



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

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

## “Dames have the same rights and duties as Knights”

Teresa Maria Pitarch i Albós, Dame Commander, Member of the Council of the Lieutenancy for Eastern Spain, talks about the contribution of women to the Order of the Holy Sepulchre



“The Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem has long welcomed Dames in addition to Knights. More and more women are taking on their role in our Pontifical Institution, carrying out multiple activities.

To tell the story of the Dames of the Order, it is essential to begin by mentioning one very illustrious woman: Saint Helena. Driven by her devotion to the Holy Sepulchre, she went to Jerusalem in search of its location. To honour it, she ordered the erection of a sumptuous temple in honour of the Glorious Resurrection of Jesus Christ, built on the mountain of Golgotha and the tomb of Christ.

She then established a chapter of canons - so called because of the ‘canon’, or rule, by which St Helena had organised the work and duties of these religious men. For the safekeeping and preservation of the Holy Sepulchre, the religious were assisted by a number of lay brothers, who, as a distinctive sign, were given a cross made of five red crosses, in memory of the five wounds of Our Lord.

However, to know how the “Most Illustrious Noble Dames of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem” came into being, we must travel back in time. It was only with the Apostolic Brief of Pope Pius IX (1868) that the interest of the Dames in collaborating in the missionary works of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem became apparent.

It is at this point in history that the name of our first Dame appears, Countess Maria Francisca Lomax, who went to see Monsignor Valerga eager to obtain information about the Order in order to make it known to her entourage.

In reality, the real reason for her visit was to ask him if he could confer on her the honour of being able to wear the medal of the Holy Sepulchre, as custodian of the works of the Patriarchate, knowing that women could receive this type of honour.

At the Patriarch's refusal, this persevering Dame requested a private audience with His Holiness to ask for the medal of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre. The Holy Father agreed to grant it to her, confirming her right to wear it as Dame Guardian of the Order.

Countess Lomax was the first name to appear in the Order's Book, opening the Chapter of Dames on April 15, 1871.

Later, after being appointed Patriarch of Jerusalem, Archbishop Bracco appointed a second Dame, Duchess Rosina di Lesignano. Later, Catherine Theresia Berthet de Flahaul, of French origin, and Theresia Cristina Maria, Empress of Brazil, were also appointed Dames.

Bishop Bracco's role was fundamental in the process of recognising the mission of the Dames. He proposed to His Holiness to create a special branch of the Order for those Dames who were committed to praying and loving the holy relic and who had the interests of the Holy Land at heart. As a reward, they would receive the insignia of the Order and the title of Noble Ladies of the Holy Sepulchre.

The successor of Pius IX, Pope Leo XIII, the sovereign head of the Order, gave final approval to the Dames in his Apostolic Letter *Venerabilis Frate Vicentius*, in the form of an Apostolic Brief, on the 3rd of August 1888.

Thus, 136 years ago, a number of Dames from various countries of the world began to play a decisive role in the Holy Land. Today, the Dames make up about one third of our members and work with great diligence and participation in our Lieutenancies and Magistral Delegations. In addition, many of the Order's peripheral structures are now led by women.

They are promoters of numerous actions and, just as the women who were present at the resurrection of Christ announced the good news, they play a fundamental role.

The Dames have the same rights and duties as the Knights. It is exactly the same. Witnessing to their faith and responding to the needs of the Order and its members is part of their personal commitment. This commitment implies great generosity in the use of their resources, skills, influence and energy in the service of others.

But it is particularly worth emphasising all the work done by the Dames, through prayer and action, to promote peaceful coexistence between all the peoples of the Holy Land. Providing spiritual, moral and material support through their participation in aid projects in the Holy Land, following the example of the first Dames.

Contributing to the financial support of the religious, charitable, cultural and social institutions and activities of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land is and always will be one of the priorities of the Dames of our Lieutenancy.

The solidarity of our Dames, exercised through the various proposals and activities within the Order, especially with the women of the Holy Land who are in need and deprived of the means to defend themselves and their rights, has become one of the special functions of the Order.

But we still have many challenges to face. We must do all we can to ensure that new Dames have the desire to join us, committed and involved women who can help us give all the support we need to achieve recognition, respect for the dignity and human rights of individuals, especially freedom of religion and worship and equality before the law, for all the inhabitants of the Holy Land.

May Saint Helena, august and tenacious Dame, enlighten us and protect us so that we may continue our work in the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem with perseverance”.

*(April 2023)*