

Being a Knight of Columbus makes me curious about being a Knight in other times and what it meant. Of course, we are Knights in the Catholic tradition which makes me think of the Knights Templar.

But there was another group of Knights that existed about the same time and they may have been inspired by the Knights Templar — they were the Knights Hospitallers.

In Jerusalem, in the 11th century there existed a Benedictine abbey that built a hospital for the care of pilgrims. Later, in the 12th century the Pope formally named those Religious who were manning the hospital, Hospitallers of St. John. They were monks who continued to obey their vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty and later these monks took up arms to protect pilgrims. Their name also changed throughout the ages to the Knights Hospitaller, to the Knights of Rhodes, to the Knights of Malta which still exists.

If you visit Rome today you can go to the top of the Aventine Hill to find a wooden door in a wall behind which once lay the monastery of the Knights of Malta. If you look through the keyhole of the door you will see it perfectly silhouettes a view of the dome of St. Peter's.

The word "Hospitallers" is taken from the original latin "hospitalis." Our word for "hospital" comes from this word as does the word "hospitality." These words derived from latin have as their root meaning a combination of "stranger" and "guest." As Paul says in his letter to the Romans (12:13) "Extend hospitality to strangers."

So what do these pictures I have behind me have to do with all of this? (30 St. Mary Ax; St. Helen Bishopsgate)

On a recent trip to London my wife and I decided to try to find the Church of the Templars. On the way we ran into what is affectionately known by Londoners as "The Gherkin." You can see why it is called that.

Notice the old fashioned church at the bottom. It also has a great name: St. Andrew Undershaft. Its name comes from a maypole that used to be set up across the street. It is a Church of England church from the 16th century.

And around the corner, also in the shadow of “The Gherkin” is another Church of England church: St. Helen’s which has been there since that 12th century. This was the parish church of William Shakespeare.

When Marlene and I were there one evening we saw that there was a gathering inside. We walked past a door and an usher by the door motioned for us to come in; so we looked at each other and then did just that.

There was a social gathering inside with friendly people serving punch and cookies. We were escorted inside but then just starting wandering around among the people.

The inside of the church was remarkable. On the walls were featured various pieces of history of the church down through the centuries. The church has gone through the fire of 1666, the Blitz of World War II and a terrorist bombing. But it still stands.

However, it was not the history or architecture of the building that stood out; rather it was the warmth, kindness and courtesy of the people inside who were obviously enjoying their socialization and were willing to share it with two foreign strangers with no strings attached.

That was real hospitality.

I never did find the Church of the Knights Templar. But that’s OK; I didn’t feel cheated at all.