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The Shrine of St Peter in Gallicantu (At the Cock's Crow) At the Heart of the Passion

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Jerusalem, March 25, 2000

Table of Contents

- [Introduction](#)
- [I. Gospel Texts](#)
- [II. Tour of the Site](#)
 - [A. The Belvedere: a biblical overview](#)
 - [1. Three valleys](#)
 - [2. Crest line of the surrounding hills](#)
 - [3. The horizon](#)
 - [4. Mount Sion \(the third hill to be so called\)](#)

 - [B. The church: a catechesis on the Passion](#)
 - [1. Facades and entrance to the church](#)
 - [2. Upper church](#)
 - [3. Lower church](#)
 - [4. Underground caves](#)
 - [5. Outside archaeological areas](#)

- [III. History of the Site](#)
 - [A. Testimony of pilgrims](#)
 - [The turbulent history of the Church: A possible reconstruction](#)

 - [B. History of the excavations](#)
 - [1. At Saint Peter in Gallicantu](#)
 - [2. At the Armenian Monastery of Saint Savior](#)

- [C. Conclusion](#)
- [D. Thoughts for today](#)

- [IV. Meditating on the Passion at Saint Peter in Gallicantu](#)
- [Notes](#)

Introduction

Name of the church

Pilgrims are often intrigued by the name of the Holy Site they are about to visit:

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In Latin: *Sanctus Petrus in Gallicantu*;

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In English: Saint Peter in Gallicantu, i.e., at the Cock's Crow.

The name comes from the episode during Christ's Passion when Peter, in the courtyard of High Priest Caiaphas, denied his Master three times, saying: "I do not know the man you are talking about." Just as he spoke the third time, "a cock crowed. The Lord turned around and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the statement which the Lord had made to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' So he went out and wept bitterly" (Lk 22:60-62).

Significance of the church

The modern church, first consecrated in 1931 and reconsecrated in 1997 after extensive renovations, is part of a long tradition going back to the 5th century according to which Christians have never ceased to commemorate on this spot Saint Peter's triple **denial**

of Jesus in the courtyard of High Priest Caiaphas, as well as the **repentance**

of the Apostle after he had heard the cock's crow and remembered the words Jesus had told him.

Convinced of the importance of this episode in the Passion, Christians first tried to **pinpoint** the spot where it had taken place, then, around 450 A.D., sought to **perpetuate its memory**

by building a church on the site. This church, as well as the others that followed, were all destroyed, as a cycle of violence took hold throughout the ages. The present structure is at least the fourth on this location.

The site comprises a church and the mysterious *Deep Pit* over which it is built, as well as the archaeological discoveries made here: foundations, cisterns, liturgical artifacts, including an ancient *stepped street* undoubtedly

taken by Jesus. It is the

entire site

which allows pilgrims to relive the various events linked to Jesus' religious trial before the high

priest, viz., his detention after his arrest at Gethsemane, his arraignment the following morning, his trial before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, the denial of Peter outside the palace as the trial was taking place within, the repentance of the Apostle, and finally Peter's reconciliation with Jesus after the Resurrection on the shores of Lake Tiberias.

I. Gospel Texts

Peter's self-assurance before the Passion

After the Last Supper at the Cenacle, Peter states with much self-assurance: "Even though all should have their faith shaken, mine will not be" (Mk 14:29).

The high priest interrogates Jesus

Arrested at Gethsemane, Jesus, according to the Synoptics, was brought, bound, from the Mount of Olives to the palace of the high priest where the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes assembled:

The high priest asked him and said to him, "Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?" Then Jesus answered, "I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven." At that the high priest tore his garments and said, "What further need have we of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as deserving to die (Mk 14:61-64).

The denial and repentance of Peter

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the high priest's maids came along. Seeing Peter warming himself, she looked intently at him and said, "You too were with the Nazarene, Jesus." But he denied it saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." So he went out into the outer court. Then the cock crowed. The maid saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." Once again he denied it. A little later the bystanders said to Peter once more, "Surely you are one of them; for you too are a Galilean." He began to curse and to swear, "I do not know this man about whom you are talking" (Mk 14:66-71).

Just as he was saying this, the cock crowed, and the Lord turned and looked at Peter, and

Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." He went out and began to weep bitterly (Lk 22:60-62).

Jesus is mocked and turned over to Pilate

The men who held Jesus in custody were ridiculing and beating him. They blindfolded him and questioned him, saying: "Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?" And they reviled him in saying many other things against him (Lk 22:63-65).

When it was morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate, the governor (Mt 27:1).

The three denials are forgiven

After the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples on the shore of Lake Tiberias where he cooked some fish for them on a charcoal fire. After the meal, Jesus said to Simon Peter:

"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He then said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep" (Jn 21:15-17).

Thus it is that the gospel texts of the Passion, when read at Saint Peter in Gallicantu, take on a paschal dimension. Just as Jesus died and rose to new life, so his disciple Peter, having experienced the serious sin of his denial, found new life thanks to the love he still had for his Master, even in his weakness: "You know that I love you." Thanks to the awareness he had of his own frailty, he was better able to confirm later on the faith of his brothers.

II. Tour of the Site

A. The Belvedere: a biblical overview

The visit of the site normally begins at the Belvedere, which offers a splendid view of the ancient City of David and its surroundings.

1. Three valleys

Saint Peter in Gallicantu is located at the intersection of three valleys:

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The Valley of Gehenna [Hinnom] (south)

Gehenna has sometimes had a bad reputation: in the time of the Kings, children were offered here in sacrifice to the idols. Later, it was the place where people burned the refuse of the city. Christian tradition placed *Potter's Field* on this spot. The tomb of High Priest Annas is located here, as is a charnel house built by the Crusaders.

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The Kidron Valley (east)

The Kidron Valley is located between the Mount of Olives and the ancient City of David (the first hill to be called Mount Sion), which the latter conquered around 1000 BC. Its water throws itself into the Dead Sea.

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The Tyropoeon Valley (center)

Practically filled in today, this valley ran along the western side of the Temple Mount and continued to the south as far as the intersection with the Kidron and Gehenna. It marked the western limits of the ancient City of David. On its slope is the Pool of Siloam, which can be seen from the Belvedere thanks to its minaret that rises slightly above the tree line.

