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The Grand Master's Message

A KNIGHT GRAND CROSS OF OUR TIMES, NOW A SAINT!

The elevation to the altars of Blessed Bartolo Longo took place on October 19, 2025 in St. Peter's Square. Leo XIV presided over the solemn celebration in which other Blesseds were proclaimed Saints. The meaning of a canonisation is in the fact that the Church is called to holiness through her children and they, having at the centre of their lives the Mystery of Jesus, with his passion, death and resurrection, shape their own existence and become a source of inspiration for many other men and women.

Bartolo Longo reached holiness after a long period of spiritual waywardness; then came his return to God by walking the path of charity, love for Mary, and the prayer of the Rosary, in which he involved friends and acquaintances. Like John beneath the Cross, Bartolo Longo gave Mary a "home", in his Shrine of Pompei (Shrine of the Blessed Virgin of the Rosary), which he founded in a desolate, poor, and ill-reputed land.

Day after day, this was the path he followed until, even after certain misunderstandings and



As a true Knight of Christ, Saint Bartolo Longo put the Gospel into practice by caring for the poor children of Pompei. His membership of the Order makes him a model for all members of this pontifical institution, where every action is aimed at guiding Knights and Dames along the path to holiness.

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unjust slander, he became a Knight of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. This honour concluded his life, and when that came to pass, he was buried wearing the knightly habit. Bartolo Longo was not a knight by dynastic inheritance nor by acquisition of title; he became one because he kept the indelible memory of the Redemption. Although we are caught up in overly human and superficial considerations in our daily lives, every Knight and Dame of the Holy Sepulchre should never forget that too.

In 1925, on the 50th anniversary of the arrival in Pompei of the image of Our Lady of the Rosary, Pius XI, the then Grand Master of the Order, decided to confer to Bartolo Longo the honor of Knight Grand Cross, which was presented to him on May 30 by Cardinal Augusto Silj. Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, in handing over the insignia and the Brief to Cardinal Silj, stated: "I am certain that this high distinction, which recognizes the great merits acquired by this outstanding man, will also serve to encourage him to continue with the tireless and youthful vigor that

distinguishes him in his religious and humanitarian apostolate."

During the solemn ceremony, in thanking Cardinal Silj, Bartolo Longo declared that he was poor: his only personal possessions were the knightly insignia he had received from the benevolence of the Pontiff, which he bequeathed to the orphans, who were the sons and daughters of prisoners (cf. *Dicasterium De Causis Sanctorum – Pompeiana – Canonizationis Beati Bartolomeai Longo – Viri Laici – Positio Super Canonizatione, Romae 2024*, pp. 787-788).

Today, we Knights and Dames cannot but fail to rejoice. Many of you have participated in the celebration in St Peter's Square and we all rejoice in the grace granted us of having a lay confrere recognized as a Saint.

May his intercession accompany us each day, inspire our steps, and sow seeds of reconciliation and charity in this dramatic moment for the Holy Land, which Bartolo Longo, as a devout Christian and Knight of the Holy Sepulchre, deeply loved.

Cardinal Fernando Filoni



The Order in union with the Universal Church

“TODAY THE CHURCH ONCE AGAIN
ENTRUSTS YOU WITH THE MISSION OF BEING
GUARDIANS OF THE SEPULCHRE OF CHRIST”

*The Holy Father's address to the more than 3,600 participants in the
Order's Jubilee Pilgrimage (Paul VI Hall, October 23, 2025)*

*Your Eminences, Your Excellencies,
Dear brothers and sisters,*

In this Jubilee Year, it is a joy to meet the Knights and Dames of the *Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem*.

You have come to Rome from various parts of the world, and this reminds us that the tradition of pilgrimage lies at the heart of the Order's history. Indeed, you were founded to safeguard the Holy Sepulchre, to care for pilgrims, and to support the Church in Jerusalem. Even today, you continue this

mission with the humility, dedication, and spirit of sacrifice that characterize chivalric Orders. This you do especially through “a constant witness of faith and solidarity towards Christians residing in the Holy Places” (*Address of the Holy Father John Paul II to the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, 2 March 2000*).

In this regard, I am thinking of the remarkable support the Order offers, which you do quietly and without fanfare, to the communities of the Holy Land, by

The Holy Father, Leo XIV, warmly welcomed the more than 3,600 Knights and Dames who came to Rome on a Jubilee pilgrimage. His wonderful address contained magnificent words of encouragement, and marks a milestone in the history of the Order.





The Order's pilgrims gathered in the Paul VI Hall on October 23 for the papal audience. During the encounter, they received a recognition of their vocation and support for their mission in service to the Mother Church in the Holy Land from the Pope.

sustaining the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem in its various endeavours. These include the Seminary, the schools, charitable and welfare initiatives, humanitarian and educational projects, the University, and assistance to the Churches. All this you do so with particular interventions during times of acute crisis, as was the case during the Covid pandemic and in the tragic days of war.

In all of this, you show that guarding the Sepulchre of Christ does not simply mean preserving a historical, archaeological, or artistic heritage, though important as it is, but supporting a Church made of living stones (cf. *1 Pt 2:4-5*), which was born around it and continues to live today as a true sign of Easter hope.

For this reason, in this Jubilee of Hope, I would like to pause with you for a moment to reflect on that Church, highlighting three of her dimensions.

The first is that of *confident expectation* (cf. Francis, Bull *Spes Non Confundit*, 4). To pause before the Lord's Sepulchre is, in fact, to renew one's faith in the God who keeps His promises, whose power no human force can overcome. In a world where arrogance and violence seem to prevail over charity, you are called to bear witness that life

triumphs over death, that love conquers hatred, that forgiveness overcomes vengeance, and that mercy and grace prevail over sin.

Your "presence" in the Holy Places must above all be a "presence of faith", helping the men and women of our time to pause with their hearts before the tomb of Christ, where sorrow finds its answer in trust, and for those who know how to listen, where the proclamation still resounds: "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said" (*Mt 28:6*).

And you can do this by nourishing your hearts through an intense sacramental life, through listening to and meditating on the Word of God, through personal and liturgical prayer, and through spiritual formation, which is so carefully cultivated within the Order.

The second dimension of hope I would like to reflect on can be seen embodied in the icon of the women who set out towards the Sepulchre to anoint the body of Jesus (cf. *Mk 16:1-2*). It is the face of service, for not even the death of the Master prevents Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome from caring for Him. I have already expressed my gratitude for the great good



you do, following in the footsteps of the ancient tradition of assistance that characterizes your Order. Thanks to your work, how many times has a glimmer of light reopened for individuals, families, and entire communities at risk of being overwhelmed by terrible tragedies, and at every level, and especially in the places where Jesus lived.

