

February 26, 2020
Ash Wednesday

Prot. N. 1/2020

Your Excellency,

“Jesus will be in agony even to the end of the world; we must not sleep during that time” (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 553). Pascal’s phrase reminds us of the mystery of the Redeemer’s struggle and suffering, which the liturgical year celebrates and makes present in a special way through Holy Week and the Sacred Triduum. It is an affirmation that also underlines the fact that Christ identifies himself with the agony and suffering of those who in history seem to know nothing but an interminable Good Friday: people tried by solitude, by war and by hunger, by rejection and abandonment.

Pope Francis’ prayer at the end of the Way of the Cross in the Colosseum on 19 April 2019 reviews the evils and pains of the world and places them beside the Cross of Jesus: “The cross of those who hunger for bread and for love; the cross of those who are alone and abandoned, even by their own children and relatives; the cross of those who thirst for justice and peace; the cross of the elderly who bear the weight of the years and of solitude; the cross of migrants who find doors closed due to fear, and hearts armoured by political calculations; the cross of the little ones, wounded in their innocence and their purity; the cross of humanity that wanders in the darkness of uncertainty and in the obscurity of the culture of the momentary”. It concludes, “Lord Jesus, revive in us the hope of the resurrection and of your definitive victory against every evil and every death”.

The Holy Land is the physical place where Jesus lived this agony and this suffering, transforming it into redemptive action thanks to an infinite love. At Gethsemane, this land receives the drops of blood that he sweats. In the upper room, he anticipates the offering of himself that he will make on the cross through the gift of the Eucharist, but also through the washing of feet and the precept of brotherly love. Along the Via Dolorosa, we can still imagine the places of the double trial and condemnation of Jesus. We can see him as he walks the road carrying the cross, helped by Simon of Cyrene, until he reaches Golgotha to be crucified. He entrusts us to Mary, hands himself over to the Father, dies and is placed in a new and empty sepulcher from which he will rise on the third day.

The Holy Land and especially the Christian community that lives there has always occupied an important place in the heart of the universal Church which – as St. Paul recalls – when it expresses its solidarity with Jerusalem, including through economic support, performs an act of restitution. Indeed, the whole Church has received from Jerusalem the gift and joy of the Gospel and of salvation in Christ Jesus “who, though he was rich, made himself poor for you, so that you could become rich through his poverty” (2 Cor 8:9). It is awareness of the gift received that still motivates us to give with joy and generosity, in fidelity to the Church’s earnest request to all her children.

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You know well what severe trials the Church in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East has endured over the centuries. Those trials are not yet finished: the tragedy of the progressive reduction of the number of local faithful continues, with the consequent risk of seeing the various Christian traditions that date back to the early centuries disappear. Long and exhausting wars continue to produce millions of refugees and strongly influence the future of entire generations. They see themselves deprived of the most basic goods such as the right to a peaceful childhood, to a harmonious school education, to dedicating one's youth to looking for a job and forming a family, to discovering one's vocation, to an industrious and dignified adult life, and to a peaceful old age.

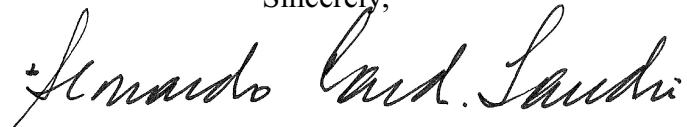
The Church continues to work to safeguard the Christian presence and to give voice to the voiceless. She certainly does so on the pastoral and liturgical level, which is fundamental for the life of our small communities. She also continues to work seriously to provide quality education through schools, which are fundamental for safeguarding Christian identity and for building fraternal coexistence especially with Muslims, according to the indications contained in the "Abu Dhabi Declaration". Thanks to the generosity of the faithful around the world, the Church continues to make accommodation available to young people who wish to form a new family, as well as to facilitate their search for employment. Likewise, she continues to provide concrete material assistance where there are forms of endemic poverty, such as health needs and humanitarian emergencies linked to the flow of refugees and foreign migrant workers.

The care of the Sanctuaries, which would be impossible without the collection *pro Terra Sancta*, is also of fundamental importance, both because they preserve the memory of divine revelation, the mystery of the Incarnation and our Redemption; and because in those places the local Christian community finds the foundations of its identity. Around the sanctuaries and thanks to their presence, many of the Christian faithful find dignified work as they welcome the millions of pilgrims who in recent years have come, in ever increasing numbers, to visit the Holy Places.

To Your Excellency, to the priests, to the consecrated men and women, and to the faithful who strive for the success of the Collection, I have the joy of transmitting the deep gratitude of the Holy Father, Pope Francis.

Finally, as I invoke abundant divine blessings on your diocese, I offer my most fraternal greeting in the Lord Jesus.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Leonardo Card. Sandri". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small cross-like mark at the beginning.

✠ Leonardo Card. Sandri
Prefect