A history of closeness: pilgrims in the Holy Land

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Looking toward the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, October 4, we want to share a text from the Grand Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre recalling the importance of the Holy Land in the life and spirituality of the Poor Man of Assisi. He followed the steps of Christ and invites us to do the same.

As Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew, and called them; then he also saw James of Zebedee and John his brother and called them; then he chose Matthew and seven others. A multitude of people from Galilee, Judea and elsewhere also followed him. Some after a while returned to their homes and responsibilities. But the attraction and curiosity remained strong.

No one had noticed a minute young man, last, always to one side, always alert. Not even the evangelists noted him in their writings. But he was always there. Only Jesus saw him, watchful and aloof. He walked last among the followers; but when the Master changed direction, that individual, who was last among those who followed him, turned out to be first, only to be overtaken by those who sought to regain the best position and be closest.

His was an intriguing presence. No one ever objected to him and in the invitations addressed to the Master and the Twelve he never sat among the diners. Sometimes he begged for a living. He did

not dress like the others, but more modestly. With his unusually cropped hair and scraggly beard, he did not attract anyone's attention.

He was particularly focused on the highly original teaching of the Master: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers.* Inwardly he was also enraptured by those fantastic expressions: *Rejoice and be glad when they speak evil of you because of me! Look at the birds of the air, they do not spin, they do not weave, and yet they dress more sumptuously than King Solomon*! And then that - *Give alms in secret* - seemed to him profoundly revolutionary. Surely he was seduced by the Lord's love for lepers, so repulsive and then healed in body and spirit!

He slept little, because he kept a watchful eye on Jesus even at night so as not to miss him, to contemplate his radiant face and to listen to his words as he prayed: *'Bless you, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for you have kept these things hidden from the wise and the intelligent and revealed them to the little ones! Yes, Father, keep them in your love!*

He believed it worthwhile to be the least among others. Heaven would be full of little ones!

One day he thought, I am really content to be the least and not to be among those in the close circle that the Master had chosen for his 'witnesses'. 'Doing God's will,' he reflected, 'created for him a freedom outside human schemes: *He who finds his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake will find it; he who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.* These words of life, indeed, made him happy.

Yet, he was profoundly disturbed to see, on that approaching Jewish Pesach, the Master humiliated, handcuffed, scourged and unjustly condemned. He saw everything, heard everything. He was present in everything. He did not want to abandon him and, as always, least among those who followed him, he accompanied him to Calvary; he took his last breath and it was the highest moment of his following.

Then suddenly he felt himself pierced by the same atrocious pain as the Crucified One; as if that pain had not wanted to be extinguished by death; and his hands, and his feet, and his side were pierced by the same spasm, indeed it had entered into him and become part of his life.

This happened for him on another mountain, La Verna; stigmatised by that Jesus whom he had wanted to follow and who now gave him the gift of his wounds to conform him more closely to himself; he would bear the marks of it in his body for the rest of his life.

That young man had a name: Francis of Assisi, the least among the Lord's disciples, the smallest in the Kingdom of Heaven, who later became the greatest, according to the Master's teaching. As a young man, he dreamed of becoming a knight and imagined himself ready to leave for the Holy Land. He never did, but somehow he became one in a different way: in charity, fraternity, peace and goodness; he was a new and perhaps revolutionary knight! Bonaventure of Bagnoregio could write: that in Francis the Lord had bestowed and adorned him with the sacred stigmata, configuring him "*in his body of death to the body of the Crucified One"; and he added: "all the work of the man of God, in public and in private, aimed at the cross of the Lord (...). For this reason, he wanted that, just as his spirit was interiorly clothed with the crucified Lord, so also his body should be clothed with the weapons of the cross (...). He who had had the gift of an extraordinary love for the cross, could well obtain from the cross an extraordinary honour*" (Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Life of St Francis, working translation ed. Paoline 2009, pp.289-290).

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Francis loved the Holy Land, like few others and in a different way to those of his time; he went there as a pilgrim (1219) at the time of the Fifth Crusade, remaining there until today through his friars; he understood that the Land that was walked upon by the Lord needed to be healed; that a non-violent approach was necessary, devoted to the daily sacrifice of the custody of those sacred places that represent the fifth Gospel. Without an inordinate desire for conquest, but rather for custody, Francis of Assisi became, one might say, the Proto-Custodian, revolutionising the way and consciousness of how we approach the Land of Jesus: no wars, no swords, no violence. He was an atypical Knight of Christ, who preferred the weapon of mercy. A Copernican reversal that is still valid today and that extends, through solidarity, to brotherhood and encounter without walls and barbed wire.

The Dames and Knights of the Holy Sepulchre also take up this legacy to draw inspiration for their life and commitment to solidarity and make the Cross their interior and exterior armour.

Fernando Cardinal Filoni

Grand Master

(October 3, 2022)