Your charity sustains them, recognising in their needs those "signs of the times" that Pope Francis has invited us to embrace and transform into "signs of hope" (cf. *Spes Non Confundit*, 8).

There is, however, a third dimension of hope to which I wish to refer: the one that leads us to look towards the goal. The image we may recall is that of Peter and John running to the Sepulchre (cf. *Jn* 20:4-10). On Easter morning, having heard the women, they hurriedly set off at once in a race that brought them to the empty tomb, where they renewed their faith in Christ in the light of the Resurrection.

Saint Paul uses the same image when he speaks of his life as a race in the stadium, that has a goal, but directed towards the

encounter with the Lord (cf. *1 Cor* 9:24-27). This is what the act of pilgrimage expresses: a symbol of the search for life's ultimate meaning (cf. *Spes Non Confundit*, 5).

You too have undertaken this journey, and I invite you to experience your presence here not as a destination, but as a stage from which to set out again, to resume your path towards the one true and final goal: full and eternal communion with God in Paradise.

Let this also be a witness to the brothers and sisters you encounter: an invitation to live the things of this world with the freedom and joy of those who know they are journeying towards the infinite horizon of eternity.

Dear friends, today the Church once again entrusts you with the mission of being guardians of the Sepulchre of Christ. Be so, in the trust of expectation, in the zeal of charity, and in the joyful momentum of hope. As St Augustine said to the Christians of his time: "Go forward, go forward in goodness [...]. Do not stray from the path, do not turn back, do not stop!" (*Sermon* 256,3).

I bless you wholeheartedly and pray for each one of you. Thank you.

Saint Bartolo Longo, pray for us!

On October 19, 2025, during World Mission Day, Pope Leo XIV canonised Bartolo Longo, who was a Knight of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre and Apostle of the Rosary. The Holy Father asked at the close of his homily, "When we hear the cries of those in difficulty, let us ask ourselves, are we witnesses to the Father's love, as Christ was to all?" the Holy Father asked at the close of his homily. He highlighted Bartolo Longo's fervent heart of devotion and described him as a benefactor of humanity. Numerous members of the Order were present at the celebration in St Peter's Square, led by their authorities. The Grand Master concelebrated the Mass with the Holy Father. We give thanks to God for this canonisation and invoke the new Saint, that the Knights and Dames of the Order may ever more be missionaries of the Gospel of Christ in their daily lives, in light of their commitment to the Mother Church of Jerusalem. Our Lady of the Rosary and Saint Bartolo Longo, pray for us!



The Grand Master has entrusted Monsignor Tommaso Caputo, Assessor of the Order and Prelate of Pompeii, with the task of preparing a booklet on Knight Bartolo Longo, intended for Members of the Order. We will inform you of its publication in due course, currently planned in Italian.

THE JUBILEE OF OVER 3,600 KNIGHTS AND DAMES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Three Days in Rome Following in the Footsteps of the Apostles Peter and Paul

From October 21 to 23, 2025, the international jubilee pilgrimage of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre brought together more than 3,600 Knights and Dames from every continent. The Governor General, the four Vice Governors General (Europe, Asia-Pacific, North America, and Latin America), along with numerous Lieutenants and Magistral Delegates, led the Order's pilgrims throughout the three days of the Order's pilgrimage. On behalf of all the Order's Knights and Dames, the Grand Master presented the Holy Father with an icon of Our Lady of Palestine, specially crafted for him in the Holy Land.

"You have come to Rome from various parts of the world, and this reminds us that the practice of pilgrimage is at the origin of your history. You were born, in fact, to guard the Holy Sepulchre, to take care of pilgrims and to support the Church of Jerusalem," said Pope Leo XIV to the over 3,600 Knights and Dames of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre who came on a jubilee pilgrimage to Rome.

The Holy Father received the Knights and Dames on October 23, in the Paul VI Audience Hall during the third day of their pilgrimage. This meeting was followed shortly after with the celebration of Mass in St Peter's Basilica, which brought them together alongside their Grand Master,



On behalf of the Order, the Grand Master offered the Holy Father an icon of Our Lady of Palestine, specially created for him in the Holy Land by a religious sister living in the community of Beit Jamal.

Cardinal Fernando Filoni. The Holy Father expressed particular gratitude for the remarkable support the Order offers to the communities of the Holy Land, "which you do quietly and without fanfare, [...] supporting the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem in its various endeavours. These include the Seminary, the schools, charitable and welfare initiatives, humanitarian and educational projects, the University, aid to the Churches with particular interventions during times of acute crisis, as was the case during the Covid pandemic and in the tragic days of war."

On behalf of the 30,000 members of this pontifical institution, who are the men and women, mostly laypeople, spread across more than 40 countries, and represented by



pilgrims from all continents, Cardinal Filoni presented the Pope with an icon of the Order's patroness, Our Lady of Palestine (whose feast is celebrated annually October 25). The icon was specially crafted for him in the Holy Land by a religious sister of the Congregation of the Monastic Sisters of Bethlehem.

"The Virgin Mary bore a son, who died and rose again for us. But she also holds a little girl in her arms in this icon," remarked the Grand Master as he presented the Marian image to the Pope. "This little girl, represented by the Holy City of Jerusalem, is the universal Church that we all form together," Cardinal Filoni added in essence, prompting a warm smile from Peter's successor, whose words of encouragement just moments earlier had deeply moved all the Knights and Dames.

"The Church today once again entrusts you with the mission of being guardians of the Sepulchre of Christ. Be so, in the *trust of waiting*, in the *zeal of charity*, and in the *joyful impulse of hope*," he said to them before offering his blessing, in an atmosphere of joyful fraternity and renewed confidence.

It is this spirit of selfless service, evoked by the Holy Father, which the Knights and Dames sought to cultivate throughout their pilgrimage. They were spiritually renewed in the four papal basilicas, where they received the plenary indulgence by passing through the Holy Door. They did this either for themselves or for those departed, and received the sacrament of reconciliation from the priests who were present.

ST PAUL OUTSIDE THE WALLS

The pilgrims were welcomed at their accommodation in Rome on Tuesday, October 21, by members of the Grand Magisterium's staff. Then, the participants in the jubilee pilgrimage took part that same afternoon in the opening Mass of the pilgrimage at the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls, which was presided over by the



On the first day of the pilgrimage, October 21, after passing through the Holy Door, members of the Order participated in a Mass at the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, presided over by Cardinal Fernando Filoni.



Grand Master.

