Custodians of a spirit of fraternity in the Holy Sites

Interview with Father Custos Francesco Patton

Father Francesco Patton, Custos of the Holy Land, together with the Governor General, Ambassador Leonardo Visconti di Modrone, and two members of the Holy Land Commission of the Grand Magisterium.

Father Patton, what were the historical ties between the Custody and the Order of the Holy Sepulchre before the restoration of the Latin Patriarchate, and how would you now consider the collaboration with the Knights and Dames who come on pilgrimage to the Holy Land?

The historical ties with the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre date back to 1474 when, by pontifical institution, the Custos of the Holy Land received the faculty to create the Knights. Since then, an institutional relationship has been developed down through the centuries with various forms of collaboration, especially in favour of the Holy Sites in general and of the Holy Sepulchre in particular. The last Knight invested by the Custos was Patriarch Valerga himself in 1848. From that moment on, more direct relations have been consolidated between the Order and the Latin Patriarchate.

Today, the relationship between the Custody and the Knights is inspired by a spirit of fraternal collaboration: whenever they make their solemn entrance into the Holy Sepulchre, or visit Jerusalem and ask to meet the Custos, or when they want to offer their help to support some projects in favour of the works of the Custody of the Holy Land, also in memory of their origins and their original bond with the Custody and for the benefit of local Christians.

The Custody coordinated the pastoral activities of the Latin Church in the Holy Land for several centuries. After the restoration of the Latin Patriarchate in 1847, how did the relations between these two ecclesiastical institutions evolve?

Until the year 1516, the Custody could not undertake other forms of apostolate except presence in the Shrines, prayer, liturgical celebrations, welcoming and caring for the pilgrims hosted in its own sites. Following the change of the regime in the region, when the Mamluks were replaced by the Ottomans who were to a certain extent more tolerant, the friars of the Custody commenced pastoral activity with local Christian populations. Beginning in 1555, the first steps were made in the return to the communion of the Catholic Church of local non-Catholic Christians, and hence the formation of the first "Latin" parish communities around the Sanctuaries. This growing activity over time enabled Blessed Pope Pius IX, in 1847, to create a Latin diocese in the Holy Land, which took the form of a "reestablishment" or "restoration" of the "Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem" (the title of the Patriarch existed from the Council of Chalcedon, and at the time of the Crusades it was resumed and survived after their defeat only in Europe as an episcopal title *in partibus infidelium*. In 1847 it was "returned to the See").

In 1627, the Congregation of Propaganda Fide considered the Custody of the Holy Land a true mission in *partibus infidelium*, declaring it directly subject to its jurisdiction and recognizing to the Friars Minor parish rights in all places where convents and hostels were founded.

Inevitably, the creation of the new Catholic territorial circumscriptions, especially those of the Latin rite, within the territory of the Custody's Mission, initially gave rise to some uncertainty as to the precise relationship between the respective jurisdictions, which were dealt with in several successive decrees of the Holy See.

These issues have now been clarified: in the apostolate among the local faithful, the Friars of the Custody serve the Particular Churches, similar to the religious who exercise their apostolate everywhere in the Catholic orb; while the competence of the Custody of the Holy Places remains proper to the Custody who always safeguards these Sites on behalf of the whole of Catholicity. The Custody still carries out pastoral activities in 29 parishes and in numerous churches, chapels and institutions. Although, as with the creation of all Particular Churches, the pastoral care of those parishes entrusted to religious is subject to the government of the Ordinary of the ecclesiastical territory, according to canon law.

Today, after 170 years of experience and maturity, we can say that we live our mutual relation in a spirit of maximum respect for respective tasks and mutual cooperation, especially in the pastoral field.

Father Patton, you met Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa when you were a novice in La Verna. What is your relationship now that he has become the Apostolic Administrator of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem? Does your common love for St. Francis of Assisi offer a common "pastoral" line? If so, in what direction?

The relationship with Msgr Pierbattista was fraternal when he was Custos of the Holy Land and continues to be very fraternal even now as the Apostolic Administrator of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem for the Latins. There are many areas in which it is extremely important to maintain close collaboration, such as parish pastoral care, school attendance, reception and integration of Catholic migrant workers, but also cooperation with other Christian communities present and that of relations with civil authorities.

Our common Franciscan roots encourage us to always keep in mind the method of dialogue and attention to individual people and their needs, especially the poor and those who suffer. Obviously, there are official occasions for dialogue, such as when we gather for meetings of the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land, informal occasions, such as recently when he was our guest

for the Feast of St. Francis, and personal occasions when address concrete and particular issues together.

Father Custos, what are the pastoral priorities that you must face with your brothers in the Holy Land, especially with regard to dialogue with Muslim and Jewish believers?

As Friars of the Holy Land, our first mandate, according to the will of the Holy See, is to guard the Holy Sites and render them accessible to pilgrims, so our first priority in pastoral care is caring for the Shrines and pilgrim reception in them, given that they are above all places where we live, pray and deepen our faith.

Then there is a pastoral priority linked to parishes, especially in Israel, Palestine, Syria, Cyprus and Rhodes, namely the care of local Christians and those who come in search of work. The priority in this case is to move towards an ever more universal and welcoming Church experience, capable of integrating those who live here and those who come here.

There is also a pastoral priority linked to the situation that our friars and Christians are living in Syria, where it is necessary to work on a very concrete plan to help the population that is sorely tried by many years of war but where it is even more necessary to keep hope alive and resuscitate the small local Christian community, to help them look to the future with a perspective of reconciliation.

Regarding dialogue with Jews and Muslims, in everyday life, relations are basically good. There are special commissions that have the purpose of promoting dialogue and also organizing various initiatives. In the Custody itself, we have Jewish and Muslim professional employees, in addition to Christians, our schools are attended by students of different confessions and the majority of students are Muslims.

This year, in the space of a few months, I was able to attend a meeting on ecology with a Jewish rabbi and a Muslim jurist, to invite local Muslim community leaders to a dinner at the end of Ramadan in the square of our sanctuary in Bethany; to host a convention at Ain Karem, at our shrine, on the figure of John the Baptist, living an experience of dialogue between Jews and Christians; and finally to organize at our shrine on Mount Nebo a convention on Moses in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Opportunities are constantly present; the important thing is to know how to grasp them while at the same time avoiding any form of exploitation. Encounters, however, first and foremost take place in everyday life and personal relationships, and then at the level of commissions or specific topics. Personally, I believe that the greatest opportunity for dialogue with the Muslim world is our Holy Land Schools and that the best opportunity for dialogue with the Jewish world is in the field of culture. With both, we must then see to collaborate on social and charitable initiatives.

Your communications outreach uses various effective means. How would you evaluate its impact in today's world?

Communications media is a necessity in today’s world to make our reality known. What I hope is that they can also be instruments of evangelization in the literal sense of the term, that is, instruments capable of telling of the good and everyday life, rather than evil and what is exceptional. Our communications media is not after scoops, nor does it want to be spectacular and sensational, but to tell of this Holy Land, its Sites and the people who live here. By paraphrasing a Chinese proverb we don’t want to talk about the falling tree, but the growing forest.

François Vayne

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