



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

“To speak of an ‘Honorific Order’ is misleading,” says Cardinal Filoni

MEETING WITH CARDINAL FERNANDO FILONI, NEW GRAND MASTER OF THE ORDER OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE



Your Eminence, in what spirit do you undertake this new responsibility as Grand Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, which the Pope entrusted to you on December 8?

In my life of service to the Church, first as assistant parish priest in Rome (nine years), then in the Service of the Apostolic See (almost forty years), I learned to love each reality to which I have been destined. Among these, I cannot fail to highlight the ecclesial missions in the Near East: Iran (at the time of the Iran-Iraq war), Iraq and Jordan (2001-2006). In Jordan, particularly as a territory where the Prophets, Moses, John the Baptist and finally Jesus had preached, I was marked by these unique bonds with Sacred History. I never imagined that I would return to address them with an appointment as head of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. It is like returning to a ‘love’ that has never been forgotten.

On the day of your appointment, comments on social media referred to the office of Grand Master of the Order as an ‘honorific’ title. How would you like to respond to this statement? In addition, more generally, in what way is membership in the Order not simply an honour?

I think the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem develops two dimensions, which remain largely unknown even to the media. The Order undoubtedly has a centuries-old history. Yet not going beyond it is reductive and, in any case, incomplete. Today the Order is a large family of volunteers (30 thousand), scattered all across the world, who, through their own voluntary contribution, ensure that the Holy Land and the places most sacred to Christianity do not become lifeless museums, rather that they have life. This takes place on two levels: the first is related to the Christians who live there; in this sense, the donations of the Members of the Order go to support poor families, primary

and secondary schools, Bethlehem University, health care institutions, and today refugees. The second is to encourage pilgrims from all over the world to visit the most sacred places on pilgrimage and help them receive a suitable welcome. This is in harmony with the Catholic Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which has authority over Israel, Palestine and Jordan. In short, to speak of "honorific order" is misleading.

Your vast experience in the service of the Church is fortunate for the Order, above all because you know the Middle East, having been Nuncio to Jordan, Iraq and Iran. What vivid memories do you have of this part of the world and how do you think the Order can contribute to promoting peace there in the long term?

Peace is the fruit of collaboration between the parties involved. It is frustrating if you work for it and often see it compromised. However, peace is nourished by respect for the rights of all: My thoughts particularly go to the people who live in the Holy Land (but the same can be said for the whole Middle East). The problem begins where prejudices of superiority, lack of historical understanding, rejection of a complex reality that begs patience and dialogue from everyone are allowed to grow. If we think of the legacy of values that unite us, Jews, Muslims and Christians, and not only spiritually, we actually discover how much we are united and first of all the uniqueness of God who, as Father, has revealed himself in this land. A God who does not have preferences (while respecting diversity) and in whose name one cannot fight and kill. The violent wars and enmities that repeatedly bloody the Holy Land (and the Middle East) can never find a justification in God, nor in a Land that primarily belongs to the God of Revelation.

The Order is little known, and sometimes a victim of prejudice, while its mission in favour of the Mother Church in the Holy Land is essential. Eminence, what would you ask of the 30 thousand members of the Order to help communicate a better image of their vocation to holiness and the important service they render to the Church?

Prejudices kill the truth. Not infrequently, they also feed on ignorance. However, it is up to us, in particular to the Members of the Order, to work to diminish them until, hopefully, they disappear. I hope these words will also inspire the desire for better knowledge of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre. I would like to emphasize here that the Order is not accessed through family or social class. Today the Order welcomes people who accept and live the ideal of a Christian life that is rooted in an empty tomb, where the living, risen Jesus is encountered. The life of a Knight and a Dame is "Christological", that is, centred on the mystery of Jesus, according to the teaching of Saint Paul (1 Cor 15:14): "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith ." In addition, the most significantly concrete point in their life lies in their participation in supporting places, works and brothers and sisters in need of the Holy Land. The 30 thousand members in the world thus constitute a large family or, if you wish, a large "parish".

The Order is a pontifical institution; therefore, it is intrinsically linked to the Holy See. Which events of ecclesial life would you ask Knights and Dames to be particularly attentive to in order to increasingly walk in communion with the Universal Church?

I will leave aside the ancient historical origins. Indeed, the Order has always had the protection of the Apostolic See so much that in its reconstruction, Pius X (1907) himself wanted to reserve the title of Grand Master of the Order. Then Pius XII (1940) passed the title to a Cardinal, and so it has remained until today. There is therefore an intimate bond between the Apostolic See and the Order. For this reason, in addition to the zeal for the Christian life of its members, in addition to supporting the works of the Holy Land, there is also the principal aim of the propagation of the faith through

personal witness and the support of the rights of the Catholic Church in that Region in respect of the rights due to any other entity that favours the peaceful coexistence of all. Therefore, the Order is sensitive to the teachings of the Supreme Pontiff in this Region by developing harmony and support.

Interview by François Vayne

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