As the pilgrims passed through the Holy Door, they reflected on the meaning of their commitment in this basilica, where the relics of Saint Paul's chains are venerated. It was he who held dear the mission among



peoples and the support of the Church in Jerusalem. During the celebration, as they listened to Cardinal Fernando Filoni's homily, each pilgrim was able to renew their personal encounter with the Lord, in order to continue serving as apostles of peace, reconciliation, and compassion.

Eager, like all pilgrims of the 2025 Jubilee, to "become pilgrims of hope" (1 Tim 1:1), rooted in the charity of Christ, the members of the Order once again mobilised to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel" (Mark 16:14-18).

ST JOHN LATERAN

On the following day, Wednesday October 22, the pilgrims of the Order passed through the Holy Door of the Basilica of St John Lateran. According to tradition, this basilica houses the wooden altar of the Apostle Peter. Following his profession of faith and Christ's affirmation of the Petrine primacy (Matthew 16:13-19), the prince of the apostles offered his life for the Church, who – as Cardinal Filoni recalled in his homily – is "a communion of persons united by faith in Jesus and in his revelation, the space where the transcendent mystery of

God meets each one of us and encounters our world."

In this spirit, the Grand Master urged the pilgrims to allow God to renew within them faith, hope, and charity, in accordance with the principles set out in the Order's Constitution: personal renunciation, generosity towards their local Churches and



On October 22, the Assessor of the Order, Monsignor Tommaso Caputo, celebrated Mass for the Knights and Dames at the Basilica of Saint John Lateran. Due to the large number of pilgrims, two Masses were held at this holy site, the second of which was presided over by the Grand Master.

the Church in the Holy Land, as an expression of their shared concern with the Pope for maintaining a Christian presence in the places where Christ lived and gave his life.

As they admired the apse mosaics depicting the mystery of the New Jerusalem, the pilgrims reflected on the Grand Master's teaching that the vocation of the Order's members is the building of a spiritual edifice (1 Pet 2:4-5, 9-10), through dialogue and reconciliation among all peoples of the Holy Land (2 Cor 5:19).

SAINT MARY MAJOR

On the afternoon of October 22, the Order of the Holy Sepulchre's jubilee pilgrimage continued with the passage through the Holy Door of the Basilica of Saint Mary Major. This Basilica was built in the 4th century in accordance with the will of the Virgin Mary, as expressed to Pope Liberius. It was consecrated for worship by Pope Sixtus III following the Council of



At the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, the pilgrims of the Order formed a procession and made their way through the Holy Door on the afternoon of October 22 and prayed the Rosary, led by the Grand Master.

Ephesus in 431, which affirmed Mary's divine motherhood, signifying that the mystery of the Incarnation opens the way to salvation.

According to tradition, the relic of the Holy Crib is preserved in this basilica, earning it the title "the Bethlehem of the West." The Dames and Knights recalled that, from their mother's womb (Ps 22), they are children and heirs, thanks to the Spirit who inspires them to call God "Abba, Father" (Gal 4:4-7), following Christ and believing in him.

Strengthened by this supernatural experience, they joined in prayer with the "fiat" of the Mother of God before the mosaics of the Annunciation, the Presentation in the Temple, and the Adoration of the Magi. In procession, behind the Grand Master and the Governor General, the pilgrims prayed the Rosary in silence, pausing for a few moments before the icon of *Salus Populi Romani*, attributed to Saint Luke and so dear to the heart of Pope Francis, whose mortal remains now rest in this basilica.



After the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, the Knights and Dames' procession made its way to Saint Peter's Basilica following the Jubilee Cross carried by Cardinal Filoni. The Order's pilgrimage culminated in a Mass celebrated by the Grand Master at the Altar of the Confession.



ST PETER'S BASILICA

On October 23, more than 3,600 Knights and Dames, having attended the papal audience granted to them by Pope Leo XIV, walked in procession from the Paul VI Hall to the Holy Door of St Peter's Basilica, before taking part in the Eucharistic celebration presided over by the Grand Master. *"Ubi Petrus, ibi Ecclesia"*—"Where Peter is, there is the Church": with this phrase from Saint Ambrose, Cardinal Filoni once again affirmed the active participation of the Order's members in the Pope's concern for supporting the Church in the Holy Land.

Before the taking of a group photo, Ambassador Leonardo Visconti di Modrone, Governor General and chief organiser of this historic event, addressed all participants, confrères, and friends of the Order. "I thank you for the devotion with which you took part in the various stages across the four Roman basilicas, and also for the patience with which you faced a few inconveniences. Coordinating the participation of almost 3,700 pilgrims from around the world was

no easy task, but I hope you will carry with you fond memories of these days in Rome, which have strengthened us in our faith and in our love for the Holy Land."

Gazing upon the majestic statue of Saint Helena, who championed the construction of the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, the pilgrims invoked her silently, to ask her to intercede through the Virgin Mary so that seemingly insurmountable situations in the Holy Land might find paths to hopeful resolution. After these three days of spiritual renewal in God, the Pilgrims parted with enthusiasm, while exchanging contact details, promising to pray for one another, and committing to remain in touch in order to ever more faithfully support the Mother Church of Jerusalem.

Among the pilgrims, Julio Menchù, a Knight from Guatemala, gave his testimony on camera at the conclusion of the pilgrimage, stating, "Our model is Saint Bartolo Longo, canonised by the Pope on October 19. A Knight of the Holy Sepulchre, he bore abundant fruit around him through his love for Mary. This is our commitment!"

François Vayne



Proceedings of the Grand Magisterium

THE HOLY LAND COMMISSION'S AUTUMN VISIT TO JORDAN

From September 28 to October 4, 2025, the Holy Land Commission of the Grand Magisterium undertook its regular visit to the Holy Land; however, on this occasion, due to the tragic situation in Israel and Palestine, the visit was confined to Jordan.

At the outset of the visit, the President of the Commission, Bartholomew McGettrick, accompanied by fellow members Tim Milner and Detlef Brümmer, received encouraging updates on activities in Jordan and on the growing number of faithful in the parishes. This news was shared during the day's meetings, the first of which was with the Chief Executive Officer of the Latin Patriarchate, Sami El-Yousef, and his team. This encounter was followed by a meeting with Father Firas Nasrawin, Director of the Latin Patriarchate Schools in Jordan, and further encounters with Auxiliary Bishop Monsignor Iyad Twal, ordained in 2024, today he is the Patriarchal Vicar for Jordan, Father Firas Aridah, Scout Chaplain, and Father Bashir Bader,

Director of the Family Centre.

