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Audience with Members of the Consulta of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem

At 12.55 today, in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the *Consulta* of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, taking place in Rome from 13 to 16 November.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I welcome you at the conclusion of the *Consulta* of the Members of the Grand Magisterium and of the Lieutenants of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. I greet and thank Cardinal Edwin O'Brien, Grand Master, and the Pro-Grand Prior, Bishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa; I greet the Members of the Grand Magisterium, together with the Lieutenants of the nations and of the places where the Order is present. And with you I greet the whole family of knights and ladies from all over the world. My gratitude goes to all of you for the many spiritual and charitable activities you carry out for the benefit of the peoples of the Holy Land.

You have gathered for the work of the *Consulta*, the general assembly that is held every five years at the See of Peter. Here in the Vatican, you are, in a certain way, at home, as you constitute an ancient pontifical institution under the protection of the Holy See. Since the last *Consulta* of 2013 the Order has grown in the number of its members, in the geographical expansion with the creation of new peripheral articulations, in the material assistance that has offered the Church in the Holy Land and in the number of pilgrimages made by your members. I thank you for supporting pastoral and cultural utility programs and I encourage you to continue your commitment, alongside the Latin Patriarchate, in coping with the refugee crisis which has led the Church to provide a significant humanitarian response in the last five years. the whole region.

It is a good sign that your initiatives in the field of training and health care are open to all, regardless of the communities they belong to and the religion they profess. In this way you help pave the way to the knowledge of Christian values, to the promotion of interreligious dialogue, mutual respect and mutual understanding. In other words, with your meritorious commitment, you too offer your contribution to the construction of the path that will lead, we all hope, to the achievement of peace throughout the region.

I know that this week you have turned your attention to the role of local managers, or lieutenants, present in more than thirteen nations and zones of the world in which your Order is active. Certainly, the continuous growth of the Order depends on your ceaseless and constantly renewed effort. In this regard, it is important not to forget that the principal aim of your Order resides in the spiritual growth of its members. Therefore, any success of your initiatives cannot be separate from adequate religious formation programmes addressed to every knight and every dame, so that they may consolidate their own indispensable relationship with the Lord Jesus, especially in prayer, in meditation on the Sacred Scriptures and in furthering their knowledge of the doctrine of the Church. It is a task above all of you as leaders to offer the example of intense spiritual life and true following of the Lord: in this way you can render a valid service of authority to those who depend upon you.

Then, with regard to your mission in the world, do not forget that you are not a philanthropic entity committed to promoting the material and social improvement of recipients. You are called to place the evangelical love of your neighbour as the final aim of your works, to witness everywhere the goodness and care with which God loves everyone. The admission into your Order of bishops, priests and deacons is absolutely not an honour. It is part of their tasks of pastoral service to assist those among you who have a role of responsibility by providing opportunities for community and liturgical prayer at every level, continuous spiritual opportunities and catechesis for ongoing formation and for the growth of all the members of the Order.

In front of the whole world – which too often turns its gaze aside – there is the dramatic situation of Christians who are persecuted and killed in ever-increasing numbers. In addition to their martyrdom of blood, there is also their “white martyrdom”, such as that which occurs in democratic countries when freedom of religion is limited. And this is the daily white martyrdom of the Church in those places. To the work of material aid to people who are so harshly tried, I urge you to always associate prayer, to constantly invoke Our Lady, whom you venerate with the title of “Our Lady of Palestine”. She is the caring Mother and the Help of Christians, for whom she obtains strength and comfort in sorrow from the Lord.

May the icon of Our Lady of Persecuted Christians, which I will soon bless and which you will all receive to take to each of your Lieutenancies, accompany your journey. Let us invoke together Mary’s concern for the Church in the Holy Land and, more generally, in the Middle East, together with her special intercession for those whose life and freedom are in danger. I accompany your precious and indefatigable work with my Blessing, and I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.
