



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

The Land that gives Life to life: an interview with a guide of pilgrimages to the Holy Land



Father Sergio Rotasperti is a Biblical scholar and has been accompanying groups of pilgrims to the Holy Land for years. Over the years he has experimented with some ad hoc proposals, from pilgrimages with the Bible in his hands in which he dedicates more time to the meditation of the Word of God to biblical trekking, walking in the Holy Land on foot.

Father Sergio, for many years you have been guiding pilgrimages to the Holy Land “with the Bible in hand.” Can you share some of your experiences with us?

There are so many ways to go to the Holy Land; one of the more profound methods is to go with the aim of deepening our understanding of the Scriptures, starting with Jerusalem. You fully enter into the Scriptures the moment they take life before your very eyes. Many pilgrims share this experience. Many people say to me: “now going home I understand the Scriptures” perhaps because they can locate the event. Reading the Scriptures on the spot means giving body, eyes, smell, feelings ... everything that a mental reading alone, far from the land, does not give you.

I have studied the Bible for many years, but only when I went to the Holy Land were my eyes opened: the Holy Land is not enough to read Scripture but if you do not read it in the Holy Land your way of reading the Bible remains limited and limiting. In fact, we call it the Fifth Gospel.

Clearly, the relationship between the Bible and the Holy Land does not end once you go to the Holy Land. The Holy Land boosts biblical archaeological knowledge and if one knows how to present the Bible well, it manages to arouse the love for Scripture in the pilgrim that must continue even when we return home. To give dignity to this land we must start from the biblical language.

Listening to you, one can tell that the Holy Land is not just a place of work for you, but it plays a much more complete and deeper part in your life experience...

For me the Holy Land symbolically contains all my being. I believe that the biblical world and its geography recall the entire inner landscape of a person and, therefore, mine too. When I go to the Holy Land I read and reread the Scriptures with people, but I also read and reread myself. Deepening my experience of this world, I rediscover myself better and it is an ever-new exercise. The texts that are read are always the same but are maieutic and have the power to arouse a response in me by always teasing out new things.

You also lead various Bible treks. How does this journey differ in the vision it allows of places and of the Scripture?

The experience of walking is unique and cannot be compared to any other itinerary. When you travel by bus, you normally experience the territory in a hurry. Trekking across land on foot allows you to recover the dimension of time. From Nazareth to Capernaum by bus, it is twenty minutes, half an hour. Walking this distance on foot may take between three and five hours but the time that you consecrate to this path, taking in every detail, is incomparable.

A couple of years ago I made the journey from Jenin to Jericho. This is not a purely biblical trek but there the experience with the Palestinian people, in walking the land of the patriarchs, was marvellous. We felt welcomed by a people and at the same time, entirely dependent on them and it is something that cannot be described.

Those who choose to go trekking normally feel the desire for something deeper and often experience something similar to that of the disciples of Emmaus. You travel along the way with a stranger and questions about the meaning of life emerge. In this land, people immediately open their hearts, they enter a climate in which they delve within themselves in a way that allows them to share their reflections with others, they read the Scriptures, which are the key to the reading of the day and lower all barriers. The walls that can exist between people who do not know each other magically disappear and they are not afraid to bare themselves.

I think this is one of the gifts of walking in this land because when you decide to go to the Holy Land and to travel on foot it starts already with a desire, a question that seeks an answer, whether human or spiritual, a pain, or it is someone who is in some conflictual situation or has to make a difficult choice.

In these years of pilgrimages, can you tell us about a particular situation or person that remains in your heart?

The story I am about to tell has evangelized my life and my way of thinking about death. A couple had long sought to go to the Holy Land but, for one reason or another, they had never been able to. His wife was diagnosed with bone cancer near their thirtieth wedding anniversary. Before dying, she told her husband that she wanted to make this pilgrimage to the Holy Land and they decided to travel with their son. Obviously, no agency wanted to take them ... The agency I work with contacted me to tell me that it did not feel like refusing their request and they asked me if I could accompany this group.

During the pilgrimage, we happened to go to the Gethsemane hermitage and that afternoon I gave them time for personal prayer. The lady asked me if she could receive the Anointing of the Sick and we prepared everything in the chapel. Before the celebration, another person in the group got up

and asked to receive the sacrament because – she told to the group at that moment – she was also suffering from cancer. Then another person ... I was so touched by what people carry in their hearts.

A few months later, the first lady died and after a while, the couple's son contacted me. The months after the pilgrimage – he told me – were full of suffering, but his mother kept repeating that thinking back to the Holy Land she had the strength to continue and was not afraid.

I think the Holy Spirit is acting in ways we do not understand. This experience has evangelized me and taught me the courage to sow and give strength. The Holy Land gives life where apparently there is none. The biblical and spiritual reading give Life to life.

The pilgrimage is not just visiting places. The Holy Land evangelizes people, just as it evangelized this woman. The memory of the places of the Lord made her go toward death with serenity despite great suffering. I can testify that for many people, even if differently, the experience is profoundly similar.

And a place?

The most beautiful place for me is the desert. I think Negev is the place that fascinates me the most and speaks to me with its silence. It allows you to enter into yourself, into God, into nature and into history. It seems to echo Hosea "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her." (Hos 2:16) and the many biblical pages, which speak of the journey of this people.

Interview by Elena Dini

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