



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

Eight Years in the Service of the Order: A Path of Dialogue and Innovation



On 30 June, in accordance with Article 11 of the Constitution of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, the Grand Master, Cardinal Filoni, signed a decree renewing “*donec aliter provideatur*” [until otherwise provided] the mandate of the Governor General, Ambassador Leonardo Visconti di Modrone. The Governor General holds the highest lay office within the Order and, as stipulated by the Constitution, serves as the central administrator responsible for its financial and economic management. As the Grand Master's closest collaborator, who rules and governs the Order, and is appointed by the Pope - the Governor maintains daily communication with His Eminence, presenting the needs of the Holy Land and reporting on his interactions with the Lieutenancies and the directives issued. In this article, Ambassador Visconti di Modrone reflects on the key milestones of his tenure during his first two terms. He also highlights the importance he places on dialogue as a source of strength and consensus, supporting innovative decisions aimed at adapting the Order's governance to today's needs and anticipating those of tomorrow.

The most rewarding aspects of my eight years serving as Governor General of the Order has undoubtedly been both the daily contact with the two Grand Masters who have held office during this period, Cardinal O'Brien and Cardinal Filoni and the ongoing dialogue with members in every corner of the world. I am deeply grateful for the kindness they have consistently shown me in supporting my initiatives.

I still remember the day I took on the role as Governor General. At the close of the Grand Magisterium meeting, I delivered my inaugural speech in which I expressed my desire to base my actions on continuous contact with all my confreres. This spirit of dialogue, even when it meant overcoming certain obstacles, has guided me from that first day on.

The Initial Challenges and the Strength of Dialogue

I was fully aware that I was succeeding the distinguished late Professor Agostino Borromeo, a Church historian of great renown. I did not share his academic background, nor his extensive experience within the Order or his familiarity with ecclesiastical circles. As a nervous newcomer stepping into a new role, I was nonetheless reassured by his support and encouragement.

I recognized that my most valuable asset was the experience gained over more than forty years in diplomatic service, along with a natural inclination for negotiation. I therefore sought to place this experience at the service of the Order, in continuity with the work of my predecessor. The two Vice Governors at the time, Giorgio Moroni Stampa and Patrick Powers, shared my approach. In a private conversation shortly after my appointment, they jointly encouraged me to embrace ever greater openness.

I began immediately with a visit to the Holy Land, joining the Commission then led by Professor Thomas Mc Kiernan, who regularly oversaw the projects and reported to the Grand Magisterium. From that moment on, direct contact with the Patriarchate and those responsible for the various operational areas has remained one of my priorities. I was -and remain to this day- keenly aware not only of the requirements set out in the Constitution, but also of the undeniable reality that those working on the ground are best placed to assess priorities and respond to emergencies.

At that time, preparations were also underway for the Consulta, with the principal topic under discussion being the reform of the Constitution and the drafting of guidelines for Lieutenants. The complexity of the subject matter, combined with the absence of a truly dialogical approach, meant that no immediate outcome was achieved. Nevertheless, that work laid the groundwork for the drafting of the General Regulations, which would only come to fruition later. These Regulations then served as a key reference point for shaping the subsequent Consulta, which -thanks to the inspired foresight of Cardinal Filoni- was opened to the participation of the Grand Priors as well.

Overcoming Difficulties and Strengthening the Structure

One major issue cast a shadow over those early days: the internal division within the Lieutenancy of France. Its resolution had been entrusted to the patient efforts of Monsignor Bernard-Nicolas Aubertin, with whom I had a long conversation at Santa Marta, where he was residing, the day after I took office. Only through dialogue and a spirit of reconciliation—even in this delicate matter—was it possible, thanks to him and the individuals he selected, to gradually reach a resolution.

On the administrative front, a significant challenge loomed: the dispute with the tenant occupying part of Palazzo della Rovere, namely the company managing the Hotel Columbus. We were faced with a choice -either to settle the dispute and continue with a modest, low-yield hotel operation, or to turn the page entirely by renewing the hotel management and undertaking a proper renovation and restoration of the Palazzo. I proposed the latter course to the Grand Master at the time, Cardinal O'Brien. Despite some internal disagreement, I secured the support of an international commission of experts to assist in the decision-making process. I remain firmly convinced it was the right choice.

By coincidence, the timing of my appointment also coincided with the transition of several Lieutenants whose terms were coming to an end. Their renewal had to be considered, often on the basis of limited information. This gave rise to the need for confidential and, by their nature, delicate enquiries, particularly with members of the clergy. I had to learn to interpret the sophisticated language of the Church, to which I was unaccustomed: a language of subtle nuances, of things said and unsaid.

