



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

"Bari meeting aims to be a laboratory for paths of peace"

Interview with Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti, President of the Italian Episcopal Conference and Prior of the Order



From February 19 to 23, Bari will welcome the Catholic bishops of the countries on the shores of the Mediterranean for the "Mediterranean, frontier of peace" meeting. Pope Francis will join the bishops on Sunday 23 February and will preside over the concluding Mass, less than two years after his last visit to the Apulian capital for an ecumenical meeting of reflection and prayer for peace with leaders of the Churches and communities of the Middle East in July 2018. The Italian Episcopal Conference organizes the gathering and ahead of the opening session, we spoke to the President Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti, who is also Prior of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre. Msgr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Apostolic Administrator of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and Pro Grand Prior of the Order, will join him in Bari, bringing the experience of the Church of the Holy Land.

Your Eminence, how do you plan to develop the discussions during the February meeting to leave enough space for the specific situations of the various Churches in the Mediterranean area to emerge while at the same time emphasizing ecclesial unity?

This is a meeting of Bishops who care about the concrete Mediterranean and not a Mediterranean dream. A meeting of shepherds of the flock, who reflect that Mediterranean Church which represents the beating heart of the primeval history of Christianity. In addition, it is a moment of exchange based on listening and on community discernment, to fully exploit the synodal method that already becomes concrete practice in leading to community thinking about the great problems of this vast area, which La Pira, prophetically, called "The great lake Tiberias".

In fact, it can no longer be claimed that the conflicts that take place in distant regions do not concern us, we cannot think that a crisis in one country does not also concern others. This is an unfathomable

mistake with potentially catastrophic consequences. The Mediterranean represents the cradle of a civilization in which Christianity is undoubtedly among the founding members.

This is why, as Mediterranean Churches, we have a moral duty to commit ourselves to promoting places of encounter and peace and, what's more, this impels us to further responsibility: we are Christians, naturally brothers and sisters, each with the gift and task to contribute with attention and compassion to dialogue in several voices without one drowning the other out, without shouting, without muttering. A new narrative is needed that can only start from a basic element: A shared vision.

This is the second meeting in Bari that brings together religious leaders from the Mediterranean area, focusing on the Christian component. How are these two encounters connected and what steps have been taken in this time?

"Mediterranean, a frontier of peace" is not a great scientific-cultural conference nor a conference in which new forms of interreligious dialogue are being experimented. It is somewhat different and special, in many respects unique, which certainly also includes cultural and religious aspects, but which refers, above all, to our most authentic way of living and being a Church. The meeting will try to achieve a small step towards promoting a culture of dialogue and peace building in Europe and throughout the Mediterranean basin.

The reality is that there is an enormous need for peace, now more than ever. Peace in our hearts, undoubtedly, but also peace for all those migrants who find death in the Mediterranean and peace for all those families who have lost everything in every country at war: affections, home, life. Peace is the ideal thread that unites the two encounters.

The Order of the Holy Sepulchre, of which you are Prior, historically has a privileged bond with the patriarchal diocese of Jerusalem. How can it be supportive of the path you are tracing?

By continuing to be convinced and sincere ambassadors of peace! This is not only the absence of war but also a commitment to promote the dignity of the human person.

When he was in Bari in 2018, Pope Francis said, "hope has the face of children." And he added: "In the Middle East, for years, an appalling number of young people mourn violent deaths in their families and see their native land threatened, often with their only prospect being that of flight." This is undoubtedly the "death of hope." To concretely oppose these atrocities one must open, as Francis said, "paths of peace" where one can turn "the gaze on those who beg to live fraternally with others."

The Bari meeting of February 2020 wants to be just that: a laboratory for a path of peace. The Order of the Holy Sepulchre can share and support this work.

What are your expectations as the meeting approaches?

There are no preordained results and I do not expect to achieve amazing goals. I am ready, however, to welcome all that the Holy Spirit will be able to arouse in a dialogue and discussion, which, I am sure, will take place with frankness and fraternal spirit.

Today a part of society no longer remembers the teachings that Paul VI condensed with a demanding expression: building "a civilization of love." The contemporary world no longer remembers what it

has been and is no longer familiar with the dimension of history which presupposes a "before" and "after" our existence and lives, instead, in an obsessive present, dominated by an "absolute I" that blinds us to the challenges of the contemporary world.

Instead, the Mediterranean has always been the sea in the middle of the lands, the sea in the middle of the continents and, for this reason, it is not possible to realistically read this space except in dialogue and as a bridge - historical, geographical, and human - between Europe, Africa and Asia. Around 20 civilizations have developed around it in the past, which are among the most important in the world. It is the home of Abraham and the three monotheistic religions; it is the sea of Jesus, which is of Galilee, of the apostles and it is the place where the first evangelization was born.

Thus, faced with the problems of today's world, faced with the problems of peace, migration, social differences and poverty, we must concretely confront each other starting from what our Fathers already knew and which now seems forgotten: if we want the shores to touch each other, we must reach out our hands.

Interview by François Vayne ed Elena Dini

(February 18, 2020)