



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

"Elena, the first true pilgrim, lover of the Land of the Lord"

Cardinal Fernando Filoni's Homily on the feast of the Patron Saint of the Order



On August 18, in the beautiful Church of Maria Santissima Annunziata in Casarano (Lecce), Cardinal Fernando Filoni, Grand Master of the Order celebrated the feast of Saint Helena, which is one of the official feasts of our Order of the Holy Sepulchre. The Grand Master was accompanied by the Archbishop of Lecce and Prior of the Order's Section, Monsignor Seccia, and Archbishop Monsignor Pezzuto, Apostolic Nuncio Emeritus, a member of the Order and who originates from the area. At the joyful celebration, the Lieutenant for Southern Adriatic Italy, Ferdinando Parente, along with the President of the Salento Section, Raffaele Garzia, and numerous Knights and Dames, together with some aspirants in formation were also present.

To help us delve deeper into the figure of our patron saint, here follows Cardinal Fernando Filoni's Homily.

Historical tradition attributes to Saint Helena the search and discovery of some of the most sacred places in Christianity related to the life of Jesus. Today, on the day of her liturgical feast, we reflect on the mission of this woman at the beginning of Christianity after her son, Emperor Constantine, granted freedom to the Church in the Roman Empire with the famous Edict of Milan in 313 AD.

Of Helena - mother, Christian, and pilgrim - we know for certain that she was born at around 255 AD not far from Constantinople, in what is Turkey today. Of pagan and plebeian origins, she married the Roman patrician Constantius Chlorus, with whom she had a son, Constantine, born in 285. When Constantius Chlorus was appointed 'Caesar' by the Emperor of Rome, he repudiated Helena due to her humble origins. It was a very difficult time for her as she found herself exposed to public repudiation; in fact, life did not spare her from severe humiliations. However, being a determined

woman, Helena overcame that period by dedicating herself to the education of Constantine. It was her son Constantine - who became 'Caesar' in 306 and then 'Emperor' - remembered his mother who had dedicated her life to him, naming her 'Augusta', 'Most Noble Woman'.

Helena became a Christian and was baptized in Milan during the time of Saint Ambrose; henceforth, for her, a new life was to begin. At that time, she was almost sixty years of age and, from then on, she dedicated her existence to a pious life, which was full of generosity and, despite her new and elevated social status, lived with modesty. Due to her attention to the poor, who were numerous at that time, she was considered an extraordinary woman of charity and humanity; at the same time, she became a benefactor of countless places of worship for those Christians who had survived the long pre-Constantinian persecution.

Of this woman, regarded as a saint in both the Eastern and Western Churches, we must here emphasize her pilgrimage to Christianity's most cherished places in the Land of Jesus. Without fear of exaggeration, we could define Helena as the first true pilgrim, lover of the Land of the Lord.

We also know that in that period men and women from Christian Rome became pilgrims or even chose to live in the places associated with the memory of Christ. For example, Saint Jerome, and those noble Roman women (Marcella, Paula, Julia, Blesilla) who sought a life of prayer in holy places. Egeria of Galicia (Spain) was the most renowned pilgrim after Helena, who travelled there despite the distances and dangers. Egeria left us a description of the biblical sites she visited, along with her spiritual and cultural impressions. The key to pilgrimages to the Holy Land, therefore, lies in Helena, who ignited the love for the veneration of the places associated with the life of the Lord. From that time onward, countless pilgrims, both men and women from all eras—like Francis of Assisi and Bridget of Sweden, up to our present day—undertake this journey of faith and penance for a unique encounter with Christ.

These are men and women who, in following Christ, feel drawn to the Land of Jesus and in so doing ask themselves: "Lord, where did you live, where did you dwell, where did you die for us?" Therefore, they are not merely curious visitors or occasional hikers in search of biblical geography; instead, they are those who intend to undertake a true spiritual journey within the sacred Scriptures. First with prayer, then by reading the Gospel passages related to that place, they renew the memory of the events of Jesus' life, and finally, anchor everything in their minds and hearts to make it their own spiritual treasure.

In Jerusalem, Helena met Macarius, who was a very important Bishop. At that moment, he was returning from the Council of Nicaea where he had vigorously defended the human and divine nature of Christ against Arius. With him, in 326, she sought the places of the Lord's passion, death, and resurrection. The meaning of this search fits well within the historical context of the time, as Christianity was being accepted in the Roman Empire, but there were too numerous Christological heresies that denied the human nature of the Lord. In seeking the actual places of Jesus' life also meant demonstrating his actual historicity. It is said that during those searches, the beams of Christ's crucifix were found, which Helena then transported to Rome, and then placed them in the Basilica of Santa Croce that she commissioned. At the same time, Constantine wanted to build the first Basilica of the Resurrection or the Holy Sepulchre, so as to gather in a single sacred building the Calvary and the empty Tomb of Jesus.

Of this unique woman, of Helena, we cannot help but remember, in addition to her human virtues, the role of faith. From the moment she came to know about Christ, she dedicated herself with intellectual courage, a historical understanding, and spiritual depth on the search for the most important Christological places. If today we can pray on Golgotha, kiss the Anointing Stone, or venerate and touch the Risen One's empty Tomb, we owe it to Helena. She became, so to speak, a Disciple of Jesus two centuries after the women who had accompanied the Lord during his preaching

and hosted him in their homes. Helena sought him in the places where he had lived and wanted the followers of Christ to find spiritual hospitality in the Basilicas built by her and her son Constantine in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Rome.

Alongside the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the Apostles, we must acknowledge a third ministry, that of the women who followed the Lord. These ministries are ontologically distinct: the first, the unique redemptive ministry of Christ; the second, the sacramental ministry of the Apostles; and third, the diaconal ministry of free Men and Women of God. These latter two ministries - that of the Successors of the Apostles and of free Men and Women of God - have not at all been exhausted, and have had, and continue to have an extraordinary richness of forms and expressions in the life of the Church.

Helena understood the beauty of this third 'ministry,' which she expressed through her generous commitment to a diaconate aimed at preserving for Christians of all times the memory of the places of Christ. In this sense, she became the progenitor of a new era that opened up pilgrimages to the Holy Land, to the places of the so-called Fifth Gospel.

As a Christian, Helena adjusted her way of living to the will of God, and sought Christ not only in the needy but also in those places that preserve his redemptive memory. In her compelling spiritual journey, we recognize in Helena the great loves for suffering humanity and for the poor of God, who had become one of us and whose historical and geographical memory needed to be preserved.

To her goes our admiration and devotion, and we will never be sufficiently grateful for having sought and protected the historical places of the memory of Christ the Redeemer.

On this liturgical feast, may Saint Helena inspire a true love for the Land of Jesus. In addition, that she may indicate the paths of peace, especially in those regions where Christ lived and which today are devastated by violence and cruel wars that desecrate the great event of the Revelation of the one God, professed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Amen

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