Special focus: first official visit of the new Governor General to the Holy Land

The Grand Magisterium delegation, accompanied by the Governor General, was received at the Latin Patriarchate by Bishop Giacinto-Boulos Marcuzzo, New Patriarchal Vicar for Jerusalem.

From September 10 to 16, 2017, Ambassador Leonardo Visconti of Modrone, Governor General of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, made his first official visit to the Holy Land. He was accompanied on this trip by a delegation composed of Msgr. Fortunato Frezza, Master of Ceremonies of the Order, Thomas McKiernan, President of the Holy Land Commission of the Grand Magisterium, Professor Bartholomew McGettrick, member of the same Commission, and the author of this report who is the director of the Order's Communication Office in Rome.

During this visit, the Governor General was able to spend time with his hosts at the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem – in Israel, Palestine and Jordan – focusing his attention on the ongoing projects supported by the Order in the field of education, pastoral care and ministry for refugees. This visit providentially took place during 170th anniversary of the restoration of the Latin Patriarchate and the reorganization of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre by Pope Pius IX in the summer of 1847.

Before his departure, the Governor General had the opportunity to meet with the Apostolic Administrator of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Msgr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, in order to prepare for his pilgrimage since the Archbishop was unfortunately in Rome for the meeting of the newly appointed bishops.

"Mabruk": it is with this word of blessing, pronounced in Arabic, that Bishop Giacinto- Boulos Marcuzzo, Patriarchal Vicar for Jerusalem and Palestine, welcomed the Governor General and the delegation accompanying him, explaining that "this word evokes the thanksgiving we owe for the good that has been received as well as the strength needed to do the good that remains to be done."

“This is all I need,” said Ambassador Leonardo Visconti of Modrone, eager to make the most of this trip to aid him in the tasks that await him in his new position.

The group then went to pray at the tomb of the first two patriarchs of Jerusalem appointed after the restoration of the Patriarchate in the nineteenth century, Msgr. Giuseppe Valerga and Msgr. Vincenzo Bracco, entrusting to their intercession the success of this visit to serve the “living stones” of the Holy Land.

The cornerstone and commemorative plaque in Jaffa of Nazareth contains a tribute to the members of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre for the help offered to the school and the parish.

The first stone at Jaffa of Nazareth

The first leg of the journey took them to Jaffa of Nazareth, Galilee, where the Governor laid the cornerstone for an addition to the parish school and new priest residence, made possible by the help provided by the Order. The new Chancellor of the Archdiocese, Father Ibrahim Shomali, the new director of administrative services, Sami El-Yousef, and Father Iyad Twal, director of the Patriarchate schools, accompanied the delegation.

In his speech, Father Hanna Kaldani, recently appointed Patriarchal Vicar for Israel and a member of the Holy Sepulchre, recalled the importance of this school for the families of the region, particularly for the Christian community. Hundreds of local authorities were present, including the mayor of the city, all deeply honored that the Governor of the Order had come to meet them. The Governor told them he was particularly “impressed by the smiles of young students which convey a joy that makes us grow in the faith and encourages us to always serve people first.”

Meeting with the Pontifical Mission

The next day, the delegation met Joseph Hazboun, director of the CNEWA - Pontifical Mission in Jerusalem, an organization that relies on the support of both the Archdiocese of New York and the Congregation for Oriental Churches.

“Since Pius XI founded CNEWA in 1926 and the establishment of the Pontifical Mission by Pope Pius XII in 1949, we have sought to help the Palestinian people, victims of occupation, striving to relieve their suffering through actions that nourish hope in new generations, “said the director.

Ambassador Visconti di Modrone responded by sharing his desire to create momentum fostering coordination between all the initiatives that encourage coexistence and dialogue in the Holy Land.

Supporting the University of Bethlehem

In this spirit, the Governor General wanted to stop at the University of Bethlehem. This institution is crucial for young Palestinian students with over 3000 enrolled in the five faculties, including a nursing school whose building is currently being developed.

Lasallian Brother Peter Bray, president of the University, welcomed the Governor General and asked him to thank the members of the Order who have sent about nine million dollars to support this “oasis of peace” over the last twenty years, allowing so many students to keep hope alive, despite the separation wall and the “segregation” that cripples Palestinian territories stifled by unrelenting colonization. Because of the wall and the restrictions on movement some of these young people have never been able to go to the Holy Sepulchre and have never even seen the sea that is only a few miles away. From the university terrace we could see this disturbing and progressive “corralling” that seems to confirm a “strategy of chaos” destined to exasperate the population – we were told – “just as happened in Gaza.”

