The Ecclesiological Significance of Support for the Holy Land

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"The Order, with its structure and activities, participates directly in the Roman Pontiff's solicitude for places and Catholic institutions in the Holy Land [...] In particular, the link with Jerusalem, which is specific to the Order, requires responsibility for its Holy Places (cf. Gal 4:26)." (Constitution, Introduction).

Reflecting on these expressions, a Knight and Dame of the Holy Sepulchre understand that, in addition to the necessary practice of the evangelical virtues (spirituality of the Members), they undertake a task entrusted to them by the Holy Father in the name of the Church. It is a true ecclesial task, not a task left to the goodwill of a few; it is much more. It is an assignment that belongs to the Church because of the responsibility it has towards the Places of Jesus and in particular towards the Church in Jerusalem, so that those Places do not become sites of religious archaeology, and that Church does not remain devoid of vitality.

To offer one's support to the Temple of Jerusalem, as it appears in the passage from the Gospel of Mark on the offering of the poor widow (Mk 12:43-44), was a duty very much felt among the Jews of the Lord's time; the affluent and the poor, who upon entering the Temple used to make their offering for the worship and maintenance of the majestic building. Jesus, observing those who made their donation, points out that some emphasised their offering by throwing in many coins, while the poor widow, almost furtively, let slip *"two small coins worth a few cents",* that is, all that she had. The difference, Jesus notes, lies not so much in the quantity of the giving, but in the difference between those who give "*what is superfluous*" and those who give "*all she had, her whole livelihood*"; the humbleness of the gesture is elevated to a supreme ethical value. Even Jesus, on his part and that of the Disciples, contributed to the sustenance of the Temple (cf. Mt 17:24-25).

Contributing to and supporting the Church in Jerusalem therefore belongs to Christians the highest sentiments of responsibility of towards the Holy Land. For a Knight and Dame, the undertaking of this specific commitment is part of a life choice. In fact, they do not join the Order out of an empty desire for social elevation, nor to enhance their public profile, but out of a sense of high and noble responsibility as 'sons and daughters' towards what is considered the 'Mother' Church and towards those places where Jesus spent his life, preached, performed miracles, and offered life on the Cross as a ransom for us. St Jerome recalls that blessed is he who carries the holy places and events of salvation within himself: "*Happy is he who bears in his breast the cross, the resurrection, the place of Christ's Nativity and the place of the Ascension. Happy is he who has Bethlehem in his heart, the heart in which Christ is born daily*" (Hom. in Ps. 95).

Some may ask: Is it really an ecclesial duty to contribute to and support the Holy Places? How can we support the Church in those Places, when all around us, in our dioceses and parishes, there is already so much poverty, perhaps even more, and we do not have sufficient financial resources? These questions have been asked by lay people and clergy.

Yes! Supporting the Holy Places and the communities living there is a true ecclesial responsibility. It does not belong to the solitary generosity of a few benefactors, but to the duty of all the children who cherish the memory of and affection for that 'paternal/maternal home' where the first apostolic community was born and raised, where the places of the Lord's life and death are preserved, and where it is possible to return to the roots of our faith. Caring for the Church of Jerusalem is therefore much more than preserving its historical and archaeological memory; the Apostles had already urged the charity of the early Christian communities of Antioch, Greece, Galatia and Macedonia to remember the *'saints'* in Jerusalem and to hold collections, which they later described as generous, indeed *'beyond their means'* (2Cor, 8, 3-4). We therefore perceive, in this common endeavour, that we have one of 'our characteristic traits', which allows each member of the Order to exercise their spirituality through "*a marked generosity*" drawn from their *"own material resources*" (cf. *The House Was Filled with the Fragrance of the Perfume*, EWTN Publishing 2020, pp. 73,74). St Paul himself also teaches us how to perform this gesture of dutiful generosity: "*so that in this way it might be ready as a bountiful gift and not as an exaction*. [...]. *Each must do as already determined, without sadness or compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver*" (2Cor 9, 5b. 7).

The Apostle Paul saw helping the Mother Church of Jerusalem in times of calamity, persecution and famine as a true ecclesiological gesture that went beyond human solidarity. The Holy Land belongs to everyone (Jews, Christians and Muslims) because it is the place where the monotheistic religions have their roots in the one, clement and merciful God. It is the place that speaks to us of God's presence among us, almost a 'touching' of Christ again, according to the felicitous expression of Francis of Assisi.

This task, in itself, belongs to the entire history of relations between the Holy Land and Christians scattered throughout the world; the continuous pilgrimages, the initiatives to ensure a presence in the most significant places, the preservation of environments, the construction of basilicas and churches to preserve the sacred memory, even unfortunately the struggles to defend, conquer and hoard the Holy Land are the testimony of this perceived ecclesial responsibility since time immemorial. It should never be forgotten that those Places are alive because of the presence of communities of believers and that we all, even more so as Knights and Dames of the Holy Sepulchre, direct our primary attention to them.

Precisely because of the importance that the Holy Land has in the life of the Church, the Knights and Dames of the Holy Sepulchre do not show an occasional interest in it, but do so in a stable and generous way, convinced of their noble and splendid responsibility.

It is not infrequent that even some ecclesiastics either do not understand this ecclesial 'duty', or are disinterested in it; there is even a certain prejudice against the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, seen as an anachronistic institution; there are even those who consider this ecclesial duty extraneous to the local Churches, either because of limited economic resources, or because of the presence of many poor people, reducing it to a private and extemporary gesture. There is a fundamental error in this way of thinking: there is a tendency to marginalise or downgrade that ecclesial duty that the Popes have always considered to be of high sensitivity and common responsibility in the Church. Some Supreme Pontiffs even kept the office of Grand Master of the Order for themselves, before delegating it to a Cardinal.

I am heartened by the gestures of some Bishops who, and many do, include among their duties, the pastoral care of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre, whose Members do not only belong to an Entity recognised by the Apostolic See, but are first and foremost their faithful, understanding that they can be a concrete expression of a work that belongs to the local Churches. Through the presence of the Knights and Dames of the Holy Sepulchre, in fact, it is the same diocesan ecclesial reality that in some way participates in the duty to permanently (and not only occasionally) support the Mother Church of Jerusalem and those Places where, not infrequently, Bishops lead pilgrimages, preserve indelible memories and send lay people and priests for in-depth biblical-theological studies and intense inter-religious experiences.

Supporting the Mother Church of Jerusalem is an act of high nobility of spirit and genuine charity. When Judas Iscariot commented negatively on the gesture of Mary of Bethany who, in his view, wasted money by anointing the Master's feet, Jesus replied concisely: *'Leave her alone*! Her gesture takes nothing away from the poor for "*you always have the poor with you*" (John 12:8), but concerns the mystery of faith, of his Person and of his resurrection.

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