2. Crest line of the surrounding hills

Four hills stand out on the eastern crest line (from north to south):

-

Mount Moriah (the second hill to be called Mount Sion). For Jews, this is the traditional place toward which Abraham journeyed in faith in order to sacrifice Isaac, his only son, as well as the location of the Temples of Solomon and Herod, marked today by the *Dome of the Rock (the Mosque of Omar)*.

For Christians, it is the setting where numerous episodes in the life of Jesus took place. For Muslims, it was the point of departure of the Prophet Mohammed's ascension to heaven.

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Mount of Olives. Many Christian memories are attached to this place: Jesus' walk from Bethany before his solemn entry into Jerusalem; his tears shed over the city; his teaching about the end of the world; his Ascension.

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Mount of Scandal (directly across from the Belvedere), so called because King Solomon would have had temples built there in honor of the gods and goddesses of his wives.

-

Mount of Evil Counsel (presently the UN headquarters) where, according to tradition, the high priests and the Pharisees held their first meeting of the Sanhedrin to plot against Jesus, and where Caiaphas "prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation" (Jn 11:47-53).

3. The horizon

In the distance, toward the east, beyond the depression of the Jordan and the Dead Sea, lie the purplish *Mountains of Moab*, visible only on a clear day. A biblical outpost, they recall the entry of the Israelites into the Promised Land, the death of Moses on Mount Nebo (Dt 31), one of their highest peaks, as well as the death of John the Baptist at Machaerus, one of Herod's villas.

4. Mount Sion (the third hill to be so called)

It was only at the beginning of the Christian era that the hill on the west began to be called Mount Sion. After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 A.D., this hill became the center of the first Christian community made up of Judeo-Christians (Jews who believed in Jesus). The following were successively located on this hill:

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The *Upper Room*, where Jesus' disciples assembled after the Ascension and where they received the Holy Spirit. The memory of the *Last Supper* (in the Cenacle) was added in the 6th century.

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Jesus' trial before Caiaphas in the palace of the high priest and the *denial* of the Apostle Peter. Two sites compete for the location of these episodes connected with the Passion: the Armenian Monastery of Saint Savior (next to the present Zion Gate) and Saint Peter in Gallicantu on the eastern slope of Mount Zion, which also commemorates the *repentance* of Saint Peter.

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The place of the *death of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Church of the Dormition).

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David's tomb, according to a late tradition of the 10th century.

B. The church: a catechesis on the Passion

From the Belvedere, pilgrims proceed to the church. Built in neo-Byzantine style by a French Assumptionist, Father Etienne Boubet, it was consecrated on September 11, 1931, and reconsecrated on May 13, 1997, after extensive restoration and renovation.

The main feature of the building is the *Deep Pit* over which the Byzantines built a church in the middle of the 5th century. This pit has traditionally been considered by some as the place where Peter took refuge to weep over his denial, and by others as the dungeon into which Jesus himself was lowered as he awaited trial before Caiaphas. A number of crosses, considered telltale signs of an ancient veneration, have been engraved and painted on its walls.

Due to the steep slope on which it is built, the church has three levels:

1. Facades and entrance to the church

Each of the mosaics on the four facades illustrates an aspect of what Jesus meant when he told Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin that he was the Messiah.

North facade:

Jesus gives Peter the keys of the Kingdom:

“I will give you the keys.” (Mt 16:19)

The scene takes place at Caesarea Philippi (Banyas) where Jesus asked his apostles “who do you say that I am?” Peter replied forthrightly: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus rewarded his confession of faith by entrusting him with “the keys of the Kingdom of heaven.” Because Jesus' hour had not yet come, he strictly ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. His hour came during his trial before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin when he declared it openly.

East facade:

Bearing his heart on his chest (typical of early 20th-century religious art), Jesus opens his arms

to welcome the weary:

“Come to me all you who are weary.” (Mt 11:28)

At a time when Jesus finds his ministry largely rejected in Galilee, he invites those who found the Pharisaic Law too much of a burden to come to him. He promises rest for those who were rejected by the religious establishment for not keeping both the written and oral traditions that were considered “yoked” together. He merely requires adherence to his person, a light yoke for the true disciple, but a stumbling block for those who had other expectations of the Messiah.

South facade:

Jesus is lowered into a dungeon to await his religious trial before Caiaphas.

“I was plunged into a deep pit.” (Ps 88:7)

Recalling Jeremiah who was let down into a cistern with ropes (Jer. 38:6), the scene portrays Jesus being lowered into a dungeon in the same way, possibly into the deep pit over which the church of St. Peter in Gallicantu is built. The people expected a triumphant Messiah who would free them from Roman occupation. Instead, Jesus came as a Suffering Servant, bringing spiritual rather than political salvation.

West facade:

Jesus is mocked and buffeted at Caiaphas' palace.

The mosaic captures the moment immediately following Caiaphas' guilty verdict when Jesus was about to be blindfolded. It depicts the ill treatment received at the hands of the Sanhedrin: “Some of them began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, ‘Prophecy!’ The guards also took him over and beat him” (Mk 14:65). Ironically, Jesus is being mocked as a prophet just as his prediction of Peter's denial is being fulfilled in the courtyard outside the palace.

Bronze doors

Designer: Benita Khoury, a Christian Palestinian from Jerusalem.

Sculptor: Richard Shiloh, an Israeli artist from Ramle, who also made the crucifix and cross for the sanctuaries of the upper and middle churches, the statue of the Suffering Servant of the Lord on the lower level, and the monument portraying St. Peter's denial of Jesus on the north patio. All were *manufactured* by G.I.I. Castings LTD in Abu Gosh.

Front panel: After the Last Supper, Jesus foretells St. Peter's denial, just as he and his disciples were about to leave for Gethsemane: "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times" (Lk 22:34). Peter protests.

Back panel: Crest with the letters A R T, signifying *Adveniat Regnum Tuum* (Thy Kingdom Come). Taken from the Lord's Prayer, the verse is the motto of the

Assumptionists,

the guardians of the shrine. Founded in France in 1845 by Father Emmanuel d'Alzon, they now number over 900 and are present in 29 countries around the world. They first came to the Holy Land in 1882 and acquired the present property in 1887.

