



A biographical profile of Bishop Alberto Gori

Custos of the Holy Land and Patriarch at the Second Vatican Council

by Paolo Pieraccini

Last November marked the fortieth anniversary of the death of Alberto Gori, Custos of the Holy Land (1937-1949) and Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem (1950-1970). Born in San Piero Agliana (Pistoia, Italy) on 9th February 1889, he put on his Franciscan habit on 27th September 1907 in the Tuscan province of St. Bonaventure, which was particularly lively from the intellectual point of view. He completed his grammar school studies in the convent of Fiesole, his philosophical studies in Siena and theological studies in Signa, where he was ordained a priest on 19th July 1914. After having served in the war as a military chaplain, he asked to be sent to serve in the Custody¹. On 8th February 1919 he arrived in Jerusalem, where he was assigned to the service of the Holy Sepulchre. In 1922, the Discretorium of the Holy Land decided to send him to Aleppo to teach classics and as Deputy Headmaster of the prestigious College of Higher Studies, founded by the Custody in 1859 to give “a very scrupulous scientific and moral education” to pupils of all religious confessions. The next year, he became the headmaster of the school, remaining in office for fifteen years, in time to see several of his pupils take up important positions in Syrian politics and public administration.

On 22nd February 1937, the General Definitorium of the Order of Friars Minor chose him for the position of Custos. In presenting him to the Congregation of *Propaganda Fide* which had to confirm the appointment, the Minister General Leonardo Bello said that in the eighteen years spent in the Custody, Father Gori – a “highly learned religious”, knowing “several languages” and “very familiar with handling business” – had won the esteem of all his brothers. On 8th April, the new Custos entered Jerusalem to take up his new position. He governed the Custody with skill, continuing the traditional policy of collaboration with the British authorities that had the mandate over Palestine². The years of his governance were amongst the most difficult in the centuries-old history of the Custody: from the middle of 1936 to the second half of 1939 the Arab revolt in Palestine caused great bloodshed with thousands of victims. The friars operating in the region encountered great difficulties in exercising their ministry, also because the fundamentalist component of the Palestinian nationalist movement saw in the Christians – including those of Arab origin – the fifth column of the “British occupier” and of the “Zionist enemy”. When the revolt came to an end, World War II started. The British interned German and Italian religious and the French religious who opposed General De Gaulle’s movement of national liberation. Father Gori, however, was left free to exercise his functions. For five long years, organizing as best as possible

¹ Many other religious of the Province of St. Bonaventure had done so in the previous decades, some of whom were appointed Secretaries of the Custody and others Fathers Custos of the Holy Land – such as Roberto Razzòli (1906-1912) and Nazareno Iacopozzi (1931-1937) –, others rose to prestigious episcopal positions in the Orient, such as the apostolic vicar of Egypt, Igino Nuti.

² This policy had been inaugurated by the Custos Ferdinando Diotallevi (1917-1924) and had been continued by his successors Aurelio Marotta (1925-1931) and Nazareno Iacopozzi (1931-1937).

the few friars and the few financial resources available to him, he was able to avoid the paralysis of the mission. The schools and seminaries had to be closed, but officiation in the Holy Places was guaranteed, as was keeping the ones in the exclusive possession of the Custody, most of the parishes run by the Custody and the charitable institutions.

At the end of the war, Father Gori did not take long to realize that difficult years were looming for Christian rights in the Holy Land. The “war of liberation” of the Jews against Great Britain (1945-1948) and the first serious clashes with the Palestinians soon broke out. In the springtime of 1946, the Custos obtained an audience with the Anglo-American Commission of enquiry on Palestine. He did not think it was right to seek the protection of the great powers, which had always used the Catholic missionary institutions and the question of the sanctuaries for their own nationalist ends. He therefore advocated the formation of a permanent council made up of Catholics, Orthodox and Armenians, who should become the joint owners of the Holy Places of the *status quo* and decide autonomously on restoration work and on any internal disputes. The suggestion fell on deaf ears, because it did not find the favour of the other two communities. In the reports he sent to the Holy See in those months, Gori expressed his perplexity over the attitude of the Jews towards the Christians and their institutions. On the other hand, he emphasized the “benevolence” of the “Arab people” who let the Catholics “work openly on building new churches and new schools”, profess the Catholic faith and “perform the holy functions”.

