

**Mass with the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem  
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**

**August 5, 2014**

**Memorial of the Dedication of the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome**

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Reverend Fathers, Knights and Ladies of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: on the morning following his election as the Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis travelled two-and-a-half miles through the city to pay a visit to the Basilica of St. Mary Major, the oldest church in the West dedicated to the mother of Jesus. Inside the basilica, the Holy Father knelt and prayed in front of the famous icon of Mary under the title of *Salus Populi Romani*, which means health (or salvation) of the Roman People. The previous night, he had told those gathered outside of St. Peter's that at as he began his pontificate, he wished "to go and pray to Our Lady, that she may watch over all of Rome."<sup>1</sup>

Last September, during a prayer vigil for peace in the Middle East, the Holy Father had the same icon brought from the Basilica of St. Mary Major to St. Peter's Square. This act signified that Mary, *Salus Populi*

*Romani*, watches over not only the people of Rome, but indeed over the whole world, especially in those areas where her help is most needed.

As we celebrate today the dedication of the basilica in which this powerful icon is enshrined, we are very aware of how much we need to continue to implore her maternal aid, particularly with regard to the situation which continues to deteriorate in the Middle East. One may be tempted to believe that there is little to no hope in these circumstances, but we continue to remain steadfast in trusting that peace is possible, for, as the angel Gabriel told the Blessed Virgin Mary at the Annunciation, “nothing will be impossible for God” (Luke 1:37).

Our Gospel for today’s Mass offers a helpful reflection in this regard. We hear the story of the Apostle Peter as he attempted to walk on the water toward Jesus. As long as his eyes were fixed on the Lord, he remained safe, but he soon became overwhelmed at the power of the wind blowing around him and, taking his eyes off of Jesus, he began to sink. Upon saving Peter from drowning, Jesus asked him: “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:31).

Peter’s lack of faith caused him to doubt that what seemed to be impossible was indeed possible with God’s mighty power. This is a timely

lesson for us as we witness in horror the violence, death, and destruction that is taking place in the Middle East. We are invited to be not so overwhelmed with all of the bad news we hear, but to place our hope in the Good News of the Gospel that Christ has risen victorious and has defeated death. No war, tragedy, or suffering could ever nullify that victory.

It is this hope that should guide us as we offer our prayers without ceasing for a peaceful resolution to the problems in the Holy Land and in the Middle East. It is also this hope which motivates us not to give up in doing whatever is necessary to aid in bringing about that peace.

In his address to the participants in the Pilgrimage of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem in Rome last year, the Holy Father highlighted this point when he said the following:

To believe in the redemptive power of the Cross and the Resurrection is to offer hope and peace. In a special way, the Land of Jesus needs it very much! The faith does not distance us from the responsibilities that we are all called to assume, but, on the contrary, it urges and impels us to concrete undertakings for a better society.<sup>2</sup>

The work that you undertake, dear Knights and Ladies, to support the activities of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and to support the Christians living in the Holy Land is an important part of the larger struggle for peace throughout the Middle East. Though your efforts may seem insignificant in comparison to the complex issues that surround the present conflicts, we are reminded by St. Paul that “all things work for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28). We are confident in faith that what we offer will be multiplied by the Lord to accomplish His will.

Like so many who have turned to Mary in times of great distress in our world, let us humbly beg her not only to intercede on our behalf for peace in the world, but that she might come to our aid to give us the strength that we need to persevere in keeping our eyes fixed on Christ and His victory. By doing so, we will continue to move forward in faith, hope, and love, cooperating with His plan of salvation, never doubting that God can and will manifest His glory by conquering all evil, bringing about lasting peace and unity for eternity in the life that awaits us in Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *First Greeting of the Holy Father Pope Francis*, 13 March 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the Pilgrimage of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, 13 September 2013.