



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

“We must show Eastern Christians our closeness”

An interview with Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for Oriental Churches.



During his recent visit to Jordan, Cardinal Leonardo Sandri met with some Middle Eastern refugees supported by the local Caritas.

Eminence, in your role in charge of the Congregation for Oriental Churches, what would you see as the priorities in providing support to Christians living in the vast biblical territories?

I often receive groups of Catholics led by their bishops, eager to express their generosity to their brothers and sisters of the East. Benefactors want to know our priorities. Promoting the fullness of religious freedom of Christians is part of the issues at stake, especially in Muslim majority countries. Eastern bishops work with us, so that governments legislate in this direction and so that all citizens are treated in the same way. I also insist on the importance of Catholic schools in the Holy Land, for example, as they are a source of dialogue and peace in society. Without the economic support of the universal Church, these schools would not survive: the competition is very strong and many teachers prefer private institutes that are able to pay them better. Another challenge is emigration from the Middle East. Christians leave the area because of insecurity, so their absence unbalances the countries. We must work to restore trust and this happens every time we build bridges of friendship where we live. Finally, we need to show Eastern Christians our closeness and to support them morally, as do the Knights and Dames of the Order by going on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and meeting the local communities that form part of the “Mother Church”.

Each year, you coordinate the Good Friday collection, which involves the whole Church. How are the fruits of this action of solidarity shared?

All the dioceses in the world deliver the outcome of these collections to Rome: 65% goes to the Franciscan Custody for the maintenance of the holy places; 35% is assigned to our Congregation for Oriental Churches Projects, which – we can say – extend from Ukraine to Iraq, from Eastern Europe

to Mesopotamia ... This is certainly not enough, but fortunately some Institutions are dedicated throughout the year to supporting these Christians who are often in difficult economic situations because of the various conflicts that wound the world. Some good news is that of the progressive return of Christians in the Nineveh Plain: many are returning to their liberated villages and there is the effort of helping reconstruct their homes and their churches.

The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem occupies a special place in the heart of the universal Church. How is the pastoral care of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, partly coordinated by the Franciscan Custody, articulated?

Christians throughout the whole world go on a pilgrimage to “see Jesus” by retracing his steps in the Holy Land, where he lived and gave his life. The popes entrusted these holy sites to the Franciscans, through the Custody, whose mission extends far beyond the territory of the Latin diocese of Jerusalem. This patriarchal diocese – reconstituted at the end of the 19th century – today expresses the identity of a local church gathered around its bishop, without losing that universal openness that has always characterized the vocation of the holy city of Jerusalem. It is the former Franciscan Custos Msgr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa who leads the patriarchal diocese, that stretches from Cyprus to Jordan, passing through Palestine and Israel. The Mother Church of Jerusalem is at the center of our concerns in Rome, and I would like to thank the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, for without its help the life of the Latin Patriarchate would be impossible, especially with regard to the seminary, Catholic schools and all the pastoral activities of evangelization. It is also important to emphasize the importance of the work done by the Order for Hebrew-speaking Catholics, also present in Israel. In the areas of education, assistance and protection of the Christian presence in the Holy Land there is an effective collaboration between the Patriarchal Diocese and the Custody of the Holy Land, while maintaining the shrines and serving the pilgrims is almost entirely entrusted to the Franciscans.

The Order of the Holy Sepulchre collaborates with you through the Reunion of Aid Agencies for the Oriental Churches known as “Roaco”, which you preside over. What is this committee’s role?

Indeed, the Order of the Holy Sepulchre is part of Reunion of Aid Agencies for the Oriental Churches, a coordinating body established in 1968. It brings together several Catholic agencies and institutions operating alongside the Catholic Churches, Oriental and Latin, in the territories followed by the Congregation. Every year we gather to reflect together on some particular themes or to focus on precise geographic areas - even though the Holy Land is usually always among them. And it is also an opportunity to verify the willingness to support various aid projects in pastoral outreach, education, health care or emergencies, as we have unfortunately seen in recent years in Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine. The Holy Father wants the help given to the Holy Land be understood in a broad sense, integrating all of the biblical territories. We are especially grateful to the Order, who also during the last meeting – its 90th to be accurate – expressed its support for several projects, in addition to the truly extraordinary and praiseworthy commitment to the life of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. This year we wanted to reflect on the formation of priests in the Middle East in particular, to foster the preservation of their respective cultures and traditions in full unity with the universal Church. Since the birth of the Congregation for Oriental Churches, established by Pope Benedict XV one hundred years ago, the formation of the clergy has always been a priority, because the people of God needs shepherds. That was the theme of our last Roaco meeting.

How would you envision the evolution of relations between the Congregation for Oriental Churches and the Order of the Holy Sepulchre?

There is an existential connection between our Congregation and the Order of the Holy Sepulchre. Relations have been strengthened thanks to Cardinal Edwin O'Brien – Grand Master of the Order – and the outgoing Governor General Agostino Borromeo, two personalities who have encouraged aid to the Oriental Churches, also in the name of the Order's commitment to serving the Holy Land. I would like to express our profound gratitude to the Knights and Dames of the Order for this effort: they are witnesses to the resurrection and joy of the Lord, especially in today's times when we face the problem of refugees in the Middle East, trying to support families fleeing from the areas of war and to fuel their hope of returning to the lands of their ancestors. I would like to express my greetings and my warm wishes to Prof. Borromeo's successor, Ambassador Leonardo Visconti of Modrone.

Interview by François Vayne

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You can access the full interview on our partner website Vatican Insider, by following this link