



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

*At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land*

## The Grand Master of the Order in Jerusalem and Bethlehem: a pilgrimage for peace



***Less than three months after the Oct. 7 attacks in Israel, Cardinal Fernando Filoni travelled to the Holy Land from Dec. 28, 2023, to Jan. 3, 2024, accompanied by Ambassador Leonardo Visconti di Modrone, Governor General, and François Vayne, the Order's Communications Director. Welcomed by Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Patriarch of Jerusalem and Grand Prior of the Order, the small delegation met with representatives of the local Church and prayed at the Holy Places for peace, spiritually united with the 30,000 Knights and Dames scattered around the world. The Grand Master's pilgrimage, which took place against a backdrop of war and severe social crisis, encouraged the Catholic community in the Holy Land and demonstrated that it is possible to return to the Holy Land without fear.***

The Order's delegation arrived in the Holy Land on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, welcomed at the Tel Aviv airport by the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Adolfo Tito Yllana, and the parish priest of Gaza, Father Gabriele Romanelli, who was in Bethlehem on Oct. 7 and has not been able to return to his parish since. That same evening, an official ceremony in honor of Cardinal Filoni was held in Jerusalem at the headquarters of the Latin Patriarchate, during which Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa thanked the Grand Master for his bold and generous initiative, which he also described as courageous. Cardinal Pizzaballa received a voluntary donation from the Grand Master of about one million euros, which the Knights and Dames sent to him for the occasion - in addition to their ordinary contributions - through the Grand Magisterium.



On the morning of the following day, after a moment of recollection in prayer by the delegation at the Holy Sepulchre, the Governor General participated in a working meeting with the Patriarchate's Administrator General, Sami El-Yousef, and his team, to discuss current problems related in particular to unemployment in Palestine, which has worsened since Oct. 7 due to the impossibility for Palestinian workers to cross the border and work in Israel. Cardinal Filoni then met with the bishops and priests of the Latin Patriarchate, in the presence of Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa. The talks highlighted the extreme gratitude of the Mother Church of Jerusalem which, at this time of great difficulty related to the ongoing conflict, can count on the moral and material support of the universal Church through the solidarity of the Order.

In the afternoon, the delegation visited some Christian families supported by the Patriarchate, who live in very small apartments in the Old City of Jerusalem. Many families are in fact supported thanks to donations from the Knights and Dames, thus enabling the Christian community to remain present in the city where Christ gave His life for humanity. Moved by the painful situations he saw with his own eyes, Cardinal Filoni listened attentively to the members of these families grappling with major social problems related in particular to the lack of work, praying with them for peace in the Holy Land.





On the third day of the pilgrimage, the Grand Master celebrated Mass at dawn at the Wayside Shrine of the Holy Sepulchre, entrusting the special intentions of the Knights and Dames around the world to Christ. He also prayed intensely for all deceased members of the Order who contributed in their lifetime to the support of the Mother Church of Jerusalem. In his homily he recalled, in light of the day's readings, that after his birth the Lord was presented in the temple in Jerusalem according to the law of Moses, with respect to which he assumed the mission of completing divine revelation. The Cardinal gave thanks to the Risen Lord for accompanying everyone's history and lives, imploring Him to return the gift of His Peace to the Holy Land.

After Mass, the delegation shared breakfast with the Franciscan community in charge of the Holy Sepulchre, visiting the restoration work on the flooring of this Holy Place so dear to the hearts of all Christians. The Grand Master and the Governor General spoke at length with the religious who have preserved the Catholic presence at the Holy Sepulchre for centuries, in communion with the Greek Orthodox and Armenian clergy.

Continuing this spiritual journey of solidarity, on Dec. 30 the delegation traveled to Taybeh, Palestine, to meet with the parish community and visit the home for the elderly run by the Latin Patriarchate. This village, once called Ephraim and now entirely inhabited by Palestinian Christians, was a refuge for Jesus and his apostles immediately after the resurrection of Lazarus (*John 11:45-56*). St. Charles de Foucauld stayed there, trying to put the Gospel into practice. Cardinal Filoni explained his decision to visit Taybeh in light of the Order's commitment to supporting the Christian population so that they can continue to live in their land despite the unfavorable political and social context.