The following day, the Holy Land Commission visited a school in Naour, where major renovation works are underway, including an expansion to allow for additional classrooms. The school classrooms are overcrowded, with up to 40 students in each one, so the extension and refurbishment will increase the school's capacity to meet the needs of the growing Christian community. Following the visit to the school, the three members of the Commission were welcomed at Jubeiha's parish and school, which is near Amman, the capital. This city holds a special place in the hearts of the Knights and Dames of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, who over the years have contributed significantly to the



Members of the Holy Land Commission visiting the Caritas headquarters in Jordan.





Catholic education in Jordan is primarily supported by the Order, as it is throughout the territory of the Latin Patriarchate.

Most refugees have been waiting from between five to ten years for a decision on their immigration visas.

Finally, on the eve of their departure from Jordan, the

Commission visited the

construction of a new church in an area witnessing steady growth in the number of faithful, and where existing facilities could no longer meet everyone's needs. On May 12, 2022, during the Grand Master, Cardinal Fernando Filoni's visit to the Holy Land, he joyfully consecrated the new Church of Saint Paul in Jubeiha. The Holy Land Commission was thus able to witness firsthand the rapid growth of the parish and the increasing need for additional space in the school, which currently serves around 800 students, the vast majority of whom are Christian.

On October 1, the Holy Land Commission visited the American University of Madaba, with its beautiful campus and state-of-the-art laboratories. This academic year, new students have joined the 1,900 strong student body who are already enrolled there. The visit continued with stops at the parish and school of Madaba, which serve a growing Christian population. This is illustrated by Sunday Mass when there are over 800 people in the congregation, and around 600 students are enrolled at the school, of whom more than 400 are Christian. The members of the Commission also met with several Iraqi refugees who are still living in Jordan. Their situation is extremely difficult, and the Latin Patriarchate continues to offer them support.

Our Lady of Peace Centre, which is a Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem institution that provides educational and therapeutic services to children with disabilities and to their families. The Centre, which the Order is proud to have supported generously over the years, is internationally recognised for the quality of its care, all of which is offered free of charge.

On the morning of October 4, before returning to their respective countries, the members of the Holy Land Commission concluded their autumn visit with a meeting with the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem's administrative staff. Beyond the many individuals and communities encountered, the data gathered points to increasingly urgent needs in the Holy Land's current context. The number of requests for humanitarian aid have risen by 400% over the past two years, with 270 recorded this past August alone. The inflation and exchange rate fluctuations have driven up costs and significantly reduced the population's purchasing power. In these challenging circumstances, job creation programmes, for example, continue to play a vital role. Over the past six months, 84 young people have completed their vocational training, enabling 76% of them to secure employment despite the difficult economic situation.



MY TIMES ARE IN YOUR HAND

Cardinal Filoni's new book, available now from all good Bookstores

Following the book on the spirituality of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, titled, *And the Whole House Was Filled with the Fragrance of the Ointment*, Cardinal Fernando Filoni, Grand Master, received several requests from Knights and Dames who wished to have guidance to continue progressing along their life of faith.

From these requests comes *I miei giorni sono nelle tue mani* (*My Times are in Your Hand*), a small volume of meditations, published by San Paolo, for now available in Italian.

A spiritual life is never static, for it is made of steps forward and pauses, of detours, of reconsiderations. It is a continuous search, which sometimes finds decisive turning points in encounters that can make us change direction.

Commencing with the lives of men and women who have encountered Christ and allowed that meeting to transform their existence, this book travels through the history of faith: beginning with distant figures such as Abraham and Moses, it enters the home of Mary and

Joseph, follows the path of the Magi, listens to the voice of John the Baptist and the tears of Mary Magdalene, up to Peter and Paul. Then the journey opens again, passing through Helena, mother of Constantine, Augustine, Thomas, Francis of Assisi, and arriving at the saints of our own time: Charles de Foucauld, Edith Stein, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, witnesses who became words made flesh and who made the gifts of Christ visible in their concrete lives.

Cardinal Filoni offers his readers pages that resemble

brushstrokes of colour on a canvas, and the reader can piece them together and create their own picture. At the centre, in filigree, there is always Jesus. But since discipleship is never complete, the book remains open, waiting for each of us to write our own story with God in the remaining pages.

On the path, we see the footprints of Jesus, and on them we can place our own feet, deciding as well, like the Psalmist, to say: "My times are in your hand" (*Ps* 31[30]:16).



ANNA MARIA MUNZI IACOBONI BECOMES A MEMBER OF THE GRAND MAGISTERIUM

As part of the forthcoming transitions within the senior offices of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, the Cardinal Grand Master, pursuant to Article 8§2 of the Order's Statute, has appointed Dame Grand Cross Anna Maria Munzi Iacoboni as a Member of the Grand Magisterium, effective from December 13, 2025. In addition, the Cardinal Grand Master has also conferred upon her the title of Lieutenant of Honour for Central Italy.

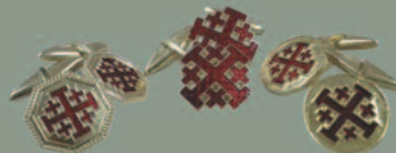
Contemporaneously, the Cardinal Grand Master has appointed, with equal effect, pursuant to Article 26§1 of the Order's Statute, Knight Grand Cross Stefano Petrillo as the new Lieutenant for Central Italy. The handover will take place during the Investiture Ceremony of the Rome Section, scheduled to be held at the Basilica of Saint John Lateran on December 13.

We entrust their new missions to the intercession of Our Lady of Palestine, Patroness of the Order.

**GUCCIONE**

SINCE 1975

DECORATIONS OF KNIGHTLY ORDERS



Order of the Holy Sepulchre
Papal Equestrian Orders
Order of Malta

Italian Dynastic Orders and Orders of the Italian Republic

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The Order and the Holy Land

THE ORDER'S MISSION IN THE HOLY LAND

"I have never seen such a hard time." The person who uttered these words is the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Beatitude Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who has spent 35 years of his life in the Holy Land and has faced many crises. The ceasefire of 13 October in Gaza does not erase the difficulties facing the Holy Land, and although there have been important developments, uncertainty remains about the next steps.

"We are distraught, deeply wounded by what we are living through, by the climate of hatred that this violence has created, which in turn generates more hatred in a vicious cycle that cannot be broken." These were Cardinal Pizzaballa, Grand Prior of our Order's comments, during a video call from Jerusalem for the prayer vigil "Peace for Gaza" organized in Rome on September 22 by the Community of Sant'Egidio, before the ceasefire. His analysis continues to resonate: "We have left the field open to many extremists on both sides; but I also see many gentle souls. These are individuals who take risks, who work for justice even at personal cost. There are Israelis, Palestinians, Jews, Christians, Muslims. Here it is not a matter of belonging but of humanity, above all."



