’ali said. “With several surgeries scheduled for a day, you never know if you’ll have more patients who just arrived from Gaza, or fewer patients because they couldn’t get in from Gaza because of trouble at checkpoints.” The stability provided by the efforts Dr. Ma’ali described will provide even more sight-saving care at the Hospital.

After speaking to the Leadership Retreat, Dr. Ma’ali began a short tour up the East Coast, visiting the Charleston and Washington, DC, Regions of the Priory. “The main message is just to show Members of the U.S. Priory the impact of their support on the lives of these patients,” he said. “It’s really about the importance of the support we receive not just financially but morally as well. The only Priory that is interested in our work to the minute details is the U.S. Priory. So I have the Prior calling me. Sometimes I call him, but usually he calls me to ask, ‘What’s happening in Gaza and what’s the need there? How are we dealing with this and how many patients have we seen so far?’ So that is really a very important thing because we don’t get regular visitors from the other Priories. They do come every now and then, but with the U.S. Priory it has become the main important project for the Holy Land. Most of your Members are up to date about projects, about the staff and about staff sponsorship.”

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Dr. Ma’ali highlighted the importance of teamwork inherent in the partnerships between the U.S. Priory and the Hospital, especially with clinical positions sponsored by Regions. “The staff love it,” he said. “We ask them, ‘What message would you like to give to the people in Palm Beach?’ and they get really excited. Someone is taking their photograph, and taking a real interest in their work and in their lives. They feel valued because someone on the other side of the world is asking what news they have to share.” Without traveling to the Holy Land, those who heard Dr. Ma’ali’s message, whether at the Leadership Retreat or at a Regional gathering, got a glimpse of the vital work they are supporting through the St John Eye Hospital Group.

“Members here are genuinely engaged in the Hospital,” Ma’ali said. “They have become a vital part of us fulfilling our mission. I speak to Members of the U.S. Priory with few boundaries and reservations, because I speak from the heart, and I know you all really understand what I’m talking about, and genuinely care about the people we serve together.”

**LEADERSHIP RETREAT**

The U.S. Priory’s second annual Leadership Retreat, held at Ponte Vedra Inn and Club in Florida, was inspirational for all in attendance. Our Regions were the focus of this year’s retreat. Prior Nigel Heath, KStJ, said, “This whole weekend is about the empowerment of the Regional structure.”

Topics included operational planning and governance within each Region, succession planning for leadership, and the role of the national office in supporting the Regions. How to host successful events and engage prospective Members got many talking about and sharing their personal “best practices.”

A presentation and discussion of the expansion of the St John Volunteer Corps (SJVC), and the impressive 17% increase in volunteerism by Confrères also brought out lively discussions about new ways to find volunteer opportunities and increase the reach and service potential of the SJVC.

The Rev’d Eleanor Ellsworth, OSJ, chair of the Pro Hominum Committee, discussed who we are now as a Priory, who we need to be and diversity within the organization.

Maxey Roberts, CSJ, Priory Secretary and Governance Committee Chair, presented information about groups within some of our larger and more geographically diverse Regions becoming “provinces” with the long-term goal of becoming separate, new Regions. Our first province hasn’t come into being yet, but a few Regions have groups that are close. The process includes gathering 10 or more Members, writing a petition, undergoing evaluation and obtaining approval. The biggest step is proof of performance, essentially successfully operating as a province for a period of three years before petitioning. This effort will help pockets of Confrères who live hours away from most Regional events become more self-sustaining and independent within the Priory.

Other topics included the Nurse and Doctor Initiative, mentoring of new Members, national and regional communications and social media and the building of endowments.

While all of the more than two dozen presenters were engaging and their presentations informative and encouraging, the highlight of the weekend was the keynote address by Dr. Ahmad Ma’ali, CEO of St John Eye Hospital Group in Jerusalem. His gratitude for the work and support of the U.S. Priory was evident both from his presentation and his interactions with Confrères. His talk about the numerous successes, increases, and expansions of programs and services garnered a standing ovation.
MOHAMMAD’S STORY

Mohammad Maswadeh, a 4-year-old from Hebron, suffered from cataracts in both of his eyes.

“Only mothers can relate to the horrible feeling I had when the doctor said, ‘Your son almost lost his sight forever!’” says Mohammad’s mother, Tahani. Mohammad is the youngest of the Maswadeh family. His parents, six siblings, and the rest of his family all hoped somehow his sight would be saved.