Stone lintel (over the bronze door)

"May the Lord bless your coming in and your going out." (Ps 121, Vulgate version)

The same text, but in Greek, is found next to the church (under the pergola) in a mosaic that was once in the atrium of the crypt of the 7th-century church.

Byzantine mosaic (on right wall)

Earth goddess Gaea (center) surrounded by various types of birds.

Undoubtedly damaged by 8th-century iconoclasts, the mosaic was rediscovered in 1992 on the

property of St. Peter in Gallicantu and restored by the Israel Antiquities Authority.

Byzantine mosaic (on the ground, beneath the Gaea mosaic)

Probably part of the floor of the 5th-century church. It is *in situ*.

2. Upper church

A. Sanctuary

Large mosaic (center)

In the lower portion of the mosaic, Jesus faces the high priest and the Sanhedrin during his religious trial. He has just stated that he is the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One, and that he will come again in glory with the clouds of heaven. Caiaphas (on the right) tears his garments in anger, declaring the statement blasphemous. The Sanhedrin condemns Jesus as deserving to die.

In the upper portion of the mosaic, four angels, carrying the cross of Jesus to his heavenly Father, ask if he deems it an acceptable sacrifice for the salvation of the world. Perplexed and disturbed, the Father ponders possible alternatives to the death of his Son before giving an affirmative answer, as suggested by St. Augustine (De Trinitate, XIII, 10, ¶ 13; De Agone Christi, XI, 12).

Ambo (right)

The symbolism on the ambo (lectern) is based on a passage from the Book of Revelation 4:6-7): "In the center, I [John] saw four living creatures. The first resembled a lion, the second was like a bull, the third had a face like that of a human being, and the fourth looked like an eagle in flight." The early Fathers of the Church applied this symbolism to the four evangelists:

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The *winged man* (upper left) depicts *St. Matthew* who, at the beginning of his gospel, presents Jesus' human genealogy.

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The *winged bull* (lower left) depicts *St. Luke* who, at the beginning of his gospel, recounts the

story of Zechariah in the temple at the hour of the evening sacrifice.

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The *eagle* (upper right) depicts *St. John* who, at the beginning of his gospel, reaches sublime heights in describing the divine origins of Jesus, the Word of God.

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The *winged lion* (lower right) depicts *St. Mark* who, at the beginning of his gospel, calls attention to the voice of John the Baptist crying in the desert wilderness.

B. Cupola: mosaic and stained glass

The motifs in the cupola continue the theme begun in the central mosaic. They depict Jesus (in the center of the stained glass window) coming in power and glory at the end of time to judge the world. As described in Mt 24:30, his sign of the cross (the stained glass window) appears in the heavens, and “his angels, blasting their trumpets, gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.” The twelve apostles join him, sitting on twelve thrones for the judgment of the twelve tribes of Israel (the world) (Mt 19:28).

C. Transepts

Right transept

Top: The Last Supper which Jesus took with his disciples the night before he died. St. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, is shown leaning back against Jesus’ chest, to ask him who his betrayer would be (Jn 13:24).

For the Jewish people, Passover commemorates the great saving event of their deliverance from slavery and their constitution as a people. When God delivered them from Egypt, he ordered each family to immolate a “lamb without blemish” (Ex 12:5), to eat it at night, and to mark with its blood the lintels over their doors. The exterminating angel spared the houses marked with this “sign.” Isaiah applied the image of the lamb to the SERVANT OF THE LORD. Dying that he might pay for the sins of many, the Servant appeared “as a lamb led to slaughter, like a sheep before the shearers, silent and not opening his mouth” (Is 53:7).

For Christians, the Eucharist—instituted by Jesus during a Passover meal—commemorates the new Passover, Jesus' redemptive death and resurrection. He is the new Passover lamb (pictured in the insert at the top of the mosaic), the "Lamb of God" whose blood redeems those who put their faith in him. Like the Servant of the Lord, he "kept silent" before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin.

Bottom: St. John, the evangelist who best heralded the divinity of Jesus, holds the Prologue to his gospel: "In the beginning was the Word."

Left transept

Top: Though Peter's faith had just wavered, Jesus looked at him with compassion. This prompted Peter to remember Jesus' prediction that he would deny him three times. Peter went out and wept bitterly.

Bottom: After sinning and repenting, Peter, wearing a tiara, strengthens the faith of his brothers, as Jesus had requested: "Once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers" (Lk 22:32).

Rear transept

Mary, Queen of Martyrs. When Jesus was first presented in the temple as an infant, Simeon said to Mary, his mother: "A sword will pierce your soul" (Lk 2:35). She later suffered greatly as she saw her son dying on the cross.

D. Side chapels

1. Left side

Mosaic: 3 repentant men

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St. William, hermit. Duke of Aquitaine and persecutor of the Church, he was converted by St. Bernard. Wearing a riveted breastplate, he came to Jerusalem where he spent nine years doing rigorous penance. He died in Italy on February 11, 1157.

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St. Dismas, the “good thief” who, before dying next to Jesus on Calvary, said to him: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Lk 23:42).

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St. Dositheus, monk. A worldly young man of the 6th century, he came to Jerusalem where he was frightened at Gethsemane by a picture of hell. He withdrew to a monastery near Gaza where he became a model of humility and obedience.

Icon: Jesus the Messiah

Jesus has just finished his discourse on the “Bread of Life” in the synagogue of Capernaum (Jn 6:22-59). Most of his listeners find it too much to take and leave (group on the left). Jesus then turns to his apostles (group on the right), telling them that they too may leave if they wish. Anticipating Jesus’ eventual public affirmation before Caiaphas that he is the Messiah, Peter (holding a key) replies: “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. You are the Christ, the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:68-9).

2. Right side

Mosaic: 3 repentant women

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St. Pelagia, recluse. A 5th-century courtesan from Antioch who, after her conversion by St. Nonnus, bishop of Edessa (Urfa, Turkey), withdrew to the Mt. of Olives where she lived a solitary life under the assumed name of Monk Pelagius. She died in 460 after four years of penance.