When Cardinal Pizzaballa visited the wounded in Gaza, one of them kissed the Patriarch's pectoral cross, so uniting his own suffering with that of Christ's.

The closeness of the Order

In a situation of such gravity, the Knights and Dames of the Holy Sepulchre can only strive to carry forward their mission of supporting the Mother Church of Jerusalem with perseverance and faith, while embracing the hope to which this Jubilee invites us. This support takes the form of prayer, care and closeness, and financial aid to meet the immense needs.

"Through their voluntary and ongoing donations, the Knights and Dames of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre have enabled the Grand Magisterium of the Order in Rome to send weekly contributions to the Holy Land, which totalled more than 16 million Euros in 2024. The average of four million per quarter has already been largely





The inhabitants of the Holy Land consider the education of their children more important than food, as it opens a future of hope for all.

surpassed during the same period in 2025 due to the current need, which has clearly inspired greater generosity among our Members," confirmed the Governor General of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, Ambassador Leonardo Visconti di Modrone.

Gaza at the center of our concern

"The vast majority of these contributions (about 80%)", continued Ambassador Visconti di Modrone, "are regularly allocated to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which through its parishes and institutions is engaged in humanitarian initiatives, including sending food, water, medicine, and fuel to Gaza (about 1.5 million Euro in 2024 and continuing to increase in 2025)." Gaza is clearly at the center of our concerns: a tragedy before which we feel powerless.

After the July attack on the Church of the Holy Family, the only Latin parish in Gaza, where for two years the few hundred Catholics remaining in the Gaza Strip have taken refuge along with other Christians. After the attack, the Latin Patriarch, accompanied by Patriarch Theophilos III, went to Gaza to comfort this small community mourning its victims.

In the following months, we witnessed the evacuation of Gaza City, pushed by the Israeli army. George Akroush, the director of the Development Office of the Latin Patriarchate, recounts the decision of the Catholic parish of the Holy Family not to leave the church: "Our priests and religious chose to remain, sharing the little they had, because those who decided to leave following evacuation orders faced constant humiliation and had no truly safe place to

The Order supports numerous projects in the Holy Land, particularly in the field of construction, so that the local Catholic Church has the means to welcome and instruct those entrusted to its pastoral care.





Parishes in the Holy Land are spiritual centers and places of social and educational action. In their parish, the local people find support and comfort.

go. Those who did leave risked being killed at every step, in addition to facing scarce (if available!) water, food, tents, medicine, and electricity, along with the constant fear of bombings, demolitions, and displacements, which became part of daily life in Gaza." We continue to pray for this community and for all the people of Gaza, who now face the reconstruction phase.

A crisis spreading to the entire Palestinian population

The situation is not calm in the rest of the Palestinian territories and East Jerusalem either. "These areas often go underreported by the international media, and yet, notes Akroush of the Latin Patriarchate, their population suffers from increasing restrictions, checkpoints, and isolation that erode livelihoods and hope. Now, in the West Bank alone, more than 1,200 iron gates, barriers, and military posts have been erected with the aim of isolating Palestinian cities from one another. For many Christian families, especially those who depended on tourism and services linked to pilgrims and visitors, which is estimated at over 60% of Christian families, unemployment has become chronic."

In the face of these challenges, the Patriarchate is intensifying its services, and the Order stands beside it in supporting the basic needs of the population by creating

jobs and supporting small businesses for unemployed Christians. In addition, there's contributing to urgent medical operations and healthcare costs for those unable to afford treatment, as well as providing food vouchers and important support for the network of schools run by the Patriarchate. Thanks to the Order's contribution, the Patriarchate has been able to carry forward the Jubilee initiative of cancelling school fee debts up to the year 2024/2025, which was a burden that many families – amid Covid, war, and unemployment – had experienced with tremendous anxiety.

Looking ahead

The journey is long, while diplomacy takes its steps. For us, in faith, it is our task to pray for peace. The small actions we can support as the Order of the Holy Sepulchre are practical and immediate. As George Akroush comments, "They do not resolve the deeper political causes of suffering, but they keep people alive and give families the dignity of a future," and he concludes by addressing those strategic partners, the Order of the Holy Sepulchre was first among them, "We will never forget your solidarity. Your donations directly translate into lives protected, children in school, surgeries carried out, elderly cared for, and fragile hearts supported."

Elena Dini



THE GRAND MASTER'S PILGRIMAGE TO THE HOLY LAND FOR THE FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION

"**T**his mid-August day is consecrated in the Church to the veneration of the *Easter of Mary*, the Lord's Mother. Following an ancient historical-liturgical tradition, the feast is also known as the *Transit of the Virgin*, or the *Dormition of Mary*, or more commonly, her *Assumption into Heaven*." This is how Cardinal Fernando Filoni, Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, began his homily delivered on August 15 at the Benedictine Abbey of the Dormition in Jerusalem.

The invitation to visit the Holy Land and celebrate the solemnity was extended to Cardinal Filoni by Father Nikodemus Schnabel, O.S.B., the Abbot at the Benedictine Abbey. At this complex and tragic moment, Cardinal Filoni brought with him the intentions for peace of the 30,000

Knights and Dames of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, and a prayer of entrustment for the beginning of the Petrine ministry of Leo XIV. The Cardinal had written to the Holy Father before his departure and for whose intentions he celebrated a Mass in the Edicule of the Holy Sepulchre.

In 1950, Pope Pius XII proclaimed the Dogma of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven, according to which, in her glorious passing from this earth, Mary's body "did not undergo corruption" and she was assumed into heaven, body and soul.

The Grand Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, stated in his Homily, "Thus, we may affirm that *Mary's Easter* follows the *Easter of the Lord Jesus*." He then addressed a clear question to those present, of whom there were far fewer than usual in a Jerusalem that is empty of pilgrims, "What

The Benedictine monastic community of the Dormition welcomed the Grand Master of the Order during the celebration of the Assumption last summer.





The Assumption Mass presided over by Cardinal Filoni at the Abbey of the Dormition in Jerusalem.

does the Assumption of Mary into heaven offer to our journey, and to our lives? In what way does it concern us? Is it merely a "doctrine", or does it mean something more?"

He continued, "To answer this question, I would like to recall Benedict XVI's reflection. In a homily for this Solemnity, he spoke of the threefold meaning of Mary's Assumption: The first, that through Mary we see that in God there is room for man. God is not closed in on Himself, He is not indifferent to humanity [...]; The first, that through Mary, we see that in God there is space for humanity. God is not enclosed in himself, nor is he indifferent to humankind [...]; the second, that like the *Holy Ark*, Mary brings the presence of God to humanity [...]; and third, that in humanity there can be space for God."

