“Seeing and Touching the Lord”

The Pilgrimage to the Holy Land of the Grand Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre (9-14th May 2022)

"We come here, as Francis of Assisi said, to 'see and touch' the Lord: to see his footsteps, to hear the echo of his words, to touch the place where he lay, as encouraged by the angel, “Come see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised from the dead!” (Matt 28: 6-7). It is where God saved us!” said Cardinal Fernando Filoni, during his speech delivered before the aedicule of the Holy Sepulchre, marking his solemn entry into the key Christian sanctuary that is the Basilica of the Resurrection.

He said he had come as a pilgrim, thanking the “children of this Mother Church of Jerusalem”, those who have “the mission of the angel who encourages us to see where the Lord lay”. “Thank you for this service to your faithful brothers and sisters around the world and especially to your brother and sister Knights and Dames of the Holy Sepulchre,” he added.

The same day, Tuesday, 10th May from 3 p.m., Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa had accompanied him in procession through the streets of the Old City, from the headquarters of the Latin Patriarchate to the Anastasis, the place of worship that encompasses both Golgotha and the sepulchre of Christ, a church built by order of Emperor Constantine in the 4th century.

Preceded by the clergy, and followed by the Knights and Dames of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre from several European countries who were in Jerusalem at the time, the Grand Master was welcomed into the sacred building by the Franciscan Custos of the Holy Land, Father Francesco Patton. This was after he had symbolically received the key to the holy place from the hands of the Muslim guardian, kept carefully by his family for centuries.

Many pilgrims from various countries attended the moving celebration and were enthralled by this unexpected event. Cardinal Filoni explained the meaning of the spiritual path that he could finally

tread, after two years of pandemic. “We come today in the silence of faith to recharge our batteries at this well of living water, where we discover 〃 the Lord, tender and merciful God, slow to anger, full of love and truth, who keeps his fidelity to the thousandth generation, supports fault, transgression and sin 〃 (Ex. 34: 6-7). We come as pilgrims to discover this mystery. This is the whole meaning of our pilgrimage, of our coming to this place. It is here that all Knights and Dames who love this place know that this is where they regains their sense of dignity and that, for the rest of their life, they will carry within them the memory of their faith in the risen Christ”.

The cardinal had arrived in Jerusalem from Rome the day before, with a small delegation from the Order, including Lieutenant General Borromeo and Governor General Visconti di Modrone. He first met the Catholic ordinaries and the Apostolic Nuncio at the premises of the Patriarchate where he listened to their accounts of local pastoral projects.

During this meeting, Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa for example highlighted the important role of female religious vocations in reaching the inhabitants of the Holy Land in their homes. Then handing over the collar of the Order to the Latin Patriarch, the Grand Master described in a few warm words his desire to continue to serve the people who form the “Mother Church”, and expressed his desire to increase awareness of this fine mission of the Knights and Dames among all the bishops of the world. He compared the Church of Jerusalem to an old family home where children, who have left and found their place in society, enjoy returning out of love.

Cardinal Filoni followed this important fraternal meeting, on the morning of the solemn entry into the Holy Sepulchre, by a visit to the Apostolic Nuncio. He then went to see each of the representatives of the Status Quo, which governs the holy places, the Patriarch of the Orthodox Greeks, Theophilus III, the representative of the Orthodox Armenians, Nourhan Manougian, and the Custos. A special moment with the Franciscan friars at the Custody was when the Grand Master accessed valuable documentary archives, in particular those relating to the dubbing of the writer François-René de Chateaubriand, made Knight of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem in 1806.

On Wednesday, 11th May, after morning mass at the Holy Sepulchre, the Grand Master's pilgrimage continued with a long stopover in Bethlehem and the surrounding area.

In the town of Beit Sahour, founded, according to tradition, on the spot where the shepherds of the nativity heard the angels’ announcement, the delegation held discussions with the priest and the parishioners. They described the problems posed by the colonisation of their lands, which has led to a decrease in the number of Christians, many being tempted by emigration because of the permanent tensions in the country. That same morning, Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, a well-known Christian in the Holy Land, was shot dead during an Israeli military operation in Jenin, Palestine...