In April 1947 – two months after the English left the decision on the future of Palestine to the United Nations – Father Gori was heard by the commission of enquiry formed to find a political solution to the problem. He asked the international community to lay down precise rules to protect the Holy Places and for the free exercise of the educational, welfare and pastoral activity of Christians, independently of the form of government put in place in the region. From the following November – after the UN opted for the internationalization of Jerusalem and the partition of the rest of the country into an Arab state and a Jewish state – the Custos was the only representative of the Latin community to sign some common declarations of the Christian religious leaders in the Holy Land to political and religious leaders all over the world³. These documents condemned the project of the United Nations and expressed solidarity with the struggle by Christian and Muslim Arabs. On 30th April 1948 – in agreement with the Orthodox and Armenian Patriarchs – Father Gori appealed to the British who were about to leave Palestine, which was now in a state of civil war, asking them to protect the sanctuaries and to withdraw only after the arrival of an international authority that could take the situation firmly into hand. The appeal was not heeded: on 14th May the British left the country and the Jews proclaimed the State of Israel and were immediately attacked by the neighbouring Arab countries. During the first few weeks of war, the Israeli authorities repeatedly asked the Custody to mediate, especially to help the elderly, women and children, to leave the Jewish Quarter besieged by the Arab legion. In this period, Father Gori continued to sign common declarations with the other Christian leaders in the region. In October 1948, he also sent a memorandum to the Pope, in which he stated that the parties in the conflict had all “committed excesses”, although the Arabs had always proven to be “very respectful and correct”. They opened fire on churches only when the Jews had transformed them into “attack posts”, whereas the Jewish terrorist groups Stern and Irgun occupied places of worship and convents “committing every kind of excess and vandalism.” Gori also pointed out the tragedy of the refugees. Their situation was really “pitiful” and they had to be allowed back to their homes as soon as possible. He then asked the Holy See to take diplomatic action to internationalize Jerusalem and allow freedom of access and worship in the sanctuaries which were to fall under Arab or Jewish sovereignty.

³ The seat of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem had been vacant since the death of Bishop Luigi Barlassina, on 27th September 1947.

Gori endeavoured in every way to take in the refugees into the Casa Novas and the various schools and homes of the Custody. To meet their most elementary needs – as the resources were not sufficient – he was able to raise awareness in the Western Catholic world for their charity, especially in the United States. He also spoke about this tragic phenomenon in a circular letter of May 1949. In the first place, he regretted the disappearance of the parishes of Ain Karem, Mugeidel and Tiberias (the faithful of the first two had fled, frightened by the previous massacres committed by the Irgun and Stern group, whilst those of the third had been chased out by the Israeli army). He then lamented that the religious had been driven out of the convent on Mount Zion near the Cenacle – which had fallen under the control of the Israeli army –, as well as the profanation of convents and places of worship, the obstacles to exercising Catholic rights and the movement of religious personnel. The Custos had lost faith in the rulers of the State of Israel. In his opinion, they should have had “a certain debt of gratitude” towards Christians, who in the recent persecutions of the Jews had “exposed their lives to save and protect them.”

Five months later, Father Gori had to leave his position at the head of the Custody because on 21st November 1949, Pope Pius XII decided to make him the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. After thirteen long years as Father Custos, he left behind him a highly respectful spiritual and pastoral legacy⁴: the Holy Places were restored and embellished thanks to the work of an exceptional architect such as Antonio Barluzzi (in particular, new mosaics in the Calvary and the sanctuary of the Visitation in Ain Karem was rebuilt); new churches and convents were built (in the first place in Damietta, Aleppo and Alexandria); educational establishments were founded that were open to pupils of every religion (parish schools in Jaffa and in various places in Syria and Lebanon as well as colleges for higher education in Lattakia and Amman); many others (including the one in Aleppo) were enlarged, without sparing attention on the quality of the teachers; seminaries and Seraphic colleges were founded and reorganized, which was also necessary due to the different political conditions in the region; the most gifted religious were sent to further their studies in European universities; archaeological excavations carried out by the Studium Biblicum of the Flagellation (in particular on Mount Nebo, in Emmaus, Bethany, Bethlehem and Ain Karem) were stepped up and scientific results were rapidly published, which was deemed essential to prove the authenticity of the Holy Places in the hands of the Custody; lastly, many pastoral initiatives in favour of the Oriental rites⁵, were taken by the Custody, especially after the war, on the request of Cardinal Eugenio Tisserand.