Ambassador Leonardo Visconti of Modrone together with Father Yacoub Rafidi, new rector of the Beit Jala Seminary, in front of the Marian icon of the chapel in which the future priests of the Latin Patriarchate pray every day.

Forming Future Priests: the Seminary of Beit Jala

That afternoon the Governor General and the delegation went deeper into Palestine, to Beit Jala, the town next to Bethlehem, where Father Yacoub Rafidi, rector of the Seminary, and his team welcomed the delegation. “You are part of our family,” said the rector, grateful for the regular aid provided by the Order for the formation of future priests of the Patriarchate. This year there are nearly sixty seminarians, twenty of whom are in the Minor Seminary.

“The mission of Monsignor Valerga, who founded this institution in 1852, continues with a missionary spirit, because we want faith in Christ to grow in the land of our fathers, patriarchs and prophets,” added Father Rafidi, showing the Icon of the Seminary, unique in its genre, representing the Virgin holding the Child Jesus, dressed in cassock and surplice, in her arms.

Father Francesco Patton, Custos of the Holy Land, together with the Governor General and two members of the Holy Land Commission of the Grand Magisterium (Thomas McKiernan, president, on the left and Bartholomew McGettrick on the right).

Synergy with the Custody

The second day also included a meeting with Father Francesco Patton fm, appointed Custos of the Holy Land a few months ago, who is close to the new Apostolic Administrator of the Latin Patriarchate, Msgr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the former Custos.

Father Patton welcomed the Governor General to the headquarters of the Custody for their meeting, during which he described the mission of the Franciscan Friars in the holy places over the past 800 years. This, he said, was to preserve the presence of Roman Catholicism during the period when the Patriarchate did not have a physical representation.

From October 16 to 18 the celebrations of this anniversary were attended by Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for Oriental Churches and representatives of the episcopal conferences from around the world.

Father Patton, with his extraordinary natural authority, insisted on the urgent need to help Christian families, especially by supporting the education of young people, and found himself in agreement with the Governor on the need to work towards a “global synergy” in this field, in order to strengthen the transmission of faith and Christian formation, a weak point and a “real problem”, unfortunately, found in many educational institutions.

Visit to the school of Naour

Visit to projects in Jordan

On Wednesday, the delegation headed to Jordan for a two-day visit. Bishop William Shomali, Patriarchal Vicar for Jordan, welcomed the General Governor to Naour, on the great outskirts of Amman, for the inauguration of a kindergarten and a new classroom wing in a parish school of the Patriarchate. A festive welcome was provided by a band, traditional dances and a wide number of people who came to represent the Christian community and to witness the blessing of the new rooms, underscoring the importance of the event, which was widely reported by local media.

In the Kingdom of Jordan, the Catholic Church benefits from a rare stability in the region: in Jordan Christians are far more numerous than they are in Palestine or Israel, which justifies important projects such as building new places of worship.

The Governor General and the delegation visited the construction site of the parish church of St. Paul's in Jubeiha, north of Amman, in a neighborhood where more and more Christians have come to work in the Jordanian capital. The parish community already has 1,500 families, that is, about 7,000 people, and the completion of the new church is greatly anticipated. The parishioners have shown how deeply they care for this project through their own financial gifts towards the initial construction work. The help of the Order will follow.