In addition to Cardinal Filoni, Abbot Nikodemus Schnabel, who is an ecclesiastical Knight of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre too, hosted a small group of young men living a time of approach and discernment toward monastic life. During his stay, Cardinal Filoni held a private meeting with them. These were small yet significant presences in a prostrated land awaiting the return of pilgrims who, especially for local Christians working in the holy places and in pilgrimage services, represent an essential support both in faith and in concrete economic life.

"In the current ocean of suffering," said

the Abbot of the Dormition, "the feast of our holy patroness is like a summer Easter that brings hope at a time when people are tormented in body and soul. We celebrate the fact that our bodies and souls have an indestructible future with God because what God has done for Mary is a promise of hope for all of us."

During his pilgrimage, Cardinal Filoni visited the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem and Grand Prior of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, and then went on to pray also at the holy places of Bethlehem, Nazareth and on the Sea of Galilee. In Bethlehem, he took the opportunity to listen attentively to the various activities supported by the Order of the Holy Sepulchre through the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, in particular through the social services office, which deals with many local initiatives. These include, for example, scholarships to cover school fees, a program of medical and pharmaceutical assistance, and food vouchers to help families who struggle to make ends meet.

In Bethlehem, as elsewhere, unemployment has become widespread because of the war, the lack of tourism and the ever-expanding denial of entry permits into Israel (where many Palestinians from the area once worked). Cardinal Filoni heard the story of Yusef, 37, who is a father of four children, the youngest just four months old,





Cardinal Filoni during a Mass celebrated on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, for peace in the Holy Land.

diabetic and with leg and vision problems. Yusef is presently working part-time for the parish, thus managing to support his family and continue to live in dignity.

Among his various meetings, the Grand Master also spoke with the Patriarch Emeritus, His Beatitude Michel Sabbah. "We Christians are as few in number as in the time of Jesus", shared Patriarch Emeritus Sabbah, who is an authoritative voice of the local Church to which he has dedicated his life. "In fact, at the time of the Cross, Christians were few in number, after Jesus they remained few then too, and today we are still few. And Jesus never told us 'You will be millions'. He always said 'Do not be afraid, little flock'. We will always be few here, but we must make an effort, because not everyone likes remaining small, thinking that because of our

numbers we are less capable than others. This is a false outlook. The Christian is not bound to numbers but to faith. One believer, Jesus said, can move mountains. Even though we are few in number, we Christians can change the whole situation. But we need catechesis, formation, prayer and the awareness that it is God who acts here."

He concluded, "There is a mystery in this land. It is blessed but at the same time there is a curse. We hope that God acts with the power of His Spirit, who will cast down from their thrones the great dictators and oppressors of the people, and that one day He Himself will come with the glory of His love, humility, not human power but glory, love for all."

With this private pilgrimage, Cardinal Filoni wished to encourage the faithful to come to the Holy Land, and live out an act of solidarity and shared hope toward the local Christian community whose members form the Mother Church of Jerusalem.

Elena Dini

During the Mass at the Holy Sepulchre, Cardinal Filoni presented the intentions of the Knights and Dames from around the world to the Lord.



THE *HOLY CHILD* PROGRAM BOUGHT A HOME

In 2019, prompted by Cardinal Filoni, Grand Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, Mother Shaun Vergauwen, Foundress of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist (Meriden, CT), and the Bethlehem *Holy Child Program* Board, launched a fundraising campaign. The goal of this combined effort was to purchase the property in Beit Sahour, located near the shrine of the Shepherds' Field. Since 1995, this has been the place where the activities of the *Holy Child Program*, an initiative of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, have been carried out.

The *Holy Child Program* provides an intense therapeutic day treatment program and alternative education for children in the Bethlehem region of the Holy Land. These children suffer from untreated complex mental health issues, severe behavioural and emotional problems, and exposure to intergenerational trauma. It is clear and understandable how important this has been, and now more than ever. The mission of the *Holy Child Program* is to instil hope through healing and to build bridges of peace in a land that so desperately needs peace.

The property where the project is based has been rented from a private family since 2000. Over the years, the project has developed the building and the land to provide a healing environment for its students and their families.

The acquisition of the property was completed in July 2025. The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem has graciously

allowed the property to be purchased and held in its name, to safeguard it in perpetuity.

"Our Program is deeply rooted in the community. For 25 years, we have served families, even generations of families, as well as other institutions working with children. The program has a long history. We put a lot into the building, but we always lived with the awareness that the owners could end the contract or sell the property to someone else. Now we do not have that worry," comments Iskander Khoury, Executive Director of the *Holy Child Program*, with joy and excitement.

A heartfelt word of thanks comes from the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist. They had the inspiration, invested resources, and worked for the children they educate and support, as well as for this project, over the past 30 years. We are grateful for the example they offer and for their commitment. "We are very grateful for the generous financial assistance of the various Lieutenancies of the Order throughout the USA and from the Grand Magisterium. We are also grateful for their continued encouragement, expressed by visiting the school and by praying for the children and families in need of its service."

Over the last three years, the Order of the Holy Sepulchre has contributed about 150,000€ to the project.

Children with complex mental health issues and exposure to intergenerational trauma are assisted with the help of the Order through the Holy Child Program in Bethlehem.



TEN YEARS OF THE COMPREHENSIVE AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE STATE OF PALESTINE AND THE HOLY SEE

This year marked the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement between the State of Palestine and the Holy See on June 26, 2015. Through its 32 articles, the agreement states the essential aspects of the life of Christians in Palestine underlining their rights, in particular the freedom for the Catholic Church – as we read in the press release that was diffused in June 2025 by the Embassy of the State of Palestine to the Holy See – “to fulfill its religious, moral, educational, social, and charitable mission. It has allowed the Church to organize its internal affairs, including granting the Latin ecclesiastical court the freedom to apply



Ambassador of the State of Palestine to the Holy See, His Excellency Issa Jamil Kassissieh, visited the Grand Master and the Governor General of the Order on October 6, 2025.

canon law, based on Palestine's recognition of the legal personality of the Catholic Church.” On the Holy See's side, the agreement ensured the recognition of the State of Palestine. This 10th anniversary comes at a very difficult time for Palestinians and our mind goes back to 2015, just a year after the historic meeting and prayer for peace in the Vatican Gardens with Pope Francis, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and then Israeli President Shimon Peres during which they planted an olive tree.

Today we might need a new olive tree during the Jubilee of Hope and we keep pray for that.