In the evening, in Jerusalem, the Order's three delegates were welcomed at the Benedictine Dormition Abbey, a monastic community that prays for the intentions of many people and works to promote dialogue among believers of the three great monotheistic religions. After vespers, the meal was followed by a discussion with Abbot Nikodemus Schnabel, particularly on the difficulties associated with the rise of religious extremism in Jewish communities. At the place where, according to tradition, the Virgin Mary fell asleep surrounded by the apostles, the delegation prayed Compline with the Benedictine community, entrusting the Mother of God with the intention of peace.



On the last day of the year, the three pilgrims of peace traveled to Beit Sahour, a village near Bethlehem, Palestine, to celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family at Sunday Mass. This village is said to have been built where angels warned shepherds of Christ's birth. The Grand Master presided at the Eucharist in the parish church, concelebrating with Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa. Cardinal Filoni developed the theme of pilgrimage in his homily, tracing how God became a pilgrim among us by becoming incarnate in a family, giving us the example of making our lives in turn an encounter of love with others, regardless of race or culture.

After Mass, the delegation met with the local Catholic community for lunch with the parish council. In the afternoon, a moving prayer for peace was held in the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem—silent and empty of pilgrims—before visiting the Effetà Institute, desired by Pope Paul VI, where deaf-mute children from all over Palestine are cared for. In the evening, back in Jerusalem, the delegation participated in the *Te Deum* presided over by the Custos, Father Francis Patton, in the Holy City's Latin Catholic parish, run by Franciscan religious, before a New Year's Eve dinner at the invitation of the Latin Patriarchate.



On World Day of Peace, January 1, the Grand Master concelebrated the Mass presided over by Patriarch Pizzaballa in the Pro-Cathedral, in the presence of many faithful who had come to entrust the new year to the Mother of God on her liturgical feast. At the end of the celebration, Cardinal Filoni gave a short speech of thanks for the welcome given to the small delegation of the Order, and then recited the prayer for peace addressed to Our Lady Queen of Palestine, which he had written. All the participants, to whom the text of the prayer had been distributed earlier, joined in the invocation, before the farewell ceremony followed by the meal offered by the Patriarch to his three guests. During the New Year's luncheon, the Governor General discussed the situation in the Holy Land with the diplomats present, drawing their attention to the Order's continuing efforts to promote peace education, particularly through the Patriarchate's network of schools supported by the Knights and Dames.

In the afternoon, leaders of the St. James Vicariate, which is responsible for the pastoral care of about 100 Hebrew-speaking Israeli Catholics, presented their delicate missionary work to the Rome delegation





On the penultimate day of the pilgrimage, the Grand Master and his two traveling companions walked in the footsteps of Christ through the now-deserted streets of Jerusalem-near the apartments of struggling Christian families visited a few days earlier-primarily along the Via Dolorosa, meditating at each station of the Way of the Cross. "Today Golgotha is in Gaza," exclaimed a passerby, imploring members of the Order and their friends to continue to pray and act for peace in the Holy Land.

In the afternoon, the delegation participated in the traditional daily procession organized by the Franciscan friars to the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, on the Sites of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Savior. Humbly, among the few pilgrims present - with a lit candle in his hand - Cardinal Filoni meditated at the foot of Calvary, near the stone where the body of the Crucified One was anointed, in front of the empty tomb and at the spot, marked by a large circle on the ground, where Mary Magdalene met the Risen One on Easter morning.



Before returning to Rome on Jan. 3, the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus and the Patriarchate's Pro-Cathedral, at the end of a week-long pilgrimage, the delegation went early in the morning, at 6:30 a.m., to the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre for Mass presided over on Golgotha by the Grand Master. All members of the Order had been invited the day before - via social media - to join him spiritually, since peace presupposes the conversion of each person.

On the morning of the last day of the trip, Ambassador Leonardo Visconti di Modrone held a second meeting at the Patriarchate devoted to economic issues, reviewing with Sami El-Yousef and his staff the various operational aspects of balanced resource management. With this in mind, the Governor General agreed with the Patriarchate's administrative team on procedures to better ensure the identification of humanitarian priorities at this dramatic time, not only in Gaza but throughout the Holy Land.