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St. Mary Magdalene, penitent. Mary Magdalene, as illustrated in this mosaic, has often been confused with the unnamed sinful woman who anointed the feet of Jesus and about whom he said: “Her many sins have been forgiven because she has shown great love” (Lk 7:47). In fact, Mary Magdalene was one of the many who assisted Jesus and the Twelve from their personal resources. She stood by the cross on Calvary. She was the first to become aware of the resurrection.

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St. Mary of Egypt. Given to a sinful way of life in her youth, she came to Jerusalem out of curiosity where she found herself unable to enter the Holy Sepulcher until she had confessed and renounced her sin. She withdrew to the Arabian Desert where, for 47 years, she lived an ascetic life of prayer and penance. She died in 421.

Tabernacle

The bronze tabernacle was created by Professor Augusto Ranocchi from the Academy of Fine Arts, Rome (Italy), and manufactured by Domus Dei, Rome. It contains the Eucharistic reserve, the Bread of Life of which Jesus spoke in the synagogue of Capernaum (cf. Jn 6:22-59 and the ¶ above on the Icon of Jesus the Messiah).

E. Stairway to the middle level: Byzantine mosaic

The mosaic fragment—on the left wall of the landing—was removed from the top of the rock, beneath the tiles on which one stands to view it. It was probably part of the floor on the upper level of the 5th-century church.

3. Lower church

Rock formation

The middle church, whose rear wall is the very rock formation of the hillside, brings to mind the scene of Peter's denial in the courtyard of the high priest, as well as Peter's subsequent repentance and reconciliation. On the right and left-hand sides of the rock formation, there are two indentations, which might possibly have been the corners of the Byzantine church.

Opening over the "dungeon"

An opening in the floor joins the "dungeon" below with the middle church. Since the Byzantine period, at least four churches have been built over this sacred pit. Three Byzantine crosses are engraved in the orifice.

Icons

1. Left side: Peter's denial: "I do not know the man." (Lk 22:57)

Center Peter and the women are seated around a fire.

Foreground Jesus looks at Peter who remembers the prediction.

Top center Perched on a column, a rooster crows.

Background Caiaphas' palace.

2. Center: Peter's repentance: "He went out and wept bitterly." (Lk 22:62)

Peter weeps over his sin in a cave on Mount Sion.

3. Right side: Peter's reconciliation: "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." (Jn 21:17)

Setting This scene, the counterpart of the triple denial, takes place after the Resurrection on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Peter affirms three times that he loves Jesus.

Background Six other apostles are hauling in a large net with 153 fish (the total known varieties of fish at the time), signifying the universal dimension of Christ's message.

Foreground Jesus hands Peter a shepherd's staff to signify Peter's leadership role among Jesus' followers.

Center The bread recalls the discourse on the Bread of Life (given in Capernaum) and the multiplication of the loaves (in Tabgha) which prefigured the Eucharist.

Bronze cross over the altar

The bronze cross over the altar is designed in the Byzantine tradition. It has five medallions:

Center The lamb represents Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Top The two keys signify Peter's spiritual authority and jurisdiction.

Left The fisherman's net symbolizes Peter's role as a fisher of men.

Right The boat symbolizes the Church with Peter at the helm.

Bottom The staff symbolizes Peter's role as shepherd of Jesus' flock.

Wooden cross on the rear wall

This cross was carried during the Assumptionist pilgrimages of NOTRE DAME DE SALUT (Our Lady of Salvation) between 1882 and 1982.

In order to counter the attacks of the French Revolution against the Church and to strengthen the faith of the people, the founder of the Assumptionists thought that his order should mobilize believers to demonstrate their faith publicly, among other ways, through pilgrimages to the holy shrines of Christendom. In 1882, the Assumptionists led the first large pilgrimage from France to the Holy Land since the Middle Ages with 1,013 pilgrims.

Given the absence of adequate services at the time, the Order acquired two steamships to transport pilgrims from Marseille to Haifa, built NOTRE DAME DE FRANCE (today, NOTRE DAME CENTER) to lodge them, and founded what later became a travel agency, NOTRE DAME DE SALUT, to organize logistics. They also raised French Catholic consciousness through a daily newspaper, LA CROIX, and began publishing a pilgrim's newsletter, LE PELERIN.

Except for the steamships which were sold long ago, all these undertakings continue to this day, albeit under new forms and circumstances.

Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament (on upper right)

The bronze tabernacle in the form of a tent signifies that, in giving the Eucharist to his followers,

Jesus “made his dwelling [pitched his tent] among us” (Jn 1:14). The tabernacle was created by Professor Augusto Ranocchi from the Academy of Fine Arts, Rome (Italy), and manufactured by Domus Dei, Rome.

The chapel is reserved for private prayer only.

4. Underground caves

Grotto (guard room)

When these underground caves were rediscovered in 1889, their physical characteristics, particularly the holes pierced in the pillars and walls, their proximity to Caiaphas’ palace, and their contiguity with the Sacred Pit (dungeon), all suggested the public jail where, according to a 4th-century Jerusalem tradition not recorded in the gospels, Jesus would have been scourged not only by Pilate but also by Caiaphas, and where the apostles Peter and John would have been held and scourged for preaching the name of Jesus in the temple area after the resurrection (Ac 4:1-3; 5:17-18; 5:40).

Aided by the context, Christians recall here some of the painful sufferings endured by Jesus during his Passion, regardless of where they took place, as well as by the apostles, the first believers in his name.

A. Sacred pit.

B. Original access to the cavity when its floor was undoubtedly at a higher level.

C. Orifice in the vault, with 3 engraved Byzantine crosses, probably pierced when the cavity’s floor was dug to a deeper level.

D. Opening between the Sacred Pit and the adjacent underground caves.

E. Present entrance to the Sacred Pit, possibly pierced by the Byzantines.

F. Inner courtyard with 7 pillars, all paired symmetrically except one.

G, H. Underground caves whose walls contain several rings.

I. Stepping stone.

J. Access steps to inner courtyard.

P. Stone columns, some of which have been reinforced and covered with cement.

Ancient cisterns

Two ancient cisterns are visible below floor level, one in the corner beside the entrance to the underground caves, the other in the passageway between the caves and the bronze statue of Jesus, the Suffering Servant.

Bronze statue of the Suffering Servant

The statue portrays Jesus, the Servant of the Lord, held captive and praying for the sins of many, as he may have done in the Sacred Pit below.