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The life of the Lieutenancies

SOUTH AFRICA: FROM MAGISTRAL DELEGATION TO LIEUTENANCY

On July 3, 2025, in response to a request from Cardinal Stephen Brislin, Grand Prior of the Order for South Africa and Metropolitan Archbishop of Johannesburg, the Cardinal Grand Master decreed the elevation of the Magistral Delegation of South Africa to the rank of Lieutenancy.

The Magistral Delegation, which has now been elevated to a Lieutenancy, currently comprises 60 members. This number is expected to increase by a further 20 in the near future with the establishment of a Section in Johannesburg, in addition to the one already present in Cape Town.

Contemporaneously, the Cardinal Grand Master signed the decree by which the serving Magistral Delegate since 2019, Juan Luis Cabral, assumed the title of Lieutenant.

This dynamic Lieutenancy held its most recent Investiture Ceremony on May 23 and 24 in Cape Town, during which ten new Knights and Dames were welcomed into the ranks of the Order.

Among those present were Nancy Moses

and Ricardo Moses.

Nancy here shares her thoughts and feelings from the Vigil that took place at St. of St Mary of the Flight into Egypt Cathedral in Cape Town in the evening of the 23rd. "As I stood before the altar, lifting the vase of oils, a wave of emotion washed over me. I felt an immense sense of privilege to be a part of such a sacred ceremony, a prelude to the honour that awaited. It was a moment where the spiritual felt tangible, and I was acutely aware of the generations of devotion and faith that have upheld this Order. The air itself seemed to hum with grace, and I found myself overwhelmed with gratitude for the path that had led me to this very point."

Ricardo echoes Nancy in recounting his experience of the Investiture Ceremony, describing it as "a moment of profound emotion that will forever be etched in my memory. Standing there, surrounded by fellow Knights and Dames, while making my solemn vows, I felt an overwhelming sense of belonging and purpose. It wasn't

merely a ceremony; it was a spiritual embrace, a tangible affirmation of a calling that has long



With the expansion of the Order's presence in South Africa, the Magistral Delegation has become a Lieutenancy.

been close to my heart."

For all Knights and Dames it is valuable to remember how this call to join the Order came about. Penelope Irvine has no difficulty in identifying the clear moment in her story when this vocation became apparent to her: "In 2018 I went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with Father Robert Bissell, which changed my life. It was a deeply spiritual and uplifting

experience, and I felt a real connection with the peoples and sacred sites. On returning I was moved to join the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre to help serve and care for the Holy Land and its people."

We extend our best wishes to the new Lieutenancy, which we are sure will continue to be a sign of hope within the local Church and a symbol of closeness to the distant yet so close Holy Land.

SOME RECENT INVESTITURES ATTENDED BY THE ORDER'S AUTHORITIES

THE GRAND MASTER AT NOTRE DAME DE PARIS

At the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris, at the end of September (26-27, 2025), the Grand Master presided over the Investiture of 19 Knights, 5 Dames, and 4 ecclesiastics from the Lieutenancy for France, as well as one Knight from Luxembourg. The ceremony was preceded by a Vigil at the church of Saint-Leu-Saint-Gilles. Cardinal Filoni, who was accompanied by the Governor General, Ambassador Leonardo Visconti di Modrone, also took part in the Lieutenancy Chapter meeting and met with the candidates. The events concluded with a gala dinner at the Palais du Luxembourg, which was attended by numerous members of the Grand Magisterium and Lieutenants from various European countries and from the United States.

The Investiture ceremonies in Paris provided an opportunity for a series of meetings between members of the Grand Magisterium and Lieutenants, within the framework of the dialogue that the Governor General recommends and promotes. At the Palais du Luxembourg, during the final



The Investiture Ceremony at Notre-Dame de Paris brought together numerous Knights and Dames.



Group photo with Cardinals Erdö and Filoni outside the Cathedral of Esztergom.



banquet following the Investiture ceremony, the Governor General held talks with Grand Magisterium members Jean-Pierre de Glutz, Enric Mas, Michael Byrne, and Helene Lund, as well as with the Lieutenants for Belgium, Damien de Laminne; for the USA Middle Atlantic, Valencia Camp; for Ireland, Peter Durnin; for England and Wales, John Joseph McNally; for Scotland, Joseph d'Inverno; for Switzerland-Liechtenstein, Donata Krethlow-Benziger; for Portugal, Bartolomeu da Costa Cabral; and for Luxembourg, Jacques Klein.

INVESTITURES IN HUNGARY PRESIDED OVER BY CARDINAL FILONI

On October 10, prior to the Vigil of Investiture of the Lieutenancy for Hungary, held in Esztergom on the banks of the Danube near Budapest, the Grand Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre met with the future Knights and Dames in the Church of Saint Ignatius. On this occasion, Cardinal Fernando Filoni's book on the Order's spirituality was officially presented, having recently been published in Hungarian. Following the Prayer Vigil held in the Church of Saint Ignatius, the Grand Master presided over the Investiture Ceremony on Saturday, October 11, welcoming ten new members into the Hungarian Lieutenancy. The ceremony took place in the Basilica of the Assumption and Saint Adalbert, in the presence of Cardinal Péter Erdő, Archbishop of Budapest and Grand Prior of the Order for Hungary. The Vice Governor General, Jean-Pierre de Glutz, represented the Grand Magisterium. Lieutenant Béla Jungbert welcomed several Lieutenants and delegates of the Order from

across Europe during those days. These included representatives from Malta, Ireland, Croatia, Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. The participants had the opportunity to exchange views on the situation in the Holy Land and on solidarity projects with the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, generously supported by the Order. They also enjoyed discovering the Order's historical roots in Hungary, learning, for example, that the Austro-Hungarian composer Franz Liszt, who was author of the *Esztergom Mass*, performed at the inauguration of the new basilica in 1856, and was himself a Knight of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem.

THE GOVERNOR GENERAL IN NEW YORK

During his visit to New York to attend the Prayer Vigil and Investiture Ceremonies (October 10–11, 2025) of the USA Eastern Lieutenancy, the Governor General, Ambassador Leonardo Visconti di Modrone, paid a visit to Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York and Grand Prior of the Order for that Lieutenancy. Their cordial conversation focused on the Order's commitments in the United States in light of diplomatic efforts aimed at revitalising the dialogue for peace in the Holy Land. Lieutenant Michael La Civita was also present at the meeting.



The Governor General with Cardinal Timothy Dolan.



History and Culture

SAINT FRANCIS IN THE HOLY LAND

The conflict that has left the Holy Land bloodied and torn since it began two years ago brings into sharp relief the meaning of Saint Francis' journey there in 1219. This was an extraordinary event and a revolutionary gesture, which left an indelible mark on the history of Christianity and interreligious dialogue. Saint Francis' message should inspire those who are working today to build a more just and fraternal world.

