



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

“In the Order, we truly are one big family”

Innovating to live out our faith in a time of crisis: the experience of the Lieutenancy for Switzerland



An exchange of ideas during a conversation between Mgr. Felix Gmür, Bishop of Basel, President of the Swiss Bishops' Conference and Prior of the German-speaking Swiss section of the Order, and Mrs. Donata Maria Krethlow- Benziger, Lieutenant for Switzerland

Donata: Bishop Gmür, dear Felix, the year 2020 has been marked by the Covid-19 pandemic. What have been your experiences of this crisis and especially in the context of your ministry as president of the Bishops' Conference? How were you, as the highest representative of the Roman Catholic Church, able to influence how the crisis was managed?

First of all, the crisis forced me out of my routine and once again made it clear that the only thing that is truly certain in life is change. With crisis comes a lot of uncertainty. The Bishops' Conference, therefore, had to assess the consequences for the spiritual support of the faithful and adjust ecclesial life by liaising with the authorities and reacting to the unfolding situation. An important finding was that churches need to improve their digital presence on the internet. The last few months have seen a burst of innovation in this area. During lockdown, parishes had to use new lines of communication. For example, a multimedia impetus on social media networks, digital prayer cards to provide opportunities for daily reflection during Holy Week, masses livestreamed via video, and video conferences as platforms for dialogue. In the future, we will need to plan digital and analogue platforms even more flexibly by adapting them to specific situations.

Donata: In the current crisis, coming together as an Order and as a Church represents a particular challenge for the members of our Order, but not only for us. What opportunities do you see to improve or to diversify religious activity within the Order?

Whenever possible, members of the Order should come together at their meetings. Most of the time, this has been possible in small groups, for example to pray the Rosary or on first Fridays for the prayer to the Sacred Heart. Young people have also organised times for common prayer or online Bible meditations. I am happy about that, and members of our Order should pay more attention to this. It is also touching that active charity – such as shopping for older members, visiting a sick person etc. – is something that is seen every day in our Order.

Bishop Felix Gmür: Dear Donata, what has been your experience of this year in the Order, in light of the Coronavirus crisis?

It was moving to see how, during this crisis, valuable signs of a deepening attachment were demonstrated in our Order. In such an extraordinary period, we had to stick together and support each other. It splendidly proved that in the Order we are truly one big family. The oldest members, the weakest or the unattached, in particular, have not been forgotten. With imagination and a desire to innovate, the leaders of the Order have endeavoured to maintain social contacts. So, there were phone trees, where Presidents or the Priors contacted members. The younger members offered to help the older ones, for example with shopping. The telephone came back into its own as did the postal service which was used to reach members of the Order. In addition, WhatsApp group chats have been created within the sections. From home, it was also possible to be united in prayer at set times with the Delegation or the Prior of the Section, or you could attend a celebration of Mass via YouTube. We were pleased to learn from some members of the Order, especially older members, that through the Order they had been able to come into contact with other people and with the outside world.

Bishop Felix Gmür: The planned Investiture in Basel and other major events could not go ahead. What have you missed the most as a Lieutenant?

It was the first time in the 70-year history of our Lieutenancy that an Investiture had to be cancelled. Generally speaking, the whole life of our Order has been severely restricted this year. Many events that are important to us could not take place. Whenever possible, I tried to attend the rare events that have taken place since March. I was so happy to be able to meet members to talk with them! I really missed the personal contact and the meetings with my members. And what I particularly missed were the pilgrimages to the Holy Land to meet the people who live there. This has been a great loss in the life of our Order.

Bishop Felix Gmür: As Dames and Knights, we must take care of the Christians of the Holy Land who are entrusted to our personal care. Without being able to get there, how have you managed to maintain contact with the people of this country this year?

On many occasions during this period, I have been in contact with a wide range of people in the Holy Land, and I have expressed our deep attachment to them. The leaders of the Latin Patriarchate, the

Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul, the Sisters of the Rosary, the priests at the seminary of Beit Jala, and many more were all happy to receive these signs of our loyalty and our compassion. As I am personally extremely attached to all the projects of the Swiss Lieutenancy, I suffered a lot from not being able to visit in 2020. I had planned to go twice this year. As soon as it is possible to travel to the Holy Land again to visit the local population and to find out for myself about current circumstances and situations, I will do so immediately. During this time especially, Christians in this region need us, Dames and Knights, to give them signs of hope and solidarity. Currently, pilgrimages from our three Sections are planned for 2021 and 2022. After the pandemic, it will be all the more important and urgent to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Donata: Bishop Gmür, it is not only as prior of the German-speaking Swiss Section of our Order that you have a special connection with the Holy Land, but also as protector of Caritas Baby Hospital. You hold this position jointly with the Archbishop of Freiburg im Breisgau. Like me, you go to Bethlehem once or twice a year and meet the local leaders there. I imagine that, like all of us, you were prevented from going to the Holy Land this year. How were you able to maintain contact with the hospital and the people there?

I have maintained personal contact with the Holy Land, albeit under difficult conditions, through a variety of channels. Unfortunately, I have not had direct contact with the Caritas Baby Hospital, but only with their office in Switzerland. Unfortunately, the trip to the Holy Land planned for January 2021 with the Holy Land Coordination has been cancelled, but in Autumn 2021, I will be on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and I will also visit Bethlehem.

Donata: In agreement with the Swiss Bishops' Conference, Christmas fundraising throughout Switzerland has been assigned, for many years, to the Caritas Baby Hospital. How do you see this instant loss of donations for the Bethlehem hospital? How do you assess the situation for the future?

I fear a significant loss of donations in 2020. This has already been demonstrated during the collection for the Holy Land in Holy Week. That is why I am going to record a video and call on the faithful to donate through this channel. The children's hospital is important and constitutes a concrete commitment to the Holy Land which deserves all our support.

Donata: Monsignor Gmür, to conclude, allow me to quote the Grand Prior of the Order, the Latin Patriarch, His Beatitude Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who thanked all the Dames and Knights from around the world for their prayers and their tremendous financial support, especially during this pandemic. According to his words, he is very fortunate to have the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem at his side, and he concludes, "Thank you for being the concrete and tangible sign of Divine Providence for this small but important Church!"

(Spring 2021)