



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

Seeing Christ looking at humanity

Interview with Msgr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa



Excellency, we would like to help our members get to know you better, on a deeper, more spiritual level. How has Saint Francis inspired your pastoral ministry?

I belong to the Franciscan religious family and the example of the saint of Assisi is therefore at the center of my life and service to the Church. The reason why I followed Francis was because he was in love with Christ in his humanity and when he saw humanity, he saw Christ. This would be how I interpret my role as pastor today in Jerusalem: first of all start afresh from Christ and my encounter with him in every living reality. The love of Jesus Christ must enlighten our pastoral choices. If our first concern are needs we will always be frustrated but instead if we start from our relationship with Jesus Christ, it illuminates all of our problems from within. A heart filled with joy for the salvation we have been gifted addresses difficulties in a different way, in an open dialogue and this is even more necessary in Jerusalem where there are so many divisions, fears, closures, both religious and political. A Church free from fear is open. We have nothing to lose and, as St Peter said to the impotent at the Beautiful Gate, the entrance to the Temple of Jerusalem: "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!".

To go even further into the heart of your spirituality, could you explain your choice of episcopal motto for the members of the Order?

Just before the official announcement of my appointment, I read this passage of the Word of God in chapter 12 of the second letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians in which it is written, "My grace is sufficient for you." In fact, I feel like a latecomer, not entirely qualified for the role as I am an Italian in the Holy Land, a Franciscan but not there because I am a Franciscan, here for an Arab church,

but I do not speak Arabic. I can see all of these limitations inherent in this choice so my only option is to entrust myself totally to grace.

You have spoken of how the writings of a French Jesuit of German origin, Christoph Theobald, inspire you. Can you draw any useful insights from his work “The revelation” to help members of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre in their spiritual life ?

This Western society, where everything changes so quickly, is no longer Christian and I wonder how we can be Church today, how can we reach people who do not welcome faith anymore and do not know Jesus Christ in a “post-Christian” society. I found an original thought in Christoph Theobald’s insights: It is not a question of converting people but to awaken in them the desire for Christ and to live every encounter in this light. Christ is already present in the world and has conquered death, all we have to do is bring him into the world, reveal his presence and awaken the consciousness of the people to God’s love that is waiting for them.

The shrine of Our Lady of Palestine in Deir Rafat, Israel, is very important for you. How are you going about inviting the faithful to visit it and promote it?

Our Lady of Palestine, the patron saint of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, plays an important role in the life of the Christian communities of the vast diocese that the Pope has sent me to serve. Of all the shrines of the Holy Land, often linked to a specific territory, that of Our Lady of Palestine gathers together all of our local Church, beyond different sensitivities, or origins, or language. I want to develop the reception capacity of this place, especially so that young people, couples, families can gather there for their spiritual refreshment.

Over 27 years you have had the opportunity to get to know the reality of the Holy Land, starting with the Franciscan Custody , the Hebrew-speaking Catholic community, the Latin Patriarchate, as well as other Christian churches and non-Christian communities. What do you think is the meeting point to allow all these actors to cooperate for the good of this land?

My experience is that someone has to start taking chances, without being afraid of losing, and starting from the shared reality. We encounter each other in service to the poor, in the common humanity, and there we build a relationship which can open to other horizons. You cannot meet each other starting from a dialogue of faith or great principles because this can create barriers.

As Pro Grand Prior, is there a particular message you want to entrust to the Knights and Ladies of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre?

I would invite you to continue your prayers and support for this land and to continue to come on pilgrimage. Through your presence in our villages and in our cities you create a universal network of spiritual solidarity, vital to the survival of our Church of Jerusalem, the Mother Church, called to keep in touch with all the Churches of the world. Also, not everyone can come here and so you can bring the Holy Land to your own realities and answer your call to be “announcers” of the beauty of these places that are not only narrated by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but also by the great passion of a rich and vibrant community that inhabits them.

Interview by François Vayne and Elena Dini

(November 2016)