The appointment of Fr. Gori as Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem did not come as a surprise. The governing skills and courage he had shown in the difficult post-war years had been highly appreciated by the Holy See. The contents of statements by the Pope and encyclicals on the situation of Palestine were often influenced by the alarm-stricken reports that he sent to the Secretariat of State. Choosing him had many advantages in the eyes of the Holy See: an expert in the spiritual and political situation of Palestine, the prelate would be able to protect the rights of Catholics and their institutions. Furthermore, as a Franciscan, he would be able to put an end to the residual friction between the Custody and the Patriarchate, as complete unity of intentions was required between the two Catholic institutions which were by far the most important in the Holy Land.

The second friar minor and first Custos of the Holy Land to rise to the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem, Bishop Gori was consecrated on 27th December 1949. On 18th February 1950, he took possession of the office, making the traditional solemn entrance into the Holy Sepulchre. The situation appeared arduous. The priests of the Patriarchate had been without a leader for two and a

⁴ The predecessors who had exceeded the canonical three or six years in office can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

⁵The most important was the foundation of the “Opera Orientale di Terra Santa” for the Coptic community of Egypt.

half years, at an extremely tormented moment in history. In this period, the institution of the Patriarchate had suffered considerably, both from the material point of view and from that of prestige. The diocese was now divided between four different countries: Jordan, Israel, Cyprus and Egypt (the Gaza Strip). The redistribution of the faithful due to the phenomenon of refugees had radically changed the physiognomy of the diocese. To govern it more effectively, Bishop Gori deemed it necessary to appoint three of his priests to the position of Patriarchal Vicars – based in Amman, Nicosia and Nazareth –, who had in-depth knowledge of the respective political and pastoral situations. After the end of the war, the Patriarch was able to obtain the return of most of the religious institutions occupied by the Israeli army and by the Arab Legion and, in the second half of the 1950s, even the payment of war compensation by Israel and Jordan, where most of the institutions and faithful of the diocese were to be found. However, life for Christians was not without difficulties and discrimination, deriving above all from the confessional structure of the two states and, regarding restrictions on freedom of movement in the Jewish state and the non-return of the refugees, from requirements of internal security (many of the Christians in Israel were Arabs). Bishop Gori made his voice heard by the rulers of both countries. Despite the esteem and prestige he enjoyed with the Hashemite court, he was unable to greatly loosen the state control over the Catholic religious, welfare and educational institutions. He achieved a more positive result on the discriminatory legislation on schools. He was helped in this by the diplomatic action of some major powers, although these had taken action mainly because they had interests of their own to protect, as they also ran important educational establishments in Jordanian territory. Bishop Gori tried in vain, however, to obtain an internationally guaranteed promise from the Prime Minister David Ben Gurion – on his first apostolic visit in Israel in 1950 – on the future treatment of the Christian minority, for the protection of their age-old rights and freedom of worship for the faithful and for pilgrims⁶.

Nevertheless, Bishop Gori devoted much of his energy to pastoral activities. The task was extremely difficult, considering the chronic lack of financial resources and the complex political and military situation of the region. At the time, the Patriarchate directly oversaw 41 parishes and branches in small centres of Palestine and Jordan and was made up of 61 secular priests, including 33 of local origin. It also had jurisdiction over that of Haifa run by the Carmelites and over eleven parishes in the hands of the Custody, located in the most developed centres of the diocese (Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Nicosia and Larnaca in particular). In addition, 69 schools for boys and girls – run by the Patriarchate, the Franciscans and by other Catholic religious congregations – provided education for more than 17,000 pupils., many of whom were Muslim, Greek Orthodox and Catholics of the Oriental rite. Bishop Gori had to dismantle many institutions of the Patriarchate in Israeli territory and considerably expand them in Jordan, where the majority of refugees had sought sanctuary. He founded a total of eighteen parish churches, many of which had an adjoining school and presbytery (except for the one in Gaza, all were in Jordanian territory, including two in Amman, one in Beith Sahur, one in Irbid and one in Zarka). He also built about ten homes for the indigenous Rosary Sisters, a Congregation formed in 1880 for the educational and welfare establishments of the Patriarchate. He paid special attention to the schools, although the phenomenon of emigration and competition from the state schools in Jordan – financed by the USA, UNESCO and UNWRA – did not allow them to develop as desired (at the end of the 1960s, the number of schools in the whole of the diocese had almost doubled (125), but they were attended by no more than 27,000 pupils). He also renovated and considerably enlarged the diocesan seminary of Beit Jalah, which produced no fewer than 42 priests during his rule. Thirty-seven of these were of local origin, in the respect of precise instructions of the Holy See to the first Patriarch, Giuseppe Valerga (1847-1872), although his successors Lodovico Piavi (1889-1905) and Luigi Barlassina