The era of the Fifth Crusade took place between September 1217 and August 29, 1221. The interpretation of the relationship between Francis, Islam, and the Crusades is not straightforward and still a subject of ongoing debate; however, it is clear that in his actions we see a different way of conducting interreligious relations, and not support for the Crusades.

In his youth, and before his conversion, Francis had been a knight and had fought; he had also tried to enlist among the Crusaders and reach the Holy Land with them to fight the infidels (as they were referred as in that era). However, the spirit that animated the Saint's journey in 1219 was profoundly different. He set out with a missionary purpose, and was even ready for martyrdom, so as to proclaim the Gospel and to share his experience of conversion

with people of different cultures and religions. Following In Christ's footsteps he made poverty and humility the weapon of his message, and not the sword.

For a long time, Francis had cherished the dream of journeying to the Holy Land, but only on his third attempt did he actually succeed. The first time, in 1212, he boarded a ship in Ancona with some companions,

but strong headwinds drove their small boat onto the coast of Dalmatia. After waiting in vain for better winds, he had to give up and return to Italy. In the following years he tried to reach the Holy Places through Morocco, but a serious illness forced him to give up.

Everything seemed to go against his aspiration, but Francis was not a man to be easily discouraged. His desire to promote peace was too deep, and his awareness of how little could be expected too clear, because from the Crusades, the future of

Christianity was conditioned by interests of another nature.

In 1215, Blessed Giles, who was one of his beloved disciples, had managed to reach the Sepulchre of Christ through begging. He was the first of the many followers of the poor man of Assisi. Upon hearing his news, and perhaps in order to find him, Francis sent another of his trusted disciples, Brother





A fresco depicting the encounter between the Saint of Assisi and the Sultan. This was an event that changed the course of the Crusade and opened the way to dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims. In addition, it paved the way for the settlement of Franciscan friars in the Holy Land and their service to pilgrims through the Custody.

Elias, to the Holy Land with some companions on a bold missionary program.

Finally, feeling encouraged upon on receiving news from his brothers, Francis attempted a third journey to the Holy Land, and this time he succeeded.

On 26 May 1219, he embarked from Ancona with 12 companions, together with crusader warriors. He reached Cyprus and finally landed at Acre, a Christian military base after the fall of Jerusalem. Here he left eleven brothers and, taking only Brother Illuminato with him, reached Damietta, where the crusader army besieged a Muslim fortress, defended by the armies of the Ayyubid Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil.

Francis' meeting with al-Malik al-Kamil is one of the most famous episodes of the journey, and one which has been described by various witnesses, not only Franciscans. Even Muslim sources attest to the presence of friars (though without naming Francis) at the Sultan's court.

Even amid historical uncertainty and inevitable hagiography, the elements that have reached us recall how Francis preached to the Sultan through the witness of his faith. Thus, Dante recalls this mission: *"[...] he had, through thirst of martyrdom, In the proud presence of the Sultan preached*

Christ and the others who came after him."

We can imagine that the crusader commanders hesitated before giving the two friars any help in crossing enemy lines, as they were aware of the risk that their message of peace might not be understood. However, we like to think that Francis insisted, and in the end, he managed to present himself with his companion at the Saracen outposts, where he asked to speak with the Sultan. The two were certainly stopped by the guards and mistreated, but in the end their perseverance overcame resistance and they were brought before al-Malik al-Kamil. And here – as the story goes – the miracle happened: through his words, Saint Francis managed to touch the Sultan's heart, who in turn realized that the two friars had come to him with a message of peace and with the intent of saving his soul. He welcomed them and agreed to their request to hold a discussion with the Muslim *ulema*.

The *ulema*, however, decreed that Francis and his companion had to be executed without delay and urged the Sultan to carry out the sentence. But the Sultan, who had been moved by Francis' words, did not heed to their judgment and instead welcomed the friars kindly, even offering them priceless



gifts. Francis replied that the only gift he desired was the Sultan's conversion, and since he could not obtain it, he would accept nothing else. Al-Malik al-Kamil realized he was in the presence of a wonderful and sublime personality and decided to guarantee him safe-conduct. This was sealed with the authority of the supreme command, by which all governors of the vast kingdom were ordered to respect Francis and all his followers and to entrust them with the custody of the Holy Places in Palestine.

After so much bloodshed, the Crusaders were forced to give up their attempt to reconquer Jerusalem.

However, Francis, with the sole power of humility, poverty, and the strength of his faith, obtained the guardianship of the Holy Places and the possibility of preserving them for worship.

Upon bidding farewell to Francis, legend has it that al-Malik al-Kamil asked him to pray that he might be inspired to follow the true religion. Even though he did not have the strength to convert, the Sultan thus invoked Francis' intercession to be inspired by God about the truth to follow.

Some historians claim that Francis defended the Crusaders' enterprise and sought to favor their cause; instead, we prefer to think that Francis in no way justified the war against the infidels, but only intended to bring a message of peace and dialogue. What is certain is that Francis aroused deep admiration in the Sultan, who allowed him to preach peace and to reach Jerusalem in the spring of 1221. At the tomb of Christ, the Saint obtained from the local authorities the right to have a small house near the Cenacle, thanks to the Sultan's recommendation, and this was the origin of

the Franciscan presence and rights at the Holy Sepulchre.

Saint Francis returned to Italy, but his friars remained in Jerusalem, and were even still there in 1291 in Acre, at the last Christian stronghold, when it was reconquered by the Saracens. Over the years they endured violence, dispossession, and pillage – and not only from Muslims – but Francis' journey marked the beginning of the Custody, which to this day is responsible for safeguarding the Holy Places.

In an age marked by conflicts, Francis carried a message of peace and reconciliation, and showed that it was

In an age marked by conflicts, Francis carried a message of peace and reconciliation, and showed that it was possible to seek harmony with people of other faiths.

possible to seek harmony with people of other faiths. His journey to the Holy Land represents a fundamental moment in the history of Christianity and interreligious dialogue. His example had a profound impact on the society of the time,

as it rekindled the Christian spirit, but it must also be considered relevant today and inspire those who work for peace and justice in the world.

Since then, the role of the Franciscans has been very important in caring for the Holy Places, and making them accessible to pilgrims from all over the world. They continue to promote interreligious dialogue and work for peace and reconciliation among Christians, Muslims, and Jews. They provide assistance to those in need, while running schools, hospitals, and hospitality centres. Thus, in the spirit of Saint Francis, they remain a living presence in the Holy Land, who are witnesses to our Christian faith in a complex and multi-religious context, today more troubled than ever.

Leonardo Visconti di Modrone
Governor General