Mohammad wasn’t born with cataracts, but not long ago, Tahani noticed Mohammad stopped playing games on her cell phone. “At first I thought he just wanted to spend more time playing outside. I thought it was a good thing. Then I realized he stopped playing games on my phone because he couldn’t see very well at all.”

Tahani had never heard of cataracts. “How was I to know that the white on his eyes made my son nearly blind? I am so grateful for the awareness campaign the St John Eye Hospital (SJEH) leads on social media. They can reach almost every Palestinian mother at her home, and increase awareness of these dangerous eye diseases.”

As Mohammad’s cataracts got worse, Tahani said her son withdrew, and had outbursts of anger and sadness. Many everyday activities made him nervous. Soon, Mohammad could barely see at all.

SJEH staff confirmed Mohammad had no vision in his right eye, and could only see slivers of light in his left eye. They further confirmed Mohammad had been using his sense of hearing to complete basic daily tasks, as he was almost completely blind by that point. He desperately needed cataract surgery if his sight was to be saved.

Mohammad underwent cataract surgeries on both of his eyes. His mother said, “My son is much calmer now than he was just a few days ago. I’ve noticed such a big change in his behavior. He is no longer mad or sad or anxious. He can see again. Thank you to everyone who supports St John Eye Hospital.”

ARE YOU FOLLOWING THE U.S. PRIORY’S FACEBOOK PAGE?

(It’s not the same thing as the private Venerable Order of St John group.)

Please make sure to follow, like, comment and share as often as possible. All of those interactions add up, and make our public page visible to more people. It’s a small way you can help the work of the Priory and the Order be recognized.

Click here  https://www.facebook.com/StJohnUSA
AN EXCERPT FROM TREASURES
KNIFE AND FORK, Murano glass and silver, 18th century

While the Order’s patients received exemplary care and a varied diet according to their individual medical ailments and the restrictions of their respective faiths, members of the Order themselves subscribed to an abstinent regime that would prevent them from erring from their Hospitaller mission. A simple existence sustained by bread and water was prescribed by the second Grand Master, Raymond du Puy, and meals would be conducted in silence. However, these austere edicts were evidently subject to a little flexibility as later records indicate a varied diet of meat, fish, eggs and wine to accompany it—although never after Compline, the last religious service of the day.

Where communal mealtimes were usual for the first Hospitaller brothers, by the 1300s Knights were permitted to eat a meal of two courses alone in their rooms, with the Master being served by his own cook and butler. The Grand Master used such private dinners as a method of diplomacy as in the case of Prince Djem, a son of the Turkish Sultan. After a dispute over the succession to the sultanate in the 1480s Djem fled to Rhodes, where he was feasted by the Grand Master. However, the Order then kept him under permanent guard. In gratitude, Djem’s brother, Sultan Bajazet, paid Djem a pension and gave the Order what would become one of their most sacred relics: the hand of St John the Baptist. The story was recounted by William Caoursin, the Vice Chancellor of the Order, and was published throughout Europe.

Table manners were enforced among the Knights: brothers were punished for throwing bread and wine at servants, getting up from table without leave, insulting each other at dinner, drunkenness, standing while eating or drinking, and for not wearing their habit during mealtimes. After meals they were to rise and process to the church for grace and, in general, the Knights were relatively well mannered at table. Napkins were used: being deprived of the use of one and having to sit on the floor when eating was a particularly humiliating punishment.

Inventories following the death of a brother often included silver cups, spoons, knives, basins, table napkins and hand towels, as well as various kitchen utensils. Plates and forks are absent from such early lists, as in the Middle Ages it was standard to eat one’s dinner from a trencher of stale bread shared with your table neighbour. Only the very greedy ate this bread, which was usually given to the poor afterwards.

Table, as opposed to kitchen, forks were not generally used by Western Europeans until the eighteenth century. The medieval Knights may have come across table forks as they were used by Byzantine courtiers, but it took until the sixteenth century for the fashion for forks to reach Italy and from thence to spread around the rest of Europe. The use of napkins may indicate a certain concern for cleanliness which was unusual for this period: contemporary writers had to instruct their readers not to wipe their noses or perspiring foreheads with their napkins nor to scratch themselves while eating, a matter of some importance when it is remembered that fingers were used in lieu of forks and that you shared your dinner with your neighbor.
In this issue, and those that follow in 2023, I will be reflecting a bit more on our Prior’s call to our Priory to be even more attentive and intentional about our mission to serve “our Lords, the sick and the poor.”