⁶ Israel formally endorsed these guarantees on 30th December 1993, signing what is known as the “Fundamental Agreement” with the Holy See, which offered valid guarantees for the freedom, religious life and activities of the Catholic Church and its faithful within Israeli legislation.

(1920-1947) had not greatly heeded these. Bishop Gori – as he had done with his friars when he was Custos – wanted many of them to have a university education, after having spent some years in the service of the parishes (those benefiting from this opportunity included the future Patriarchs Michel Sabbah and Fouad Twal and the future auxiliary bishops Giacinto Marcuzzo, Kamal Batish and Sélim Sayegh).

Exercising pastoral activity in the Latin Patriarchal diocese of Jerusalem was particularly difficult because it could not be limited to the purely spiritual side. It also had to include welfare, in view of the destitution of the faithful. Bishop Gori – although he no longer had the subsidies from the Catholic nations –, tried to meet these difficulties through the best use of the annual amount guaranteed to him by the Custody of the Holy Land, stimulating private charity from the West and the activity of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre. However, the welfare work by the Patriarchate and the numerous male and female religious congregations under its jurisdiction could not curb the growing phenomenon of emigration of the faithful, fomented in particular by poverty, discrimination, constant political tension and the repeated economic crises that affected the region (in the early 1970s, out of some 55,000 Catholics resident in the Latin Patriarchal diocese of Jerusalem – 13,000 in Israel, 40,000 in Jordan, 2,000 in Cyprus and 300 in Gaza –, as many as 30,000 lived abroad).

Bishop Gori continued to pay great attention to running his diocese even when he was called on to contribute to organize and attend the Second Vatican Council. As a member of the Central Preparatory Commission for this assembly and of various pontifical departments, he made an important contribution to the proceedings, with repeated interventions of a disciplinary and doctrinal nature. In particular, he spoke on the topic of relations with non-Christian religions, on the question of Episcopal collegiality, on the Church in the contemporary world and on relations with separated Oriental Christians. During the Council debate, Bishop Gori was also able to withstand the request to suppress the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which his Oriental Catholic equivalents opposed for the traditional activity of Latinization and who wanted a Melkite Patriarchate in replacement. Not only were these requests not accepted by the Council Fathers – during the patriarchate of Bishop Gori the attempt to convert Oriental Christians to Latin Catholicism had virtually been abandoned – but the Latin Patriarch succeeded in obtaining the appointment of three auxiliary bishops from the Pope, one of whom - Bishop Giacomo Giuseppe Beltritti – with the right of succession⁷.

After returning for good to Jerusalem in December 1965, the now elderly Patriarch governed his diocese for another five years, and in this period he also took up the position of Chairman of the Conference of Latin Bishops of the Middle East. Lastly, he was the witness of two new tragedies for the Arab population in the region: the Six Days' War (June 1967) which ended with the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem and – a few weeks before his death – the bloody repression of the PLO fighters by the Hashemite government of Jordan (known as “Black September”), the dramatic effects of which he wanted to be the direct witness, despite his very poor state of health. He passed away on 25th November 1970 and was buried in the patriarchal Co-Cathedral of Jerusalem, next to some of his most illustrious predecessors, including his brother of the Custody Lodovico Piavi (1889-1905).

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⁷ Bishop Beltritti succeeded Bishop Gori and governed until his retirement in December 1987, a few weeks after the start of the first *Intifada*.