Dialogue at the Core of Action

Indifferent to criticism, I have always placed dialogue -conducted with the utmost transparency- at the heart of my approach. I began attending Investiture ceremonies, particularly in countries with the largest number of members and the most significant contributions. At my first such ceremony in Bordeaux, I sensed that the gathering following the Investiture could serve as an ideal occasion to outline, in a brief address, the direction of my work and the Order's projects. With the encouragement of Grand Master Cardinal Filoni, I introduced this practice.

Over time, I added a request to meet with members of the Lieutenancy and with the candidates. This initiative gradually became customary and has been enriched by the distinguished presence of the Grand Master himself.

From the outset, regional meetings struck me as an important opportunity to strengthen dialogue among the Lieutenants. After the European meeting in Rome, I attended the Latin American meeting in Buenos Aires and the North American one in Toronto. Most recently, in May of this year, I fulfilled the long-held wish of meeting in person, rather than remotely, with confreres from Australia, Asia, and the Pacific in Perth.

Among European Lieutenancies, I found it more constructive to hold smaller regional meetings between similar jurisdictions. I therefore promoted such gatherings in Madrid, Paris, Stockholm, Vienna, London, and Prague, and encouraged the establishment of a semi-annual meeting for Italian-speaking Lieutenants. These meetings have enabled valuable exchanges of experience and fostered a shared understanding of commitments and a spirit of brotherhood in prayer.

To encourage broader participation in decision-making, I asked Grand Master Cardinal O'Brien to establish three new Commissions: the first for Economic Affairs; the second for Spiritual Affairs; and a third for the Revision of Protocol Rules. The first two were confirmed as permanent and incorporated into the new Constitution. The third was effectively absorbed into the temporary Commission that, under the guidance of Cardinal Filoni, drafted the new General Regulations.

Recent Challenges and New Opportunities

COVID-19 posed a serious obstacle to the progress that was underway. During that dark period, all visits were suspended for a year, and meetings had to be coordinated electronically. This inevitably reduced the bonding effect of informal conversations during ceremonies, which had previously fostered a strong sense of familiarity. Pilgrimages came to a complete halt, with serious consequences not only for the Holy Land's economy but also for its spiritual life.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, the outbreak of war has proved an even more dramatic tragedy. Since its onset, the Order has been compelled to seek new forms of assistance for the Christian community in the Holy Land, which is increasingly under pressure and at risk of extinction. Additional contributions -through appeals, targeted campaigns, and specific projects beyond the usual ones- have been encouraged, as they form the backbone of our charitable commitment.

Meanwhile, the Palazzo della Rovere project was taking shape. The courage to choose the path of innovation was rewarded, following a long and patient negotiation (and not without controversial moments, media interference, and timely changes in consultants), which led to the selection of a prestigious tenant. This new partner, having assumed responsibility for the renovation costs of the Palazzo, has enabled us to preserve the Order's resources and offers strong assurances for the future.

The temporary relocation of the Order's offices to allow the works to proceed has not diminished the efficiency of the Grand Magisterium, although it has inevitably curtailed its promotional activities. In the preceding months, various events and visits were organized in the prestigious Pinturicchio-frescoed halls to promote the image of the Order and raise awareness of our charitable work. This has included a concerted effort in external relations, accompanied by a parallel strengthening of our information and communication channels, now carried out in six languages for the benefit of an ever-wider audience.

By fortunate coincidence, excavation works in the garden of the Palazzo della Rovere also uncovered important archaeological finds. Following agreements with the relevant cultural heritage authorities, these artefacts will be displayed in a small museum managed by a Foundation. An esteemed Scientific Committee, chaired by Cardinal Ravasi, is overseeing its operations.

Even in these endeavors, the dialogue between representatives of the various authorities involved, both Italian and Vatican, expert consultants, and the tenant's representatives has been key. Weekly meetings of the Steering Committee, held every Tuesday, have enabled harmonious coordination of the renovation works and the development of an exhibition and educational project that will greatly benefit the Order. The strong relationship established with the leadership of the Vatican Museums will also allow us to recover fragments of frescoes that were removed from the Palazzo della Rovere during restoration work carried out in 1950.

Conclusion: Looking to the Future

Throughout all these endeavors, I have been sustained by the constant support of the Grand Master, who rules and governs the Order, appointed by the Supreme Pontiff. He has been kept informed of every step along this journey, while the principles of dialogue and transparency with all those involved have remained the guiding force behind my actions. This has enabled me to introduce innovation, take initiative, and share responsibility with individuals driven by the same spirit, alongside competent professionals.

Today, after eight years in office, I am deeply grateful for the trust placed in me by the two Grand Masters who have served during this time: Cardinal Edwin O'Brien and, currently, Cardinal Fernando Filoni. I entrust to the protection of the Blessed Virgin, Patroness of the Order and Queen of Palestine, the work that still lies ahead—work I intend to continue with the same spirit of service that led me to accept the role of Governor General eight years ago.

Leonardo Visconti di Modrone

Governor General

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