

In a recent article in AMERICA, Drew Christiansen, S.J., the editor in chief of *America,* reflects on the powerful spiritual encounter one experiences in visiting the church of St. Peter in Gallicantu in Jerusalem. This site is believed to be Caiaphas' palace and where Jesus' trial and Peter's denial took place.

The current church is of special significance to the Assumptionists, as it was built by Fr. Etienne Boubet, A.A. in 1920s and was magnificently renovated by Fr. Robert Fortin, A.A. between 1994 and 1997. Pilgrims from around the world who visit St. Peter's are profoundly touched by its biblical importance and the beautiful art which calls them to repentance, contrition and conversion. As the author states, "St. Peter Gallicantu is special among holy places because step by step it offers so many opportunities to enter into Christ's passion…"

Walk Into Repentance
By Drew Christiansen
America, The National Catholic Weekly
January 24-31, 2011

Said to be the site of Caiaphas's palace, Jesus' trial and Peter's denial, there has been a church at the site of Saint Peter in Gallicantu—Saint Peter Where the Cock Crowed—since Byzantine times. The current church was built by the French Assumptionist Étienne Boubet in 1931. In the 1990s it was beautifully renewed by Robert Fortin, an American Assumptionist who was rector, and the Palestinian Christian architect Samir Kandah. In keeping with the commemoration of St. Peter's denial, a constant theme in the church's art is repentance. A walk within the church takes one deeper and deeper into the spirit of contrition. There is no place quite like it.

On the upper level, Father Boubet designed the church in shades of violet and green, colors of repentance, and with little natural light. The altar is flanked by images of penitent saints, including the “good thief,” Dismas, and St. Mary of Egypt. On the second level, an extraordinary, blue-tinted bronze of the Suffering Servant invites visitors to contemplate the prophecies of Isaiah fulfilled in Jesus. Committed pilgrims should avoid the impulse to move ahead with the crowd and instead take time to meditate there on Isaiah’s Servant Songs, whose enactment began in this place.

Opposite the statue, a stairwell leads to a crypt chapel, where living stone flows into a white marble sanctuary. Three paintings in modern iconic style adorn the space. To the left, with a cock looking down from a pillar, a handcuffed Jesus gazes on Peter after his denial; in the center Peter weeps over his denial; and to the right one sees reconciliation as Jesus asks, “Peter, do you love me?” In the lower chapel, pilgrims cannot but reflect on their own failures to be true to Christ.

The walk then takes pilgrims into the rock below the church, to a cistern that was deepened into a holding cell. Its walls have been inscribed with crosses by centuries of pilgrims who have descended to the place where Jesus is said to have been held prisoner the night before his death. In this bleak setting, the custom is to recite Psalm 88, from which I have excerpted here verses 4 and 6:

For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol,
I am reckoned among those who go down to the Pit….
Thou hast put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.

A psaltery presents the prayer in more than 80 languages. When the recitation is complete, guides sometimes plunge the cell into a chilling darkness.

In “the Pit,” as pilgrims experience the depths of Christ’s abandonment, their walk of repentance runs its course. St. Peter Gallicantu is special among holy places because step by step it offers so many opportunities to enter into Christ’s passion and to stir up repentance in the heart.





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