A visit by the Vicariate for Migrants and Asylum Seekers then took place at the Holy Rachel Centre in Jerusalem, where the children of these people are cared for during the day by the Vicariate. Also with the help of the Order, the Latin Patriarchate provides pastoral and social support to 70,000 foreign Catholic workers in very precarious situations in Israel, mainly from Asia and Africa.

At the end of this pilgrimage for peace, a farewell meeting was held at the Patriarchate, during which Cardinal Pizzaballa, surrounded by his staff, once again thanked Cardinal Filoni and Ambassador Visconti di Modrone for the Order's solidarity with the Church in the Holy Land, hoping that the exceptional step taken will encourage the Knights and Dames to return on pilgrimage in the near future.

**François Vayne**

*(January 2024)*

"Let us not forget the Holy Land, the Patriarchate, its needs and its works."

Excerpt from an interview Cardinal Fernando Filoni gave to L'Osservatore Romano at the end of his pilgrimage, the morning of his departure from Jerusalem

"We made this trip at a time when the Holy Land is experiencing a period of solitude at an international level, with regards the absence of tourists and pilgrims who usually go here, especially at this time of year, to Jerusalem, Bethlehem and other places. While the silence caused by the absence of pilgrims is particularly evident in the streets of this ancient city, the Governor General and I thought it would be useful to show our closeness, our solidarity and offer our help in the face of such a reality of lack of pilgrims and visitors, which is also reflected in an economic crisis. We think of all the people who no longer have jobs, who have been laid off, families who no longer have an income....

Given our vocation to the Holy Land, it seemed appropriate for us to be present here today, also in view of the 57th World Day of Peace, while the Pope calls us every day to peace. To be here, in the context of this celebration desired by Paul VI, seemed to us the best way to reiterate, also to our Knights and Dames, that we do not forget at this moment the Holy Land, the Patriarchate, its needs, its works... that is precisely why we came.

I must say that we really enjoyed this trip, which took place in a particularly special atmosphere. We experienced the isolation of these places, especially when we walked along the empty Stations of the Cross, without anyone. This is particularly evident in a city with such a personality; the soul of Jerusalem is very peculiar, like that of the Holy Places, because of the presence of pilgrims. Pilgrims give life; pilgrims are life. When the pilgrims are not there, what remains is the structure, like a beautiful shell that lacks something: life.

And in a way, we wanted to say to those who want to go here: Courage! It is possible to come; it is possible to be present. We are not politicians who can give the guarantees that a state and security obviously require, but in light of what we have seen, what we have experienced, the way we have been received, we think it is possible for Jerusalem and the Holy Places to come alive again.

We visited some very poor families, really poor families, families who are not only poverty stricken but who do not even have jobs at the moment, as they live off the income from tourism-related activities. This is very relevant because these Christian families that we visited, who live in poverty, and who in a sense represent a stable presence in the Holy City, find themselves, if there is no support, if there is no help, in an extremely difficult condition. This is with regard to the first aspect.

Another aspect was the fact that we were able to converse and meet people who experienced the trauma of October 7 and the subsequent tragedies. We were able to talk to people who were closer to the Jewish world and therefore experienced more intensely the trauma, the enormous, unspeakable, unacceptable massacre of October 7, but we also felt that for so many families it was impossible to get out because of the destruction.

The pastor in Gaza was extraordinary: he accompanied us, he organized our visits, he mediated, so to speak, in the Holy Places, but he also made us experience the reality of Gaza, through the permanent ties he maintains with Gaza. We did not go to Gaza, but in a way we went to Gaza. And we were also happy to see how the few pilgrims present gave a "deep sense of prayer." It almost seemed that, in the silence, our prayer was stronger, more alive.

Not only did we visit the Holy Places, the Basilica... but, in Bethlehem, we were also able to sit alone in the grotto. We were alone. Very few people were sitting there, praying in silence. This sense of prayer was also very beautiful, very powerful.

There are other moments that we shared with the brethren in the Basilica, but also in the parish that we visited in Beit Sahour: a beautiful presence, and this presence was that of a somewhat sad



celebration, a celebration that should not disappear but that carries in its heart the traces of this parish reality.

There are so many aspects that we were able to capture. And then there is the affection of all those people who need our presence."