



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

A family of the Order on pilgrimage



During a Christmas lunch with our children and grandchildren, we proposed to make a trip to the Holy Land to celebrate our golden wedding anniversary together: 50 years of marriage must be first of all celebrated with the family. As their response was unanimously enthusiastic, we fixed a date straight away.

We contacted **Brother Christian Eeckhout** whom we know well, a Dominican Brother who lives in Jerusalem and is a member of the Belgian Lieutenancy of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. He is attached to the Biblical School, and has a perfect knowledge of the Holy Land both from an historical and an archaeological point of view. We asked him if he could arrange a oneweek programme for us and be our guide, which he readily accepted. We wrote a travel book for each of the grandchildren, with some notes and photos of the country and sites we were going to visit to enable them to prepare for the journey and put themselves in the right frame of mind for the adventure.

On the great departure day, we met at Brussels airport for an early morning flight via Zurich to Tel Aviv. We were greeted by Brother Christian who was waiting for us with the driver and the mini coach that would carry us throughout our stay. We formed a party of 16 people, our three households and 8 grandchildren, the 9th, the eldest, Charles, 21, being an “Erasmus” student at the University of Shanghai, to our regret was not able to share this experience with us, but thanks to “Skype”, we were able to keep in contact throughout our journey.

In **Bethlehem** we were warmly welcomed at the guesthouse of the **Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul**. It is situated close to the Crèche which is financed by the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, and where the religious Sisters look after a hundred orphans. It is also close to the hospital (maternity and neonatal centre) which is financed by the Order of Malta. The next day we went to **Ain Karem**, the birthplace of John the Baptist, and from there we took the road through the beautiful

hills of **Judea**, very wild and rugged, to reach the “Shepherds Fields” where we were blessed to be able to visit a grotto similar to the one in which the Virgin would have given birth, not in the “common room” says the Gospel, but in a more secluded room. The explanations of the Brother retraced the way of life at the time. Back then to **Bethlehem to visit the Basilica of the Nativity**, built in 325 by Emperor Constantine, and fortified by the Crusaders, one of the oldest Christian churches. Each visit to a place gave Brother Christian the opportunity to read, or have one of us read a chosen passage of the Scriptures.

Two days later, we set off early and took the long road to the North. At first sinuous and spectacular, it passes through the hills of the Judean Desert, of a dazzling white in the sun. We went up to the intensely cultivated **Golan Heights** by a steep road and reached a panoramic view overlooking the **Sea of Galilee or of Tiberias** and all the surrounding villages. What a view! Going down to Capernaum, we attended Mass in the chapel built over the remains of the house of Saint Peter where Christ often stayed. The end of the excursion took us to the **Mount of Beatitudes**, which beautifully overlooks the lake.

On the next day, we went down to the shores of the lake at **Tabgha**. The site where the Brother celebrated the Eucharist for us has remained unchanged for 2000 years! A sublime moment surrounded by nature, as it always was, with its fishing boats and the fishermen on the calm waters of the morning.

We then reached **Nazareth** and visited the Basilica of the Annunciation, built over the alleged home of the Virgin Mary. A road with a steep gradient brought us, in the afternoon, to the Dead Sea, 396 meters below sea level. We spent the last two days of our pilgrimage in **Jerusalem**. On the penultimate day, we tried to access the Esplanade of the Temple. An endless queue stretched overlooking the Wailing Wall. Luckily, we were the last people to pass, before closing time, through the control which gives access to the Esplanade and to contemplate the “Dome of the Rock”, a building of Islamic architecture topped by a golden dome. We then headed to the **Garden of Olives**, planted with ancient trees.

As François had been Lieutenant of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem for Belgium, he wanted to go to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, in order to greet the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, **Mgr Fouad Twal**, Grand Prior of the Order, and his Auxiliary Bishop **Mgr William Shomali**, both longstanding acquaintances. We were received as true friends. The Patriarch wished to thank François for his services rendered to the Holy Land and to the Latin Patriarchate by awarding him the insignia of the Golden Palm of Jerusalem. The children were impressed by this very simple ceremony, and displayed deep gratitude vis-à-vis their father. Each of us was given a rosary in olive wood.

We could not leave Jerusalem without visiting the **Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre**, where we gave thanks, asking the Lord that we may increasingly become witnesses of His resurrection. On the last day, it was with a head and heart filled with all the images and the rich experiences we shared with joy, spirituality, and as a family, that we made our way back to Tel Aviv. The happy initiative of presenting ourselves to the airport controls as a single family, made us escape practically all the difficulties.

A wonderful intergenerational connivance was the dominant feature of this marvellous experience. **The grandchildren told us how this journey had enabled them to better understand the Gospels, the life of Christ and admitted that they would return if the opportunity arose.**

Let us meet again for the diamond wedding anniversary!

Bernadette and François t’Kint de Roodenbeke

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