

Ash Wednesday 2022

Dear brother in Christ,

On Palm Sunday 2021, the Holy Father used very strong words to speak of the Passion of the Lord: "This amazes us: to see the Almighty reduced to nothing ... to see the God of the universe stripped of everything ... Why, Lord, did you wish to endure all this? Jesus did it for us, to plumb the depths of our human experience, our entire existence, all our evil. To draw near to us and not abandon us in our suffering and our death. By experiencing in the flesh our deepest struggles and conflicts, he redeemed and transformed them" (Pope Francis, Homily, 28 March 2021).

Pope Francis in 2021 made two pilgrimages of hope amidst the Christian communities of the Middle East and the Holy Land. Hoping against all hope, while the whole world was still in the throes of the pandemic, he wanted to reach some of the most lonely and suffering: our brothers and sisters in Iraq, land of Abraham, land of exile, land that knew how to keep the name of Christ despite the violence of war and persecution. Alongside him with prayer and affection, we too walked the streets of Mosul and Qaraqosh, we stopped in prayer in the Syrian Catholic Cathedral of Baghdad in memory of the witnesses killed on 31 October 2010 while they were celebrating the Liturgy, which the East loves to define as "heaven on earth". That day the earth was tinged with blood and rubble, yet as believers, we recognize that the Easter light of the Passion and Resurrection was released, spreading the balm and perfume of those who follow the immolated Lamb with the gift of their life. In Cyprus too and then in Greece, lands of apostolic preaching, the Pope faced the suffering of division: of a land, of peoples, of believers in Christ who still cannot share the same table of the Eucharist, of those that many have come seeking refuge and welcome. There was no lack of other appeals, gestures and invitations to peace for other lands that the history of salvation and biblical events invite us to understand as "Holy Land".

Faced with these gestures of the Holy Father which testify to the desire for closeness, for encounter, to bring at least a little relief as if it were the caress of the Nazarene, we must have the courage – as individuals and Christian communities – to ask ourselves: what do I see, what do I notice? What is the perimeter of my gaze? In the Easter towards which the Lenten journey that we have started today leads us, will I allow the Lord to visit my solitude and ours? And to the Love who will come to visit me will I be able to respond with love? Love cannot be repaid except with love!

If, in personal terms, Christ has suffered and died only once and cannot die anymore, in his Body, which is the Church, He continues to suffer, especially in the Middle East, but also in every other place in the world where the freedom to live the faith is trampled and prevented: from persecution in many cases, from the hostile environment at times, often from the globalization of indifference, from the violence of wars with which humanity unfortunately never seems to be satisfied, as happens in Ukraine.

For two consecutive years, the Christians of the Holy Land have celebrated Easter and Christmas in a sort of isolation, without the warmth and solidarity of pilgrims visiting the Holy Places and local communities. Families have suffered beyond measure, more from the lack of work than from the immediate effects of the pandemic itself.

It is by the express wish of the Popes that the Collection "*Pro Terra Sancta*" was begun and continues to be taken up, usually on the day of the saving Passion of the Lord, Good Friday. It is not something ancient or outdated, because it expresses above all our awareness of being

rooted in the proclamation of redemption, which spread from Jerusalem and reached us all. The gesture of offering, even a small one, but by everyone, like the widow's mite, allows our brothers and sisters to continue to live, to hope and to offer a living witness to the Word made flesh in places and on the streets that saw his presence. If we lose our roots, how can we be, wherever we are in the world, a tree that grows and bears fruits of love, charity and sharing?

Looking therefore at Christ who touched our human reality to its depths, letting ourselves be inspired by the gestures of closeness made by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Journeys and accepting his invitation to live solidarity with our brothers and sisters of the Holy Land, let us give new vigour to the practice of the Collection for the Holy Land. Through the competent Diocesan Offices and thanks to the presence and work all over the world of the Franciscan Commissaries of the Holy Land of the Order of Friars Minor, let us also take care of the preparation for it, through testimonies, prayers or the simple celebration of the *Via Crucis*. In Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and in many other shrines and monasteries, prayer is offered for the Church all over the world, and we are invited to remember with the heart and with a small gift all those who pronounce our name before the Lord, giving thanks for our generosity. The information material distributed every year helps us to see the flow of charity and life made possible thanks to the Collection.

To you, to the priests, to the consecrated men and women, and to the faithful who strive for the success of the Collection, in a labour to which the Church calls all her children in various well-known ways, I have the joy of transmitting the deep gratitude of the Holy Father, Pope Francis. As I invoke abundant divine blessings on the community entrusted to you, I offer most fraternal greetings in the Lord Jesus.

Sincerely

✠ Leonardo Card. Sandri

Prefect

✠ Giorgio Demetrio Gallaro

Archbishop Secretary

N.B. A summary of the works of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land and this Congregation can be found on the website of the Dicastery: www.orientchurch.va / Colletta Terra Santa.

Original text from:

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2022/03/24/0208/00440.html#ing>

Report of the activities of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land:

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2022/03/24/0208/00440.html#engrapp>