During the meeting, the Grand Master insisted on the importance of the education and training of future Christian leaders of Palestinian society. The delegation then went to greet the students and teachers of a school located in the same town, founded by the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist.

A time of prayer then took place at the grotto of the Nativity, and afterwards the group went to the centre for disabled children, the Hogar Niño Dios, led by the nuns and monks of the Incarnate Word. The joy of the children was contagious. One of them refused to let go of the cardinal's hand throughout the visit, illustrating the trust that the most vulnerable show to those who love them, and confirming in its own way the concrete bond of the members of the Order with the people who are the embodiment of the suffering Christ in the Holy Land.

The cardinal lunched at the University of Bethlehem, supported by the Order, before spending the afternoon at the seminary of Beit Jala, in the company of the candidates for the priesthood and their teachers, in an atmosphere full of gratitude towards the Knights and Dames.

That same day, after leaving Beit Jala for Nazareth in northern Israel, Cardinal Filoni was keen to stop at the shrine of Our Lady of Palestine, in Deir Rafat, halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The Sisters of Bethlehem who live there gave the delegation a friendly and prayerful welcome, demonstrating the spiritual service they provide in this place. The shrine was built in 1927, on the inspired initiative of Patriarch Luigi Barlassina who, through its construction, wanted to place the Holy Land under the protective mantle of the Virgin Mary.

That evening, in Nazareth, the Grand Master suggested a time of silence in the house of Mary, which stayed opened late especially for him and the delegation then, early the next morning he presided over a mass there, concelebrated by Mgr. Rafic Nahra, the new auxiliary bishop and Patriarchal Vicar for Israel. Each of the pilgrims was able to add their little ‘yes’ to the great ‘yes’ of Mary, in the name of the whole Order. In this way, the solidarity given to the inhabitants of the Holy Land is, first and foremost, guided by the love of God and in complete openness to his will.

On Thursday, 12th May, the Cardinal and his retinue left for Jordan, via Jericho. They were due in Amman in the afternoon for the consecration of the Church of Saint Paul in Jubeiha, built in a district of the capital where the Christian population is in a phase of great growth. The Mass was marked by an atmosphere of great fervour, the Patriarch insisting on publicly thanking the representatives of the Order for the financial support given to the project over the past few years.

The Grand Master addressed the faithful of the parish, entrusting them with the important task of completing the work of the builders thanks to “a prophetic Christian presence, that is to say, capable of proclaiming the mystery of Jesus, Son of God, who brings peace, mercy, forgiveness, and respect for the rights of all, coexistence and fraternity”.

In the evening, alongside the new Auxiliary Bishop and Patriarchal Vicar for Jordan, Mgr. Jamal Khader Daibes, son of the land of Palestine, the Grand Master was dressed in the traditional gandura, an eastern sign of welcome. He was greeted amid ululations and applause from a crowd of guests aware that they were witnessing an historic event in this Muslim country where Christians have an important role to play.

On the penultimate day of his pilgrimage to the sources of the faith, Cardinal Filoni walked in the footsteps of Moses, at the top of Mount Nebo, where the biblical prophet was able to glimpse the Promised Land after forty years of walking in the desert.

During the afternoon of 13th May, the guests who had come from Rome attended a presentation by the directors of the 25 Jordanian schools of the Latin Patriarchate. The directors described their educational project, which includes 30% Muslim students, pointing out in particular that, for two successive years, the best baccalaureate results in Jordan have come from a Catholic establishment of the Latin Patriarchate. They also mentioned the need to develop professional schools in the country, asking the Order to commit to this if possible.

Cardinal Filoni and the six members of the delegation left Amman on 14th May, reliving all these meetings in their hearts, having been able to put faces to the projects carried out. They were eager to share with those around them the enthusiasm felt during their pilgrimage to encourage the members of the Order to tread once again the path to the Holy Land, and there to meet the “living stones” of this vast diocese of Asia that is so important in the eyes of the Universal Church.

Francois Vayne

(May 2022)