



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

*At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land*

**“The culture of encounter at the very heart of the mission of the Church”**

Interview with Archbishop Giuseppe Lazzarotto, Apostolic Delegate to Jerusalem and Palestine, and Apostolic Nuncio to Israel



***Msgr. Giuseppe Lazzarotto, in what way could the agreement signed on June 26, between the Holy See and the State of Palestine, be described as historic, and in your opinion what fundamental elements does it contain?***

We can certainly call this an historic agreement because it is the first Treaty between the Holy See and the State of Palestine. But its real importance lies in the fact that it offers a clear recognition and precise legal guarantees to the Catholic Church and its institutions in Palestine.

Regarding the content – which will be released after the ratification of the Agreement – the very title indicates it. This is a “global agreement” and thus covers all aspects of the life of the Church, its members, clergy and faithful, its structures and institutions. An important chapter concerning religious freedom and conscience is elaborated and detailed. Other aspects of the life of the Church in Palestine are also addressed: its jurisdiction, personal status, places of worship, social and charitable activity, means of social communication. Another chapter is dedicated to taxation issues and other aspects of church property.

***Can we consider that this agreement is a model for organizing the presence and life of the Church in all other Muslim-majority countries?***

The Agreement can surely be an important point of reference for other Muslim-majority countries where the church can boast a long tradition of presence and activity on behalf of the Christian community and society in general. But I believe it is important to understand why the Holy See negotiates and concludes such agreements. At the same time as seeking to achieve legal security,

the Church also intends to offer concrete ways for its members to promote the welfare of the society in which they live.

***Regarding the agreement with Israel, which is still under negotiation, do you think we are heading for a signature in the short term?***

The agreement with Israel is virtually defined in its essential aspects. There are only a few technical points on which the Government of Israel has yet to decide. Various circumstances, including the formation of a new Government, have so far delayed the conclusion of the Agreement. For its part, the Holy See hopes we can soon resume negotiations and find a common agreement on the points that are still pending.

***How does the Church promote the culture of encounter and interreligious dialogue in the Holy Land, and what role do Catholic schools have in this area?***

I would say the promotion of the culture of encounter and dialogue is at the heart of the mission of the Church. It is the Gospel message, which she is called to proclaim, that requires it. In the Holy Land the Church accomplishes this by all its institutions and especially by its network of schools that can boast a long tradition of teaching and high level of education recognized by all. I think it is essential that, in our schools, we engage further in seeking new educational pathways to meet the challenges which arise from encounter and dialogue in the specific context of the Holy Land and, in general, the Middle East.

***Can you briefly describe the legal status of Catholic schools in Palestine on the one hand, and Israel on the other, and tell us in this regard what challenges face the Church in the two countries?***

Both Israel and Palestine recognize the right of the Catholic Church to exercise its educational mission and to establish schools. The State of Israel also provides some financial support, as it does also for other schools in the same category. Currently the level of economic commitment of the State is the subject of a dispute between Christian schools in Israel and the Ministry of Education. President Reuven Rivlin's recent visit to the Vatican offered the opportunity to express the common wish that this issue could quickly find a satisfactory solution. What the Church asks in truth is to fulfill its mission in the most efficient manner.

***In your opinion what are the fruits of Pope Francis's visit to the Holy Land in May 2014?***

Pope Francis's visit in May 2014 remains a point of reference and encouragement, strong and clear, to all who sincerely work for peace in the Holy Land. The words and gestures of the Holy Father are also an appeal to all the leaders to open up to a higher dimension of politics. I think especially of the moment of prayer to which he invited the President of Israel and the President of Palestine in the presence of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople.

***How are the people of Gaza living today, a year after the "protective edge" operation, in particular the members of the small Catholic community, and what can we do for these people in a concrete manner?***

In Gaza the situation is very difficult after the war last year. Even the reconstruction has not yet been initiated. Our small Catholic community continues to offer a generous and courageous testimony among many difficulties. It does so mainly through the three schools and the homes for assistance to disabled children and the elderly.

***Are refugees from Iraq and Syria welcomed in Israel and also in Palestine, as they are in Jordan? Are these refugees victims of anti- Christian persecution, as claimed by some Western media, or do you think that their plight is the subject of a global operation to promote the “clash of civilizations” in the strategic interest of one particular camp?***

Regarding the situation of Christians in Iraq and in Syria, and more generally in the Middle East, we all know the frequent calls by Pope Francis, who continues to invite us to prayer and action on behalf of all the Christians who suffer persecution because of their faith. The situation is certainly very complex and very difficult to decipher. Nevertheless the words of the Holy Father are clear and push the international community to think seriously about the injustices of which Christians are the victims.

***How do you see the future of the region, from the outpost of Jerusalem, what is your hope, and how can the Order of the Holy Sepulchre participate even further in the service of peace in the Middle East?***

The general framework of the situation and the future in the Holy Land and the Middle East remain bleak. But we have learned from the Lord that we must never cease to sow hope even when discord seems to stifle everything. This is the great challenge for the Church in these times, well beyond this region. The Order of the Holy Sepulchre will find its place and continue its commitment to dialogue and collaboration with the local Church and its institutions.

**Interview by François Vayne**

*(September 22, 2015)*