The history of the Holy Land Commission

Thomas McKiernan, President of the Grand Magisterium's Commission for the Holy Land, presents the history of this consultative body

Members of the Holy Land Commission with the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Msgr. Fouad Twal

Several years ago I was asked to speak about The Holy Land Commission at an investiture in the USA. The lieutenant commented that many members are not aware of the existence of this commission or its function. This began a series of talks I have given about the role of this commission. The response has been excellent as our members are eager to learn how the projects we fund are being monitored.

There is no written history of the Holy Land Commission but Dr. Heinrich Dickmann and Dr. Christa von Siemens of Germany have provided information to suggest it had its genesis with the already existing Holy Land Commission of the German Lieutenancy. The German Commission consisted of members Mrs. Margarete Underberg, Mrs. Elisabeth Verreet, Mrs. Luise Werhahn and Mr. Michael Wirtz. In the beginning this was a private initiative of the German Lieutenancy. **Mrs. Verreet** took over the Commission from Mrs. Underberg in 1986 and remained its president for twenty years. During this time she also began the "Sozialfond" which is now known as the Humanitarian Fund.

Mrs. Verreet invited **Dr. Christa von Siemens**, a member from Munich, to participate in the visits to the Holy Land. An additional confrere during this era was **Robert Benson**, Lieutenant of England and Wales. Mr. Benson describes working with Elisabeth Verreet as a significant personal blessing. Mr. Benson succeeded Mrs. Verreet as president of the commission.

After Mrs. Verreet's death in 2006 and the retirement of Mr. Benson a few years later, Dr. vonSiemens became the president of the commission. Adolfo Rinaldi of Italy, Mrs. Constance van Wesemael of the Netherlands and Dr. Michael Whelan of the United Kingdom were also members of the Commission over these years.

When Dr. von Siemens completed her mandate on the Grand Magisterium, I was asked to succeed her as president and Professor Bart McGettrick of Scotland and Dr. Heinrich Dickmann of Germany were appointed as members. Professor Bartholomew [Bart] McGettrick, is a recognized writer and speaker on Christian educational leadership and Dr. Heinrich Dickmann, had a distinguished career in business as CEO of a European insurance conglomerate.

My background is in secondary education and business. I was administrator of a Catholic high school; while also serving on the board of a bank and as trustee of a foreign mission foundation pledged to the Holy See. The combination of education, business and missionary outreach, in addition to our genuine friendship and respect for each other has made for a balanced team.

Dr. Dickmann is intent on carrying on the original German initiative of “Sozialfond” and he works to balance solidarity and subsidiarity with our Christians of the Latin Patriarchate. It’s a delicate balance; too much of either can cause Christians to lose their dignity and create atmosphere of dependency. Not enough lessens their chance to survive and prosper on their own.

Professor McGettrick brings the concepts of Christian leadership to the principals and teachers in the schools of the Patriarchate. He, like Dr. Dickmann and I, believe education is both the best gift you can give anyone and also the only ladder out of poverty.

The commission is advisory to the Cardinal Grand Master. We do not set the priorities of the Patriarchate, those are determined by the Patriarch. However, with the recent situation of migrants & refugees, especially in Jordan and Tel Aviv, the commission is looking beyond the usual capital improvement and building projects and urges a redirection of our special funding, at least temporarily, to humanitarian aid and pastoral concerns. In my talks about the Holy Land Commission, I tell our members that we go, we observe, we advise and we report and with respect to their donations for projects in the Holy Land, **we, the Commission are their eyes, ears and conscience on the ground**.

This is not a definitive history of The Holy Land Commission but I believe it is a reasonable summary of its beginning and current status.

Thomas E. McKiernan, KCSG, KGCHS

Member of the Grand Magisterium

President of the Holy Land Commission

(January 10, 2016)