On the wall next to the statue, texts from Isaiah and St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, state its significance:

"Because he surrendered himself to death and was counted among the wicked, while bearing the sins of many and interceding for transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12)

"God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name." (Phil 2:9)

The title *Servant of the Lord* was first given to Moses, the mediator of the Covenant, and to David, the prototype of the messianic king. It was also applied to the patriarchs, prophets and priests. The role of these servants was to keep the people faithful to the Covenant and to the service of God that it implied.

Jesus took upon himself the mission of Servant. He lived in the midst of his disciples “as one who serves,” eventually giving his life for the redemption of others. Rejected by his own, he was treated as a common criminal and thrown into prison where he prayed for his oppressors. His suffering allowed him to conclude a new Covenant with God. After dying on the cross, he rose again, not to re-establish a temporal kingdom but to enter into his glory and to lead all who believe in him to his heavenly messianic kingdom.

Sacred Pit (dungeon)

On the east side, an opening, 5 steps, and a 3-meter drop beneath them, as well as different chisel marks on the top and bottom portions of the cavity’s walls, all suggest that the floor might originally have been at a higher level and have served as a mikveh (Jewish ritual bath). Subsequently, the floor would have been dug deeper in order to convert the mikveh to a cistern/dungeon. The orifice in the vault was possibly pierced at the time of the conversion, though the date of the latter remains unknown.

Excavations in 1889 uncovered 3 Byzantine crosses engraved in the orifice at the top, 7 red and 4 black oxide crosses on the walls, and the silhouette of a praying figure on the lower south wall. These findings, along with the ruins of a church and a significant number of mosaics, coins and religious objects, testify to the presence of a 5th-century church. Struck by the overall appearance of the pit and prompted by its proximity to Caiaphas’ palace—thought to have been located in this general area—the Byzantines insisted on constructing a church over the pit, despite the added difficulties and costs of building cliff-side, rather than choosing an easier site just a few meters higher up the hill.

But what exactly did the Byzantines wish to commemorate in this holy place? Undoubtedly, an event linked to the Passion, either Jesus’ captivity as he awaited trial before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, or the tears of Peter as he wept bitterly.

Having focused their attention on St. Peter on the middle level of the church, pilgrims today, at this lower level, often choose to remember Jesus, the Suffering Servant of the Lord, placing on his lips the words of the psalmist: “My soul is surfeited with troubles.... You have plunged me

into the bottom of the pit.... I am imprisoned and cannot escape” (Ps 88).

1. Original access to the cavity when its floor was undoubtedly at a higher level.
2. Orifice in the vault, with 3 engraved Byzantine crosses.
3. Different chisel marks on the top and bottom portions of the walls.
4. Opening between pit and adjacent underground caves.
5. 7 red oxide crosses on the walls.
6. 4 black oxide crosses on the walls.
7. Silhouette of praying figure on the lower south wall.

5. Outside archaeological areas

Excavations behind the church

The normal exit from the church is through the door next to the bronze statue. Upon leaving the building, the tour continues to the left.

One passes over the remains of what were probably the foundations of the Byzantine church. To the right, there are various cisterns, possible mikvaot (Jewish ritual baths), and what must have been an ancient mill.

Excavations were first carried out on the property between 1888 and 1909 by Father Germer-Durand, A.A. New excavations were carried out between 1992 and 1999 on the north side of the Ancient Stepped Street. They can be viewed from the observatory that can be accessed at the top of the Holy Stairs.

These recent excavations revealed vestiges of the Herodian, Byzantine, Arab, and Crusader periods. By and large, the Byzantine remains are those of modest dwellings, suggesting the presence of a Christian community living next to the 5th-century church.

Ancient stepped street (holy stairs)

Discovered in 1897, this ancient stepped street once linked the wealthy upper portion of the city with its poorer lower section where two of the population's main water supplies were located: the Gihon Spring and the Pool of Siloam.

It is difficult to date the street exactly because it has often been repaired over the centuries. However, it is not impossible that it existed in Jesus' time, in which case he undoubtedly passed over it whenever he came to Jerusalem.

He probably took it twice the night before he died, first, when, having left the Upper Room after the Last Supper, he crossed the Kidron Valley on his way to Gethsemane, and, second, following his arrest there, when he returned as a captive to await his religious trial before Caiaphas.

The two bas-reliefs at the top of the stairs recall both instances. They were designed by Sister Myrrhia of Darmstadt, Germany, and were executed and offered by the Evangelical Sisterhood and Brotherhood of Mary to which she belongs.

Regarding this stairway, Father Bargil Pixner, OSB, who has particularly studied the site of Saint Peter in Gallicantu, comments as follows:

Some of the steps of the ancient stairway are higher on one end than are on the other. If this feature once characterized the entire stairway, it would explain an enigmatic comment of Aristeeas who states (Pseudo Aristeeas, 106) that the inhabitants of Jerusalem had reserved parts of stairways for those who observed particular rules of purity. As a matter of fact, in New Testament times, the Essenian Quarter was located on the southwestern portion of Mount Sion.

[\[i\]](#)

Courtyard on the north side of the church

1. Bronze monument on east side of patio: Peter denies Jesus (Lk 22:57)

In the presence of a Roman soldier, 2 women question Peter as he sits next to the fire warming himself. He states that he does not know the man. The cock (on the column) is about to crow.

2. Ruins behind the stone benches and beneath the patio floor

A Byzantine monastery probably once stood in this courtyard. Mosaic fragments from its floor lie beneath the present stone pavement.

3. Old stone steps next to the church (behind the cage next to the church)

The old stone steps probably connected the atrium in the crypt with the upper level of the Byzantine church.

4. Ablution basin (next to the church wall)

The large stone basin is probably from the atrium in the crypt of the 5th-century church. It was used to wash one's hands and face before entering the building. Such basins are the prototypes of modern-day holy-water fonts.

5. Mosaic with Greek inscription (on the upper level under the pergola)

The mosaic is a fragment from the floor in the atrium of the crypt after the church's reconstruction in the 7th century. It lies near the spot where it was found by archaeologists.

The inscription, from Psalm 121, reads: "May the Lord guard your coming in and your going out."

The same verse is now found in Latin on the stone lintel over the main entrance of the present upper church.

