



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

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

## Young volunteers at the service of hope in the Holy Land



“Two years ago the Lieutenancy made its pilgrimage to the Holy Land with the new Lieutenant José Carlos Sanjuán y Monforte and part of his family, including his son Lucas, and three other boys, sons of a future Knight who would soon enter the Order. During the journey the idea was born to organize a pilgrimage geared towards an experience of volunteering that would allow the youngest to learn first-hand about the Holy Land and the work of the diocesan church and the religious organizations that are present in the Holy Places supporting Christians and the neediest among the population.” These are the words of **María José Fernández y Martín**, Dame of the **Lieutenancy for Western Spain**, describing how the foundations were laid for the magnificent experience shared this year by **13 young people** (4 boys and 9 girls) whom she accompanied to the Holy Land for two weeks of **pilgrimage and volunteering** from June 30 to July 14.

“We had to prepare a program that would combine work and pilgrimage. For most of the young people it was their first contact with the Holy Land. As a first experience, it was clear for the Lieutenancy that it had to be a special moment that would allow us to open a promising path for the future from a human and spiritual point of view, uniting Christian values with putting them into practice in a real and active way,” commented Maria José.

Close to the children of Bethlehem

Of the 13 volunteers, the 5 youngest girls volunteered at **La Crèche, an orphanage in Bethlehem run by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul** while the remaining 8 young people offered their service to the Hogar Niño Dios, an institute of the Religious Family of the Incarnate Word that welcomes children with disabilities. Both institutions are long standing beneficiaries of the support of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre.

There are about 60 children between 0 and 5 years old at La Crèche. “When we arrived, a baby born in the 7th month and abandoned was just entering the orphanage. His lungs, still unable to breathe on their own, needed oxygen and, in his cradle at the crèche, his little body battled to open up to life. Together with this new-born, another dozen children were under 6 months old ... everyone was waiting for a caress, a gesture of affection that made them feel loved ...”, said Maria José, adding that at the end of the volunteer period, the 5 volunteer girls had been affectionately nicknamed “Crèche Ladies”.

The other destination for our volunteers lies a short walk from the Basilica of the Nativity: the **Hogar Niño Dios**. The sisters immediately suggested the best attitude to have to really experience the time spent at the Hogar: “an open heart, a smile on your lips and a great desire to action”. The children of the Hogar need a lot of attention and the boys have helped both with the children as well as with the daily activities of managing the house: cleaning, washing, organising, helping in the kitchen and in the pantry. Among the many special moments, Maria José points to the party celebrated on the final day.

“When the volunteers finish their time at the Hogar there is a big party. Then Sister Nives attaches her cell phone to an amplifier and puts a compilation of happy songs that children really love. Each child chooses a volunteer, entrusts himself/herself to him/her arms and dances. Even those who can move on their own choose a volunteer to join hands and make their own fun and tender choreographies. How can we truly give a value to moments such as these? How can you describe the laughter of a child or baby whose limitations are so great that they can barely move alone? How can you describe witnessing the joy of a child whose deformation is a permanent risk to his life? After you have danced with one of these little ones, everything changes. In that embrace all distances are erased. There is a perfect fusion of hearts and unconditional love. **That child will be your friend forever.** You will remember them in your prayers and you will know that, for them, God blesses you in every prayer.”

**Fernando Elias Perez Esteban Picazo**, one of the young volunteers, says: “This experience was a gift from the Lord. It was especially wonderful to be able to be with the children that the sisters take care of. Although many could not speak, they said everything with their eyes. Theirs is a look of love, joy, simplicity. A look that thanks you for every little detail. **Their eyes look just like how God looks at us in this world: loving and hoping to be loved.** There are so many things to learn from them.”

#### Pilgrims in the footsteps of Jesus

Besides being volunteers, these young people also had the joy of being pilgrims. The first three days in the Holy Land were days of pilgrimage in Galilee based in **Nazareth**, a few meters from the Basilica of the Annunciation, in one of the houses of the Sisters of the Rosary.

We turn again to Fernando who describes his experience in the basilica: “This was the most special place for me. Sitting there was like being present at the time of the annunciation. I caught myself thinking how God had entrusted a task of such great importance to Nazareth, to a girl who lived in such a modest house. But it is precisely in this that we see the greatness of God: he looks at the heart. And in the heart of Mary found a joyful yes, a total abandonment to His love.”

On arriving in Bethlehem, which was their base for the remaining days of volunteering, some afternoons and evenings were dedicated to visiting the holy places in Bethlehem and Jerusalem. In particular, the night between July 8 and 9, a group of 5 volunteers accompanied by Maria José remained **in prayer inside the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre**. “From 10 to midnight we were able to stay and pray inside the aedicule. The rest of the night we were in various holy places. We have prayed together and devoted time to personal prayer,” said Maria José. A few hours later, the group was preparing for another unique experience: to celebrate the Eucharist inside the aedicule of the Holy Sepulchre. “It is not easy to describe the emotion they each experienced while we were in the

place of the resurrection celebrating the Eucharist. They were 25 intense and emotion-filled minutes and everyone gave thanks to God for having had this opportunity,” explained Maria José with joy.

At the end of the pilgrimage, the group of volunteers of the Lieutenancy for Western Spain, together with a group of volunteers organized by the Lieutenancy for Portugal (that is running the volunteer initiative for the third year) had the opportunity to visit the Latin Patriarchate and spend time with **Archbishop Pizzaballa** who wanted to hear about the experience that these young people had lived and who also told them about the Christian presence in the Holy Land and about the Order’s activities.

“A before and after in my life”

**Nuria Garcia** had already been in the Holy Land but “**through the needs of others I felt very close to Jesus**. It was an unforgettable pilgrimage that undoubtedly marked a before and after in my life. Now I understand much better why they call this Earth the Fifth Gospel.”

**Sergio Hallado** initially did not want to go when the volunteer pilgrimage was first proposed to him. He had various reasons, including the economic aspect. But a solution was found thanks to the generosity of many. At the end of the experience he commented: “I can only say three words about the trip: **unique, unforgettable and emotional**. And this not only for the experience itself but for the other people in the group whom I already miss tremendously. I would like to take this journey again, it changed my way of seeing things and, even more than that, it changed my life. Now I am more patient and more helpful. This is why I wish to say to all those who have lived this experience with me and to those who organized it: THANK YOU EVERYONE, FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY HEART!”

**Elena Dini**

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