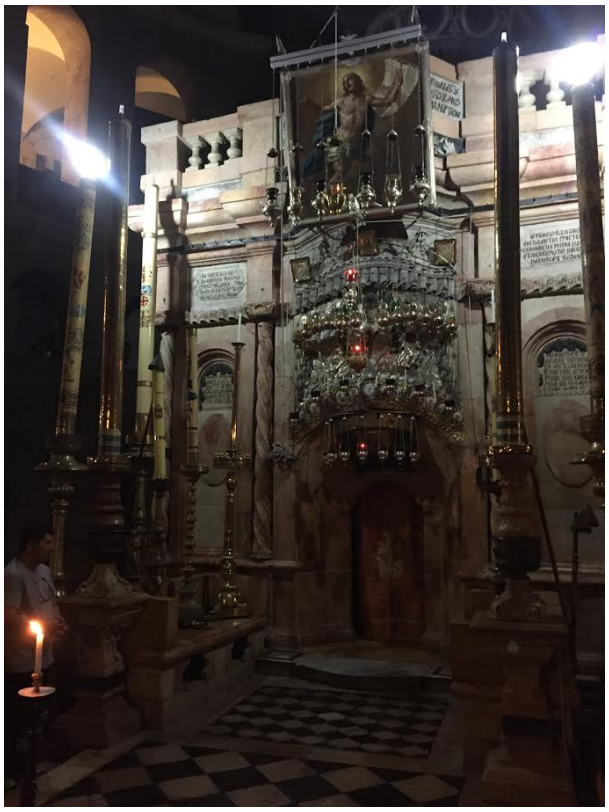
On Thursday, September 14, the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, the program included a pilgrimage to Mount Nebo from which Moses, before dying, could see the Promised Land. In this holy place, entrusted to the Franciscan friars of the Custody, one recalls Moses' staff on which was mounted a bronze serpent. All who were bitten by a serpent and looked at the bronze serpent were healed: a sign of anticipation of the cross of Christ that saves us from eternal death. The delegation prayed on this mountain, facing Jerusalem, with the texts of the liturgy of the day that exalt the mystery of our salvation, asking God to protect all the inhabitants of the Holy Land.

The Order alongside refugees

En route to Mount Nebo, the Governor General visited some Iraqi refugees working in Madaba, 30 kilometers south of Amman, a Jordanian city with a large Christian community.

In a workshop, made up of portable buildings, refugees make mosaics which are for sale. The Order participates in the financing of these humanitarian activities, together with Caritas and the French Embassy. Salam, a 31-year-old refugee who was wounded during an attack in Mosul and escaped from Qaraqosh with his family, told us that it is easier for the Syrians to think of returning home after Daesh's defeat rather than for Iraqis, afraid of the instability that persists in their country. "Our faith in Christ is a solid rock, we have nothing but God," Salam testified, a man whose words and face we will not forget.

Bishop Mauro Lalli, chargé d'affaires of the Nunciature in Jordan, invited the delegation of the Order to dinner. He was very impressed by the work carried out in the region by the Knights and Dames, "not just to keep faith in the holy places but to nourish it."



On the day of the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, at the Holy Sepulchre, the members of the Grand Magisterium delegation carried all of the intentions of the Knights and Dames around the world in prayer.

The last meetings in Jerusalem

Returning to Jerusalem on Friday, the Governor met with the Palestinian priests with whom he had a frank and direct dialogue during a lunch offered at the Latin Patriarchate. On that occasion, the Governor received an icon of Our Lady of Palestine, painted by one of the Little Sisters of Bethlehem and blessed in the afternoon by Msgr. Fortunato Frezza during the pilgrimage of the Delegation to the Holy Sepulchre for the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows.

At the end of the stay, the delegation met again with Sami El-Yousef and his team, which included a pair of young French volunteers, Claire and Charles-Edouard Guilbert, who are in charge of the project office. This afforded the group the opportunity to review the assistance the Order provides. They reported on projects that have been completed, illustrated ongoing projects and proposed future projects, all in a climate of deep confidence. These will be discussed at length during the next meeting of the Grand Magisterium at the end of October.

A final appointment before returning to Rome allowed us to speak with Claudio Maina, director of the Secretariat of Solidarity, an office of the Apostolic Nunciature. Its mission, in coordination with the Congregation for Oriental Churches, is to distribute aid to Catholic schools that do not belong to the Latin Patriarchate. He reported that some Christian families have difficulty in paying the tuition fee. “Religious identity is lost and, too often, profitability is the working principle. The Order must ensure that the transmission of faith is not marginalized in schools that receive its support,” he recommended, echoing the Custos’ reflection. In the Holy Land only 25% of Christians profess to practice their faith while 55% of Jews and 65% of Muslims practice their faith.

The personal relationships established, the insights received and the observation noted during the week-long visit are important first steps for the Governor General to help orient him during these first days of his mandate. This will make communication with the Patriarchate easier in the years to come. This journey undoubtedly opens up a new and promising chapter in the collaboration between the Order and the Church in the Holy Land.

François Vayne

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