Alcove beneath the outside stairway (next to the belfry)

1. Engraving

The engraving takes its inspiration from Psalm 42:2: "As the hind longs for the running waters, so my soul longs for you, O God."

It depicts deer drinking from waters flowing from Golgotha where the Lamb of God was sacrificed, suggesting that these waters can quench the deepest thirsts of humankind.

2. Column bases

The column bases are probably from earlier churches on this site.

Ancient vestiges at the entrance to the shop

1. Stone lintel (1st century A.D.)

The stone lintel over the entrance to the shop was found on this property during excavations at the turn of the century.

In the center, a Hebrew inscription (today, illegible) which reads: **LE ACHAM HOUA KORBAN**, meaning: **Depot (korban) for sin-offerings**.

Korban originally meant a gift offered to God (sacrifice), but eventually came to mean the temple treasury (Mt 27:6) which was located within the temple precincts. However, as mentioned in 2 Kgs 12:17, "funds from guilt-offerings and from sin-offerings were not brought to the temple of the Lord: they belonged to the priests."

As the highest cultic, administrative, and judicial authority in the land, the high priest had first choice of the "holy things of the temple" distributed to the officiating priests who lived solely from the offerings brought to the temple. He also had special privileges regarding sin-offerings made to atone for his personal sins, for sins in judgment made by the Sanhedrin, and for communal sins.

The high priest most probably had his own treasury (depot) for the safekeeping of the offerings to which he was entitled. Finding the lintel on this property would seem to suggest that his palace was either here or not far way.

2. Stone cross

On the right-hand side of the shop entrance, a cross is chiseled into one of the stones. Found on the property during excavations, the stone was probably first used in an earlier church on this site, then, to preserve it, re-used in the present structure.

Model of Jerusalem in the Byzantine period (4th to 6th century)

On the hill next to the shop, a model of Jerusalem in the Byzantine period represents a glorious moment in the expansion of Christianity when, in the 4th century, the Roman persecutions had come to an end and Christians, for the first time, were able to build churches commemorating various episodes in the life of Jesus. The model reveals the relief of the city with its hills and its valleys, its streets and its gates, its basilicas and its churches. Seven major churches are represented:

1. The Basilica enclosing the Tomb of Jesus.
2. The Church of Holy Sion.
3. The Church of St. Mary of the Sheep Pool.

4. The Church of St. John the Baptist.

5. The Church of Siloam.

6. The Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu.

7. The Church of St. Mary, the Mother of God (the Nea).

The model as made possible through the collaboration of Professor Jacques Briand, exegete and archaeologist, and Mr. Jean-Claude Marmorat, architect and builder of scale models.

III. History of the Site

Where was Caiaphas' palace? That question has troubled specialists since the end of the last century. There are two schools of thought:

For some, Saint Peter in Gallicantu is indeed the spot where Caiaphas' palace once stood. It is here that Jesus was arraigned before the high priest and the Sanhedrin on Thursday night, before being sent to Pilate. Over the ruins of the palace, several churches have been built since the 5th century. It is only since the Middle Ages (11th century) that the site is no longer considered as the palace of Caiaphas, but only as the one to which Peter withdrew to weep after the denial, hence the name of the church, *at the Cock's Crow*.

For others, the palace of Caiaphas is to be found at the top of the Upper City (the Christian Mount Sion). More precisely, it would be located on the property of the Armenian Orthodox Monastery of Saint Savior, just across from today's Zion Gate, at approximately 300 meters from Saint Peter in Gallicantu, on top of the hill. [\[ii\]](#)

According to this second opinion, the shrine of Saint Peter in Gallicantu is merely the place to which the Apostle fled to weep over his denial, and therefore commemorates only the *tears of Saint Peter*.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the two opinions occasioned lively confrontations, which can be easily understood in the context of the period, when it seemed important to pinpoint with extreme accuracy the exact location of this or that biblical episode, all the while forgetting that Christians of earlier periods, particularly the Byzantines, had other criteria for determining the location of holy sites, among them, the liturgy and easiness of access.

A. Testimony of pilgrims

Literary history records descriptions given by the first pilgrims known to have visited Mount Sion during the period when Byzantine Jerusalem was erecting its first Christian shrines on the presumed locations of the major events in the life of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints. What did they see?

Pilgrim of Bordeaux

This anonymous pilgrim, who visited the Holy Land in 333 A.D., left us a very cold but precise account of his movements. He wrote:

When ascending Sion to leave Jerusalem, you see down in the valley on your left, beside the wall, the pool called Siloam.... As you climb Sion from there, you come upon the place where the house of Caiaphas once stood and where the column to which they tied Jesus in order to scourge him is still standing. From inside the walls of Sion, you can see the place where David had his palace. [\[iii\]](#)

But where was the Pilgrim of Bordeaux when he saw the palace of Caiaphas: on the hillside as he ascended, or at the top of the hill? That question lies at the heart of the discussion, each side answering it differently.

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem 348

The ruins of the palace of Caiaphas were still in existence in 348 A.D., as clearly stated in a catechesis of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem. To prove to the catechumens the reality of Jesus' crucifixion, he refers to the ruins of the once impressive palace of Caiaphas. His listeners knew well what he was referring to:

Do not deny the Crucified. If you do, the house of Caiaphas will arraign you, showing by its present devastation the power of him who was formerly judged there. [\[iv\]](#)

Jerusalem manuscript of the Armenian Lectionary 417—439

At the beginning of the 5th century, the Jerusalem manuscript of the *Armenian Lectionary* states that the palace of Caiaphas is now a station
along the route of the procession from the Mount of Olives to Calvary during the night between Holy Thursday and Good Friday:

And immediately, [from Gethsemane] the procession goes to the courtyard of the high priest, the place of Peter's repentance. The gospel of Saint Matthew is read: "Those who had arrested Jesus led him away to Caiaphas the high priest.... He went out and began to weep bitterly" (Mt 26:57 and 75). [\[v\]](#)

Jerusalem Breviary c. 530

During the next century, a significant change took place in the overall lay of the land. According to the testimony of the *Jerusalem Breviary*, **the house of Caiaphas became a large basilica dedicated to Saint Peter:**

[From the basilica of Holy) Sion, one goes to the house of Caiaphas, the place of Peter's denial where there is a large basilica dedicated to Saint Peter. [\[vi\]](#)

This church was probably constructed thanks to the generosity of Empress Eudocia (c. 401 - 460) whose devotion to the Prince of the Apostles is well known.

