



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

A rich spiritual contribution to the life of the Lieutenancies

Testimonies of men and women religious within the Order



“The main gift membership in the Order has given me is a deeper understanding of its commitment to support the Church in the Holy Land and the Patriarchate to provide religious leadership for the churches and schools. It has given me a more global vision of the Church. I appreciate the times for prayer, retreat and learning together. While my religious life also includes those activities, praying with members of the Order widens our opportunity to pray for others which is one of our Christian duties. These opportunities are also ways for me to grow in my spiritual life.” These are the words of Sister Lois Paha, Dominican Sister and Religious-Dame of the Order in the Lieutenancy for Western USA since 2015.

For some time, in fact, religious men and women connected in a special way to the Holy Land have been approaching the Order of the Holy Sepulchre to experience communion with other brothers and sisters who manifest special zeal and solicitude for the Land of Jesus.

During the spring of 2021, a circular letter with guidelines for the admission of religious men and women, accompanied by an explanatory note, was addressed to all the Lieutenancies to formalize in a clear manner the entrance and presence in the Order of those who belong to institutes of consecrated life. Although admission to the Order is primarily reserved to the laity, “the admission of religious (men and women), as faithful called by God to a particular consecration (cf. *LG* 43),” is part of the spirit of the Order. In fact, because of their specific consecration to God, they contribute to keeping alive the awareness that the Cross is the superabundance of God’s love overflowing into this world (cf. *Vita Consecrata*, n. 24),” is stated in the explanatory note released.

The guidelines emphasize that “a religious shall not seek out, or be included in, the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem for the sake of an honorary title, but in imitation of those men and women, like Joseph of Arimathea, who offered his tomb to the Lord after asking Pilate for his body (cf. *Mt*

27:57-60), or like Nicodemus, who brought myrrh, aloes, and burial cloths (cf. *Jn* 19:39-40), or again like Mary of Magdala and the other women who piously provided for the burial of the tortured body of the Master (cf. *Lk* 23:55-56) and were the first witnesses of his Resurrection (cf. *Mt* 28:1-10; *Mk* 16:1-11; *Lk* 24:1-12; *Jn* 20:1-18)."

This attention to the body of Christ translates today not only into a deep love for the Land in which he lived, gave his life for us and rose again, but also into a charitable concern for the communities that live there. Father Jean- Michel Poffet, a Dominican, was director of the École Biblique in Jerusalem from 1999 to 2008. It was in this context that he became acquainted with the work of the Knights and Dames of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre. During a visit to Rome, he had met Cardinal Furno, then Grand Master, who had decided to support their institute. The Order's contribution to the École Biblique has continued over time and for the past ten years or so it has been supporting the Palestinian employees who work in the famous and well-stocked library of this center of study. Concerning his entry into the Order through the Lieutenancy for Switzerland, Father Jean-Michel says: "As a religious, I was not looking for a new membership but becoming a member of the Order allowed me to concretize my solidarity in a particular way with Eastern Christians. I know the good that the Order does and how valuable this support is for the schools of the Patriarchate and other institutions. It is not only economic support: it is also prayer and moral support."

Sister Lois Paha also addresses the Order's purpose. When she joined the Diocese of Tucson, Sister Lois "got to know members of the Order more closely and learned more about the goals and purpose through their commitment. As chance would have it, Sister Lois was responsible for preparing liturgies for and participating in an Order pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 2013. "The overall goal to support the Christians in the Holy Land became real to me during the 2013 pilgrimage. Seeing the struggle of the Christians gave me the motivation to learn more about this reality and understand more of the situation. As an educator I was especially motivated by the work of Bethlehem University and their efforts to provide strong leaders for the future of the region. I was also impressed by the openness of Christians and Muslims to work together for the healthy and prosperous life they all seek," she says.

Sister Anne Marie Smith took her vows in the Franciscan order in 1960. She joined the Order of the Holy Sepulchre as a Religious-Dame with the Lieutenancy for Western USA. She recounts discovering the existence of this pontifical institution through one of the priests with whom she worked. "I had just completed my second trip to the Holy Land and had learned so much about the people, the conflicts, the care of the various sites by the Franciscans – another connection. While on my first trip I experienced a member receiving the Pilgrim's shell. I later learned what that meant and I wanted to support the faith community in the Holy Land." For Sister Anne, belonging to the Order is also a way to keep in touch with the Franciscan communities in those places.

Involvement in the family of the Order is certainly another important component of choosing to be a Religious-Knight or Religious-Dame. Father Jean-Michel recounts how his participation in the activities of the Lieutenancy is regular and, in addition to this, how he had "the honor and joy of accompanying two years ago a pilgrimage to the Holy Land: a great moment for all of us. In addition, I have led pilgrimages for some French Delegations (Paris, Provence, Lyon)." Sister Anne is aware that belonging to the Order is also accompanied by a desire to contribute financially to the needs of the Church in the Holy Land. In the case of religious, this is not always possible, yet the support they offer is no less important. "As Sisters – she explains – we are not able to provide the financial support expected of members, but we can provide our prayers." Finally, Sister Lois shares how she has put her studies and experience in the field of liturgy to use in organizing prayer meetings for the Lieutenancy. In addition, she explains, "I have volunteered to assist as well with the editorial work on the newsletter and other projects as requested."

The beauty of the Order's life profoundly benefits from this rich diversity of states of life united at the same time by the feeling of being part of the same family guided by the same purpose of service and love for the Holy Land.

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