“I bless all the members of the Order, and do not forget to pray for me”

Pope Francis’ message to the Order

During his Pontificate, Pope Francis granted the Order of the Holy Sepulchre a special audience on three occasions. These occasions coincided with the Order’s Consulta, which is the general assembly we hold every five years.

During the Eastertide, as we rejoice in the experience of the Resurrection, yet at this moment when the Church is mourning for the late holy Father, his words from our most recent audience with him - which occurred November 9, 2023- still ring clearly in our ears. “The empty Sepulchre, whose special custodian you have by vocation committed yourselves to be for centuries, is in this sense above all a sign of the boundless love of the Crucified One, who keeps nothing for himself and who therefore cannot be held back by the snares of death”.

As an Order connected to a Sepulchre, which is profoundly precious precisely because it is empty, we cannot but be grateful to Pope Francis for having consistently reminded us of this call to life that lies at the heart of our mission.

On September 13, 2013, just a few months after his election, Pope Francis welcomed the members of the Consulta and also the participants in the Order’s International Pilgrimage during the Year of Faith. There were over 3,500 Knights and Dames gathered in the Paul VI Audience Hall, to whom he wished, “to express my appreciation and my encouragement for the initiatives of solidarity that the Order fosters in the Holy Places and that in recent years have been further developed and broadened.” He urged them to ensure that “Jesus Christ Crucified and Risen truly be the centre of your life and of each of your personal and group projects. To believe in the redemptive power of the Cross and the Resurrection to offer hope and peace. In a special way, the Land of Jesus needs it very much!”

On November 16, 2018, the Members of the Consulta were warmly received with the words, “Here in the Vatican, you are, in a certain way, at home” in recognition of the Order as an ancient Pontifical Institution under the protection of the Holy See. Speaking of our work in the Holy Land, the Pope did not hesitate to emphasize a theme very close to his heart, namely interreligious openness and dialogue in daily life. “It is a good sign that your initiatives in the field of training and health care are open to all, regardless of the communities they belong to and the religion they profess. In this way you help pave the way to make Christian values known, to the promotion of interreligious dialogue, mutual respect and mutual understanding.” Regarding the motivations that drive us in our mission, the Holy Father was keen to underline, “Do not forget that you are not a philanthropic entity committed to promoting the material and social improvement of recipients. You are called to place the evangelical love of neighbour as the central and final aim of your works, to bear witness everywhere to the goodness and care with which God loves everyone.”

Missionaries and heralds of God’s love through our special attention to the Holy Land: this is how Pope Francis has invited us to live out our calling.

With this in mind, in 2023 he gave us a beautiful image, which we treasure dearly, as he reflected on the importance of formation linked to the Jerusalem Cross, our emblem:

“Initial and ongoing, practical and spiritual formation: they are four guidelines that we can see represented in the sign of the Cross, which stands out clearly on your mantles and inspires your spirituality. With its horizontal arm, it reminds you of your commitment to ensure that your dedication to the crucified and risen Christ embraces your entire life, and in charity makes you close to every brother and sister; while its vertical arm, firmly planted on the ground and pointing to heaven, reminds you of the inalienable complementarity, in your journey, between a life of prayer and service to your brothers and sisters, attentive, qualified, and well rooted in the realities in which you operate, aimed at the total good of the person.”

In that final audience, Pope Francis could not help but share what has always been a constant concern in his heart and in his message, particularly during the past year and a half of war, which is prayer for peace in the Holy Land. “I would like to join you,” urged the Successor of Peter, “in thinking of the Holy Land. We are sadly witnessing a tragedy unfolding in the very places where the Lord lived, where he taught us through his humanity to love, to forgive and to do good to all. And instead, we see them torn apart by terrible suffering that affects above all so many innocents, so many innocent dead.”

Finally, our memory turns to that last moment and his final words in which he entrusted us once again to the protection of our Patroness and, as always, at the conclusion of his audiences, he asked for an act of mercy for himself, so that he could continue to carry out the heavy Petrine ministry:

“Dear brothers and sisters, may the Virgin Mary, invoked by you with the title of *Queen of Palestine*, assist you always in your mission. I bless you all from my heart, I bless all the members of the Order and their families. And please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you”.

Pope Francis, Thank you.

(April 2025)