



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

An audience with King Felipe VI of Spain



The audience was granted on April 1 at the Palace of the Zarzuela by King Felipe VI of Spain to the Cardinal Grand Master and the delegation accompanying him. It was a highly significant moment, beyond the ceremony of simple protocol characteristic of the current Spanish monarchy, that reaffirmed the historical bonds between the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem and the Royal House of Spain and for the personal devotion confirmed by the Sovereign towards the Holy Land.

As a connoisseur of Spain, having lived there as Italian Ambassador, I would like to share my experience of this return to the Zarzuela.

The King's residence is not a magnificent palace, but a modern villa surrounded by a large park on the outskirts of the capital. Once past the checkpoint, we passed through centuries-old holm oak forests populated by deer and fawns that freely grazed without fear.

The Sovereign waited for us, wearing a mask, in the centre of the audience hall, the same one I had visited so many times as Ambassador. There Cardinal Filoni conferred on him the Collar of the Order, recalling the many historical titles the Spanish sovereign bears, including the title of King of Jerusalem, handed down to him through the centuries by Aragonese inheritance, and which represents - albeit in an honorary sense - the continuity of the bond between the Catholic Sovereigns and the Holy Land.

The King, in reply, jokingly recalled how on a visit to Jerusalem, he was shown special consideration by virtue of that honorary title, which the Israeli authorities did not hesitate to recognize.

Beyond these evocative aspects of a millenary history, King Felipe's welcome to our delegation was particularly cordial, lasting more than the half hour foreseen by the protocol. The Cardinal Grand Master and I were accompanied by the two Spanish Lieutenants as well as by the members of the Council of the two Lieutenancies. The King wanted to address a word to everyone and spoke to the two Lieutenants of their commitment to the charitable work in the Holy Land.

José Carlos Sanjuan y Monforte, Lieutenant for Western Spain, wished to thank the Sovereign for the support always given to the Order of the Holy Sepulchre and the special attention given to the works and projects in the Holy Land. Juan Carlos de Balle y Comas, Lieutenant for Eastern Spain, on the other hand, referred to his exemplary family role, presenting the Sovereign with a remembrance for his two little princesses Leonor and Sofia.

For my part, I wanted to express to the King the honour of meeting him as Governor General of the Order, now that he holds the highest office in the State, in memory of previous occasions of interview, when I held the office of Ambassador of Italy and he was Prince of Asturias.

Several years have passed and the expectations that the country placed in the young prince, heir to the throne, have found the widest confirmation in eight years of reign that he has led with dignity, firmness and sense of duty, collecting unanimous internal and international consensus.

The King then accompanied us up the stairs to the garden for a commemorative photo. In the open air we took off our masks.

The Cardinal was dressed in a cassock and his purple sash shone in the sun in strong contrast to our dark clothes. Don Felipe wore a grey suit, of excellent cut, and wore on his light blue shirt, with very light squares, a patterned tie of the same colour and black loafers. He was very gracious spending time alone with us: his collaborators, who had greeted us at the entrance to the villa, had silently moved away.

I noticed some of the members of the Spanish delegation wore a green tie. Out of curiosity I asked the significance, it was explained to me that, similarly to the Italian Risorgimento patriots who shouted "Viva VERDI" (hiding behind the name of the great master, their faith in the unifying role of the Savoy sovereign) to sing the praises of Vittorio Emanuele, King of Italy, they wanted to communicate loyalty and devotion to the Sovereign with the colour of their green ties: "V. E.R.D.E.: Viva El Rey De Espana".

The symbolic function of the King is followed with great attention in Spain, especially in the context of the constitutional structure of the State. In his eight years of reign, the Sovereign has been able to interpret it with great balance and transparency, defending the Constitution and representing a firm ethical reference for Spanish citizens and the keystone of complex political balances. The King is the symbol of unity and continuity of the country according to the Spanish constitution.

The Spanish delegation included Professor Daniel Berzosa y Lopez, Chancellor of the Lieutenancy of Eastern Spain, a well-known constitutionalist, who recently won a journalism prize with an article in which he explained precisely the constitutional role of Philip VI.

"The philosopher Hobbes - wrote Professor Berzosa - was the first to ask himself the question in the "Leviathan" of how to reduce the multiplicity of the voices of a people to the unity of power and how to guarantee its continuity so that we can actually speak of an authentic permanence of the State. In Spain, the question has been resolved with the monarchy, which represents a symbolic power distinct from the actual powers of the state."

The symbolic power of the King argues Berzosa – “although he cannot impose orders, he has made it so that because of his prestige and dignity no one can reasonably evade listening to his advice.”

The impression left by Felipe VI at the end of our meeting, however, was not only that of a man strongly determined to fulfil his constitutional duties, but above all that of a brother in the Order, who believes in the values of solidarity, is sensitive to the initiatives of our Institution and is deeply bound, not only by the historical roots of his family, but by personal conviction, to the Holy Land.

Leonardo Visconti di Modrone

Governor General

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