Bernard the monk 870

Bernard, a Frankish monk, reaffirmed the presence of the church and recalled the important events that had taken place there:

Due east from Sion, there is the church of Saint Peter, which is built over the house of Caiaphas where the apostle denied his Master. [\[vii\]](#)

Saewulf 1102-03

In 1102-03, i.e., during the period of the Latin Kingdom, Saewulf, an Anglo-Saxon pilgrim, visited the Church of Saint Peter:

Under the wall of the city, outside, on the declivity of Mount Sion, is the Church of Saint Peter which is called Gallicanus [sic], where he hid himself in a very deep cave—which may still be seen—after his denial of our Lord, and there wept bitterly over his crime. [\[viii\]](#)

The text makes two important points: the term *Gallicantus* is now applied to the Church of Saint Peter, and the repentance of the Apostle is associated with a deep pit. There is no longer a mention of the house of Caiaphas.

Subsequent testimonies varied little. What seems to have taken place is a separation between the remembrance of Peter's denial and that of his repentance, the latter henceforth identified, as suggested by Saewulf, with a deep pit that would eventually be filled with rubble and rubbish.

Daniel, Hegumen (abbot) 1106

In 1106, 7 years after the capture of Jerusalem, a Russian hegumen (abbot) named Daniel, after visiting *the new house* of Caiaphas (the House of John the Theologian), went next to the eastern slope of Mount Sion to visit the church of Saint Peter:

Not far [from the house of Caiaphas], on the eastern slope of the mountain, there is a deep pit to which one descends by thirty-two steps. It is there that Peter wept bitterly over his denial. A church dedicated to the holy apostle Peter has been built over this pit. [\[ix\]](#)

Eugesippus 1148

In 1148, a certain Eugesippus explains:

At the cock's crow, Saint Peter fled to a cavern, now called cantus galli (cock's crow), where he shed bitter tears. This cavern is located on the road that descends to Jehoshaphat, below the gate of Mount Sion. [\[x\]](#)

Conclusion

Since it was technically more difficult and economically more costly for the Byzantines to build on the slope of Mount Sion than on the flat surface at the top of the hill, it must be assumed that they deliberately wanted their church on this particular spot, and nowhere else. Unfortunately, they left no indication concerning the precise reason for this choice, except for the fact that they built the church directly over the *Deep Pit*.

Literary history as well as archaeology (cf. Chapter 3) allow us to further assume that they at least wanted to commemorate Peter's tears and repentance.

In the absence of any definitive archaeological evidence disproving that they also wanted to remember Jesus' religious trial before Caiaphas in the general area where it took place, today's shrine preserves both traditions, in the hope that neither will be lost and that Christians, aided by the physical appearance of the site, will be able to deepen their understanding of this entire segment of Christ's Passion.

The turbulent history of the Church: A possible reconstruction

Built around 457-460 by Eudocia, and most likely seriously damaged during the Samaritan revolt of 520 A.D., the basilica was completely destroyed by the Persians in 614.

After the defeat of Chosroes in 627 by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, Modestus—the abbot of Saint Theodosius Monastery and later Patriarch of Jerusalem—reconstructed the Christian shrines. Saint Peter's, among those he rebuilt, was served by the monks of Saint Theodosius (Byzantine coins from this period were found in the church's foundations, on the northwest). The Church was destroyed around 1009 by Hakim, the Fatimide Caliph.

During a number of years, the major events of the Passion of Christ were commemorated in a modest chapel on top of Mount Sion. However, the memory of the *tears of Peter* continued to be kept on the hillside, as evidenced by an anonymous author in 1095. This situation continued until the arrival of the Crusaders in 1099.

The Crusaders built a new church c. 1102, calling it *Sanctus Petrus in Gallicantu*. During the Middle Ages, only the repentance of Peter was commemorated. The Crusader church was destroyed in 1219 and replaced by an oratory which, in turn, was destroyed by el-Malek en-Nasser between 1293 and 1335.

While on pilgrimage, an Augustinian friar, Fra Giacomo de Verona, wrote in 1335:

As one begins to descend Mount Sion in the direction of the Valley of Jehoshaphat (the Kidron Valley), there was once a church, of which there are no longer any traces. It was here that Peter wept over his triple denial. [\[xi\]](#)

It was not until 1888—almost five centuries later—that excavations were carried out by the Assumptionists. These excavations provided the elements that were needed to re-establish the history of the site and to reconstruct an important shrine dedicated to the Passion of Christ. In the 1920s, a new church was built on the ruins of the earlier ones by Fr. Etienne Boubet, A.A., who was also the architect and mosaicist. It was damaged during the war of 1948, then repaired, and subsequently restored and extensively renovated between 1994 and 1997 by Fr. Robert Fortin, A.A., superior, and Mr. Samir Kandah, architect.

B. History of the excavations

1. At Saint Peter in Gallicantu

In May 1887, Count Amédée de Piellat gave the Assumptionists a property located on the eastern slope of Mount Sion. He had purchased it a few years earlier from a fellah because of the presence on it of a cave known as *the grotto of Peter's tears*.

Father Germer-Durand, the first superior of the Assumptionist community, was a man of great talent. Having studied archaeology and epigraphy, he was well prepared to undertake excavations on the property. Early on, the religious became convinced that they would find on their property the ruins of the palace of Caiaphas where Jesus had undergone his religious trial. They were encouraged by the presence of the famous *grotto of Peter's tears*.

The excavations began *officially* in 1888 around this grotto but revealed no traces of the churches mentioned in the ancient pilgrim accounts. Father Germer-Durand and his team of Assumptionist students therefore began excavating more to the north of the grotto. It was here that a brother, digging the soil in order to plant a vine, discovered a grotto/cistern/pit that had surely been the object of Christian veneration during an ancient period. In the orifice at the top of the grotto, the excavators discovered, beneath a layer of plaster, three Byzantine crosses engraved in the stone. When they cleared the cavity of its rubble, they noticed four black crosses and five red crosses on the walls.

