



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

Not just Gaza

Reflections of the Governor General following the pilgrimage to the Holy Land with the Grand Master



Returning from the Holy Land where the Grand Master and the Governor General presented the donations of about one million euros that the Knights and Dames have sent for the ongoing emergency, Governor General Visconti di Modrone tells how aid is needed not only in Gaza - where it cannot be sent for now - but also in the West Bank where the Order, working alongside the Patriarchate, is supporting the population suffering the economic and social consequences of the war.

I cannot help but share with my brethren around the world the deep impressions my recent pilgrimage with the Grand Master to the Holy Land at the turn of the year made. It was a pilgrimage unlike any other. The tension of yesteryear in the Holy Places between Israelis and Palestinians had turned into today's war. At such a time in the absence of pilgrimages, it was onerous upon us to give the Patriarchate a sign of closeness.

Nonetheless, the emotions we experienced were dramatic: The Holy City is empty. At the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, the Franciscan friars welcomed us with joy and offered us hot chocolate and some cookies after the Holy Rite celebrated in front of the Tomb of the Risen One, and they happily explained the restoration work under way to us.

As we walked the entire length of the Via Dolorosa from the Lion's Gate toward the Holy Sepulchre, we only encountered a nun returning to the Church of St. Veronica and a Franciscan who hastened to solicit our presence at the procession to be held in the afternoon. The Church of St. Anne was deserted, where a lazy janitor did not have the courage to ask for payment of the ticket, the Museum of the Flagellation was closed, the Ecce Homo arch abandoned. The first nine Stations, marked on the way, but whose small plaques I had missed in the past, distracted by the cheerful hubbub and

confusion of the passage, were a quiet place to stop and pray. At the Museum of the Holy Land, a kind nun opened the rooms housing the artefacts by turning on the lights for us.

Stores and restaurants are closed: It was difficult to find a way to bring a souvenir back home. The only one found open did not even give me the satisfaction of the traditional pretence of price negotiations. At the American Colony, the large dining room with a fireplace lit for only one other table where four elegant ladies,' likely consorts of foreign diplomats, sat.

At Notre Dame there were few people, but a conspicuous sign on the door of the store indicated that it was closed. Few patrons at the restaurant, perhaps the only one open in town for New Year's Eve. Jaffa Gate, the transit point from which the roads leading to the Armenian quarter and the Ancient Roman Cardo to the Omar Mosque branch off, were literally deserted. Nice to be able to pray silently and at length over the Holy Places, but sad to know that the reason for this absence of pilgrims is war.

Only outside the historic walls of the Old City does Jerusalem seem to maintain a semblance of normalcy even if the traffic does not resemble that of years past. In people's comments, it is believed that Jerusalem is less affected by Hamas rockets because it is inhabited by many Palestinians and farther away; better to target Tel Aviv because it is closer and because it is more "Israeli." On Sunday, January 7, 27 rockets were fired at Tel Aviv. They avoid Jerusalem because 1/3 of Jerusalem's population is Palestinian. They hit Tel Aviv more where the population is more Israeli. But still even here many people tell first-hand of seeing Hamas rockets flying over the city and being intercepted before hitting the target.



The liturgical celebrations are certainly beautiful and solemn, with much participation but the faithful's eyes are glazed over with emotion. In conversations with Patriarchate officials, the climate of war is felt in every word of the conversation. The first observation I hear repeated is that Gaza is talked about a lot but - it is observed - there are few Christians. There is less talk about the West Bank, but there are many Christians there.

The consequences of Israel's measures with settlements, the offer of jobs to new non-Palestinian immigrants, and the gradual violation of the measures that were provided for in the Oslo Accords have created exasperation, unemployment and much poverty throughout the West Bank.

The reconstruction of Gaza will be long: it is expected to take a year to remove all the rubble and seven years to rebuild the buildings. But the wound in the West Bank is likely to be even more onerous for the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, because in addition to reviving the economy it will be necessary to rebuild the confidence in the younger generations that they can continue to live there.

Under these conditions, what are the prospects for the Order? The needs of the Palestinian community will grow. the Order of the Holy Sepulchre must move from a philosophy of aid to one of "job creation" toward which we were already moving; it will be inevitable to devote maximum efforts to humanitarian and pastoral activities. The resumption of pilgrimages must take place as soon as possible, seeking to restart dialogue by bringing a message of peace.

We need a different approach between the situation in Gaza and the situation in the West Bank.

In Gaza as long as military operations are ongoing, we cannot intervene. In the West Bank, the Order can begin its work right away by operating on the humanitarian front and launching "job creation projects" to restore hope of employment to those who have lost it. The war intervened when the population was recovering from Covid. Many who had found work again lost their jobs, and the current unemployment rate surpasses any previous one, including the Covid period.

In the West Bank, the Patriarchate owns a lot of land to build on while it owns none in Gaza. However, there are three Catholic schools in Gaza and perhaps the building of one of them could be exploited as housing.

In Gaza, when the conflict is over, there will be international solidarity to rebuild what was destroyed, but the hatred generated in the West Bank will be difficult to repair. Indeed, it will be difficult to rebuild dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. Palestinian exasperation leads to their identification with Hamas, and certainly the same phenomenon occurs in the Palestinian perception of Israel. Indeed, the majority of the Israeli population has slipped to the right and Israel harbors a deep distrust against the entire Palestinian population not just Hamas.

In the state of extreme distress, the Patriarchate structures continue their aid work in all directions. Aid in the West Bank has been rapid. The Patriarchate's Humanitarian Fund will be divided into four operational areas: 1) schools; 2) social aid with contributions and food vouchers; 3) medical intervention for extraordinary operations; 4) medical welfare program for people with chronic diseases. Many of the new projects involve job creation. Their purpose is to help small businesses in the West Bank, whereas for Gaza a job creation activity is premature.

Cardinal Filoni's visit is seen as a driving force that will have beneficial effects. The role of the

Patriarchate has also benefitted. The maintenance of parish buildings is necessary, but education and pastoral activities are more essential today. It must involve the younger generation: restore their confidence and tie them to the Holy Land, countering emigration.

Thus, difficult times lie ahead of us. Our enthusiasm and faith must not waver.

May the Cardinal Grand Master's courageous message of peace and dialogue be an inspiration to us all.

Leonardo Visconti di Modrone

Governor General

(January 2024)