Serving others—whether it be a smile to a stranger, a call to a lonely friend, an hour at a soup kitchen or a mission trip in a faraway land—all service requires a measure of sacrifice. The British Protestant clergyman, John Henry Jowett (d., 1923) once wrote “Ministry that costs nothing, accomplishes nothing.” The sacrifice of our time, our talent, our treasures for the sake of serving others is not just a noble aim, it is an essential element in our Order’s mission—pro utilitate hominum. It either means what it means, or it means nothing at all.

However, I confess, that I often fall into the trap of seeing such service as another thing to “do,” something I have taken up, only by giving up something I would rather be doing! When I gather with my worship leaders on Sunday morning, we always begin in prayer. And I often begin with these words, “Almighty God, we thank you for the opportunity to serve you and the people you send our way today.” Now, another small confession, until our Prior’s invitation to commit to this year of intentional service, I had forgotten to believe in that prayer—that I often pray! I had forgotten that the opportunity to serve is not merely about sacrifice—but it should be seasoned with gratitude! The opportunity to serve others is something for which we all have reason to be grateful. What an incredible honor it is do work, which is, in fact—holy... godly.

Presbyterian pastor and author, Fredrick Buechner, who sadly died in August last year, wrote “To sacrifice something is to make it holy by giving it away for love.” Is that not the most noble of callings when it comes to serving our fellow men and women—to love them? And when we love and serve them, we all know, as our Lord said, we are also serving Him (Matthew 25:40).

Our Jewish brothers and sisters hold to an important rabbinical saying attributed to 3rd Century Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, “A procession of angels passes before each person, and the heralds go before them, saying, ‘Make way for the image of God!’”

What if we really believed we’re not just serving because we are called to do so, but when doing so, we were serving those created in God’s image? When we do so, in whatever way—we are helping those who benefit from that service to become more fully who God created them to be—whether by lifting their spirits, feeding their hunger, restoring their sight, or helping set them on a path to a better life.

You may know the wonderful story of an artist who came to a town and set up his paints and brushes on the outside of a run-down building and began to paint a mural. Curious people gathered to watch and as they did, he began to paint them into the mural. But when he did, he didn’t paint them as they appeared to everyone else and even to themselves.

There was a young girl who had been using crutches for much of her life, “Poor girl,” everyone would say, but when the artist painted her, it was on a stage as a concert violinist. There was a woman who sat on the edge by herself—seemingly a social cripple lacking in confidence to say the least, but in the painting there she was, but now in the center of the picture as a community leader. There was a middle-aged man who was the superintendent of the building the artist was painting his mural on. Most people just assumed he had lived there his whole life. As far as anyone knew, it was all he had ever seen. But the artist painted him as a surgeon in an operating room.

One young boy was standing nearby. For whatever reason, he was the kind of kid who no one gave the time of day to, but the artist gave him one of his brushes and he started to paint as he did. **Who knew he could paint?**

**He did**—just as he seemed to know that the building superintendent had for one season of life been a highly esteemed surgeon, but something fell apart in his life—and he moved into this building, putting his God-given gifts away. But in time, the young girl took up the violin and sure enough became a star performer. The woman was inspired to get to know others, and in time, she ran for office and became the leader of the town council. The super of the building returned to the operating room. What was going on?

The artist saw in those people what no one else had dreamed of and when they saw themselves and others through his eyes, they started to become the people he painted them to be.

This my friends is what we are called to do—in our service to others... to help change the conditions of the hurting, suffering and wounded in the world about us. This is truly God’s work, by sacrificing things that may seem precious to us, but when used for a greater purpose—but it is God’s work in and through those who choose to accept the invitation to serve—and thus the sacrifice is in fact made holy, and for that—we should all be grateful!

So my friends... I invite you to join me as we step more deeply into 2023 to accept the invitation to meditate more, pray more and think more about our Priory’s responsibility to serve—and then once all of that prep work is done—get to it! Serve! There’s plenty to do... there are many to serve!

**Pro Fide, Pro Utilitate Hominum,**
The Reverend Dr. Russell J. Levenson, Jr., OSTJ
Sub-Prelate