



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

*At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land*

## Stories of a great history II



Pope Pius XI, who was Grand Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, worked hard to support the Christians of the Holy Land.

**Don Michele Bellino, Prior of the Order in Bari, offers us the opportunity to learn more about the action of the Grand Masters in the service of the Christian East. This autumn he tells us about Pius XI and the Order's mission in Palestine.**

During the years of Pope Pius XI's pontificate (1922-1939), the vicissitudes of Palestine would continue to interest international diplomacy on the question of Jerusalem and the holy sites. The Balfour Declaration of 1917, with the mandate of Great Britain committing to the establishment of a national Jewish homeland in Palestine, is the plot around which the pontifical activity was to be woven.

Here are the words of Pope Ratti, during a speech to a consistory on 11 December 1922: ... We are still very anxious about Palestine, about that blessed land... Now, since it seems that the Representatives of the Powers at the League of Nations will have to deal with Palestine again in the near future, we make Our own, as well as the protest, so the purpose of Our Predecessor: We want to ensure that when the mandate for Palestine is established, the rights of the Catholic and Christian Church are safeguarded...[1]

Pius XI's pastoral concern was to undertake activities that could support Christians in Palestine, overcoming the idea of an evangelization that would forget the identities of the different communities. What choice did Pope Ratti make for the Order? The Apostolic Letter of 6 January 1928[2] indicates the reformist action that he outlined: ...We desire that from now on the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre and the aforementioned 'Work for the Preservation of the Faith' in the Holy Places be

joined and form almost a single body or institution under the government of the one Patriarch of Jerusalem.

The task of the Work previously established by the Patriarch of Jerusalem was to deal with, "... in many ways, the increase and the safeguard of the Catholic Faith, promoting schools, publishing useful books, opening societies and clubs with the purpose of appropriate education or honest entertainment."

The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Archbishop Luigi Barlassina (1928-1947), took in hand the reorganization of the two institutions, in order to address the situation of Christians in Palestine. The choice of endorsing apostolate activities in Palestine, as a mission of the Knights and Dames, indicated the new path that the Order had to take in the contemporary age. It was no coincidence that the approval of the new ceremonial of 5 August 1931, by Pope Pius XI, indicated the "Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem." The city of Jerusalem was the key element of identity, but also the mission to be implemented, for the members of the Order. In one of the speeches that Pope Ratti addressed to Catholic university students, he urged them to study not only the history of the Catholic Church, but also that of the other churches, because this preparation would make them able to participate in the work for Unity: "first of all we must know and love each other... If there are prejudices on both sides, let the prejudices fall... sometimes fraternal piety is lacking, because knowledge is lacking." [3]

1 "Nos velle ut cum maturitas Palaestinae ordinandae venerit, Ecclesiae catholicae christianisque universis ibi salva et incolumia iura sint." in ACTA APOSTOLICA SEDES (AAS), vol. XIV (1922), p. 609.

2 AAS, vol. XX (1928), pp. 68-70.

3 PIO XI, Discorso dell'8 gennaio 1927 in Discorsi, ed. D. BERTETTO, I, Torino 1961, p. 670.

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