



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

"The members of the Order are like ambassadors of the Holy Land"

Exclusive interview with Holy See Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin



Your Eminence, what does the Order of the Holy Sepulchre represent to you and what is its place in the universal Church? Given that the Pope appoints the Grand Master, could it be said that this is the only chivalric order intrinsically linked to the Holy See?

Since the dawn of Christianity, the Land where Our Lord was born, lived, died and rose again has had a special place in the hearts of believers and of the various ecclesial communities that have spread outside the Jewish world. Many faithful chose to live the Gospel both in a solitary form, as hermits, and gathering together, precisely in the places that had seen the earthly presence of Christ, in particular those linked to the stages of his public life, beginning with the Holy Sepulchre. The need is also felt to visit them. Thus, pilgrimages began, as a devotional and existential form of journey, which saw significant growth during the Middle Ages. The birth of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre dates back to that period, with explicit reference to the tomb that guarded the body of Jesus Christ devoid of life and from where he rose again. The need was felt to defend its integrity and that of those who went to visit it.

The Knights of the Holy Sepulchre were among those engaged in this noble enterprise. The earliest documents concerning them date back to 1336. From the 14th century onwards, the Popes sought to give them a juridical regulation and they gradually expanded their tasks to devote themselves to preserving the faith in the Holy Land, supporting charitable works and social services of the Church, in particular those promoted by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

The Order has always benefited from the protection of the Supreme Pontiffs. We could cite some passages, for example in 1496 Alexander VI decided that he would be the supreme Moderator, delegating to the Franciscans - who had been entrusted with the care of the Holy Sepulchre by Clement VI in 1342 - the power to confer the knighthood to nobles and gentlemen on a pilgrimage to

the Holy Land. Leo X renewed the confirmation of this privilege to the Franciscans in 1516, Benedict XIV further renewed it in 1746, and finally, in 1847 Pius IX, who reconstituted the Order, did so too. In 1888, Leo XIII also granted the possibility to nominate Dames. In 1907, Pius X decided that the title of Grand Master of the Order would belong to the Pope himself. In 1932, Pius XI approved the new Constitution and granted that Knights and Dames could to receive their Investiture beyond Jerusalem. In 1940, Pius XII appointed a Cardinal Protector of the Order. After the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Saint Paul VI in 1977 proceeded to approve the new Constitution. Saint John Paul II granted the Order, legal personality under Vatican City State. The current Grand Master is the Cardinal Edwin Frederick O'Brien.

The Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre is, together with the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, one of the two chivalric orders recognized by the Holy See. In the first, the Pope appoints the Grand Master, while in the second he is confirmed.

There are 30,000 Knights and Dames worldwide who are very active within their local Churches and strongly united with the bishops of the territory, who often act as Grand Priors of the Order's Lieutenancies. Would you say that the mission of the members of the Order consists in being ambassadors of the Holy Land in their respective dioceses?

It could be said in all truth that the members of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre, both the Knights and the Dames, are like "ambassadors" of the Holy Land. In fact, in addition to living their own Christian faith and manifesting adherence to the Catholic Church in the environments in which they live and work – in which sense all the baptized are called to be "ambassadors of Christ" (see 2 Cor 5:20) – they promote initiatives in favour of the Holy Places in the parishes and in the dioceses they belong to. Moreover, through their presence they also raise awareness among the faithful to meet the needs of the Christians who live in the Holy Land, often in difficult, if not dramatic, conditions. Today, the most pressing task is to create the political and socio-economic conditions that favour the permanence of Christians in the Holy Land, because it is in the interest of the whole Church that the Land of Jesus does not become a museum of archaeological finds and precious stones, but continue to be a Church built with "living stones" (1 Pt 2:5), Christians who for two thousand years have continued the uninterrupted tradition of the presence of Christ's disciples. Therefore, members of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre are asked not only to promote the collection of funds for the ecclesial realities present in the Holy Land, but also to pray and work so that peace prevails over divisions and violence.

The Holy Land has been experiencing an exceptional increase in pilgrimages for some years. What is your analysis of this phenomenon concerning the Mother Church of Jerusalem? Furthermore, could you perhaps share a personal spiritual moment you experienced at the Holy Sepulchre?

Pilgrimages are an important way to support the Christian presence in the Holy Land. It is also through these journeys of faith that Christians can help their brothers and sisters who live there. This allows the Christians of the Holy Land to work and support their families. Without this contribution of solidarity, the Holy Land would be poorer not only from the economic point of view, but above all from the human point of view. In fact, pilgrimages allow an exchange of cultures, languages, traditions, etc. which open to knowledge and mutual respect, promoting a society founded on the values of universal justice and fraternity. If, on the one hand, the pilgrims transmit resources to the inhabitants of those lands, on the other they receive much more than they can ever give in return. In fact, the pilgrim has an experience of faith in the places of salvation history that have seen the passage of

Jesus on this earth. A journey into memory and, at the same time, a rediscovery of the Gospel that is embodied in all time and at all latitudes.

Personally speaking, my visits to the Holy Land, beginning with my first visit in 1980 immediately after my ordination, have been unforgettable human and spiritual experiences. I am still greatly moved by the memory of one night in 2009, when on the eve of the apostolic journey of Pope Benedict XVI I was able to pray at length in the completely empty Basilica of the Agony in Gethsemane, until quite late. I also remember the Holy Mass celebrated in the aedicule of the Holy Sepulchre the following morning, at dawn. These were very intense moments, as were those with Pope Francis in 2014, which left an indelible mark on my heart and which I remember with a sense of nostalgia. The pilgrimages to the Holy Land have been a privileged way for me to know, love and follow the Lord Jesus more. Sometimes with a thrill of fear in the awareness that I am treading on the same land that he has walked. However, always with immense gratitude, knowing that all that he did, he did for me and for all my brothers and sisters in humanity, he did it for our love and for our salvation. I hope that everyone who is a pilgrim in the Holy Land can experience the same sentiments and return strengthened in faith and Christian witness.

Interview by François Vayne

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