

FURTHER DETAILS: The Custody of the Holy Land, ATS Pro Terra Sancta, The Custody in Egypt

The Custody of the Holy Land

The Custody of the Holy Land is the name by which the Franciscans of the Order of Friars Minor are known today, who have been present in the eastern part of the Mediterranean from the earliest days of the Order, founded by St Francis in 1209, and who serve as custodian of the Holy Places by the will and mandate of the universal Church. The Franciscan's vocation in the Holy Land today has four principal orientations: prayer in the Holy Places, the welcoming of pilgrims, and the custodianship of the Holy Places and supporting the poorest.

ATS Pro Terra Sancta

ATS Pro Terra Sancta is the nonprofit Non-governmental organization of the Custody of the Holy Land. The President of ATS Pro Terra Sancta is the Custos of the Holy Land. ATS Pro Terra Sancta seeks to put into practice the Custody's wishes with regard to supporting the Christian presence in the Holy Land and the works to preserve the Holy Sites, the wellspring for the entire world in terms of beauty, hope and peace. The activities and projects supported by ATS Pro Terra Sancta are always carried out without regard to religion, race, nationality or language.

The Custody of the Holy Land in Egypt

On 21 April 1632 Father Paolo da Lodi obtained from the Venetian Consul Giovanni Donato a fixed residence in Cairo for the Franciscans, who had been Chaplains for the Venetian colony in that city for many years. For this purpose the Venetian merchant Domenico Savio allowed the Friars to use his own home, "next door to the choir of the Venetian chapel". The Embassy was located in the Mouski district, the famous Cairo bazaar, today 12 Bendaka ("Venetians") Street. On 16 January 1633, the same Consul made a similar concession for a residence for the Friars in Alexandria, "recognizing as eminently just and necessary the protection of those Franciscan Fathers, who come here for Christianity and then move on to Jerusalem..." In this manner the Franciscans were able to carry out their activities in a more regular manner. Over time, the large flow of Europeans favored by Muhammad Ali and his successors made the Mouski convent home to the largest Latin parish in Cairo, with sub-parishes - St Joseph, Bulacco and Meadi, which later became independent. The Mouski parish reached its largest extension in the last decade of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th, with around 20,000 worshippers, the majority of whom were Italian, but with large numbers of Maltese, Austrians, Slavs, French and people of Middle Eastern origin. The Mouski church, a cathedral since 1858, was a point of reference for all these nationalities, as evidenced by the rich parish archives whose first documents go back to 1611. During Lent, when the parish was at its height, Lenten services were conducted in 5 languages: Italian, Maltese, French, German, Slav. A large number of pastoral activities took place around the Sanctuary of Our Lady, declared Queen of Egypt by Cardinal Gustavo Testa in 1939. With the Second World War the number of parishioners began to diminish. The Egyptian Revolution (1952), and in particular the occupation of the Suez Canal (1956), brought about a large exodus. Today the Latin parish has been reduced to just a few families. To reactivate the great convent, the Custody of the Holy Land had the idea to found the Franciscan Center for Christian Oriental Studies.

The Franciscan Center for Christian Oriental Studies

With the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, the great Mouski convent – seat since ancient times of the large Latin parish in Cairo – had remained almost empty. It was then, in order to make better use of the convent, that our Studies Center was founded. On 16 September 1954 the Franciscan Center for Christian Oriental Studies was inaugurated in the Mouski convent. Both its founder, Father Giacinto Faccio, at that time Custos of the Holy Land, and its first Director Father Martiniano Roncaglia were Venetian. The first President of the Egyptian Republic, Muhammad Naguib, the Apostolic Nuncio and various civil and religious dignitaries attended the inauguration. The Custody of the Holy Land had long nurtured the idea of founding an eastern opus.

The principal aim of the Center is the **development of studies relating to the Christian communities in the Middle East** and the documentation of the life and history of the Franciscans in the Holy Land, thus continuing the work of Father Girolamo Golubovich. Two principal activities of the Center were established, and remain to this day: a) contact with the Christian and non-Christian cultural world, both local and foreign; b) publication of studies and research on those communities.

The library is divided into two large sections: general (theology, history, geography, art, etc.) and specialist materials, i.e., the cultural heritage of each of the Middle Eastern Christian communities: Copt, Armenian, Syrian, etc. These specialist areas include the Arab Christian section, that is, Christian religious-cultural material written in Arabic. The initial nucleus of the library was formed by books particularly useful for the purpose of the Center that were gathered from the various convents of the Custody. Over time more books were added, either directly or through gifts, or through subscriptions to journals and collections. Currently the library is considered to be one of the best in Cairo, and unique in its genre, on account of its specialization. It contains more than 50,000 volumes, in addition to a large collection of journals and Arab-Christian and Western magazines, as well as manuscripts (more than a thousand, not counting a collection of Islamic ones which are still uncatalogued).