Over the next few years, the religious made more interesting discoveries on the property, some of them dating back to the Herodian period, others to the Byzantine or later periods. Little by little, these discoveries led them to believe that this was indeed the site of the *palace of Caiaphas*.

Jewish and Roman Periods

1. A block of stone (2m 50 long by 0m 50 wide) carrying the Hebrew inscription: *Le asham hou korban (this is the offering for sins)*. The excavators

believed that the block and its inscription marked the place where the faithful deposited the many offerings intended for the priests but placed under the supervision of the high priest himself. The block of stone, whose inscription is illegible today, forms the lintel over the door of the souvenir shop.

2. A collection of Jewish weights and measures which are thought to have been the official standards of the day that had been entrusted to the care of the high priest. Unfortunately, most of this precious collection has disappeared as a result of the turmoil in the area since 1948.

3. An ancient stepped street, possibly of the Herodian Period, which linked the upper and lower parts of the city.

4. The Deep Pit (an ancient Jewish ritual bath) and the adjacent common prison (a Jewish tomb transformed into a quarry).

5. Coins from the Hasmonean and Roman Periods, as well as from the War of the Jewish Revolt (66-70 A.D.).

6. A section of the lower aqueduct that brought water to the Temple. It was built during the Hasmonean period (2nd century BC), then subsequently repaired by both Herod and Pilate.

Byzantine Period

1. *Mosaics*, some of which are very beautiful.

2. *Coins*: 9 bronze pieces were found in the foundations on the south-east side of the church, bearing the images of Emperor Theodosius (408-450), Emperor Marcien (450-457), and Emperor Leo the Great (457-474). 5 pieces were found in the foundations on the northwest side of the church, bearing the images of Emperor Phocas (602-610) and Emperor Heraclius (610-641).

3. *Liturgical objects*: a communion spoon, oil lamps with crosses, a polycandilon complete with its chains and a hook, as well as a terracotta dish carrying a Greek inscription: *O agios Theodosios, Monis, Joseph Tapinos.*

4. A *ring* with a rooster in its setting, and a hand *seal* whose handle was in the shape of a rooster.

5. *Vestiges of a Byzantine church*: foundations, capitals with engraved crosses, a block of stone carrying a cross, and marble moldings.

The present church was built in 1931 in neo-Byzantine style. A rooster surmounts its squatty cupola. The goal of the architect, Father Etienne Boubet, was to preserve the most important ancient vestiges uncovered during the excavations, particularly the *Deep Pit*.

Toward new discoveries

Between 1993 and 1999, new excavations were conducted on the property under the direction of Father Florentino Díez and under the auspices of the Spanish Biblical and Archaeological Institute of Jerusalem (Pontifical University of Salamanca). One of the objectives was to ascertain if, around the church, there were any vestiges of dwellings from the Herodian Period (Excavation Report, 1993).

Father Díez formulated an hypothesis: would the palace of Caiaphas, whose traces have not yet been found, be located on the upper portion of the property which has not yet been excavated?

Indeed, it is highly possible that the eastern slope of Mount Sion still contains many archaeological treasures.

2. At the Armenian Monastery of Saint Savior

The Armenian Monastery, 50 meters north of the traditional location of the Cenacle, dates back in its present form

to the 15th century, as evidenced by a large mosaic.

The account of a pilgrim named Theodosius (530 A.D.) is quoted as evidence that the house of Caiaphas was located on this exact spot:

From Holy Sion to the house of Caiaphas, now the Church of Saint Peter, there are 50 paces more or less. [\[xii\]](#)

Admittedly, the approximate distance of 50 meters applies better to the Armenian Monastery than to Saint Peter in Gallicantu. However, the distance is no more than an approximation, given certain other distances advanced by this same author.

In 1971-72, while excavating in the courtyard of the Armenian Monastery, Israeli archaeologists, under the direction of M. Broshi, uncovered luxurious houses of the Herodian Period, which included frescoes containing depictions of birds. [\[xiii\]](#)

Proponents of the Saint Savior opinion believe that the palace of Caiaphas was most likely located at the top of the hill. [\[xiv\]](#) But those in favor of the Saint Peter in Gallicantu find it unlikely that the high priest of Jerusalem would have disregarded, in his own palace, the interdict of the Torah against graven images, when Herod himself did not dare transgress it.

C. Conclusion

Excavations have not yet settled the matter

An objective analysis of the results of the excavations carried out to date seem to indicate that the question of the authenticity of the two sites has not yet been definitively settled and, consequently, that the two opposing opinions have not yet been reconciled. It confirms, however, that the two locations were well within the inhabited section of the city at the time of Christ.

The accounts of pilgrims tend to favor Saint Peter in Gallicantu

Though excavations have not yet settled the matter, the literary tradition leans in favor of Saint Peter in Gallicantu, for, as Albert Storme comments in the Franciscan periodical *La Terre Sainte*:

It is clear that the house of Caiaphas, the courtyard of the high priest, and the Church of Saint Peter in Gallicantu are all one and the same place, and that this place was located on the eastern slope of Mount Sion, at a fairly good

distance from the southern wall of the city. A simple glance suffices to establish that only Saint Peter in Gallicantu fulfills this condition. [\[xv\]](#)

The same conclusion is reached by Father Bargil Pixner, OSB, who writes:

From the description of the Armenian Lectionary, which describes the Holy Week procession in the 5th century, it is clear that the house of Caiaphas was not located at the top of Mount Sion but on its slope, near Saint Peter in Gallicantu. [\[xvi\]](#)

The problem, Father Pixner points out, was compounded by the fact that, after the 9th or 10th century, a duplication of shrines had taken place: the house of Caiaphas was thought to have been located near the basilica of Holy Sion, and the repentance of Peter was thought to have taken place on the slope of Mount Sion. But, concludes Father Pixner:

There is no doubt that the duplication came very late, and that the place identified by the ancient tradition where Jesus was arraigned before the high priest was located in the general area where the Church of Saint Peter in Gallicantu now stands. [\[xvii\]](#)

Such is the current status of the long impassioned debate over the respective authenticity of the two shrines.

D. Thoughts for today

The debate over the location of an essential episode during Christ's Passion should surprise no one. It finds its explanation in history as well as in the mentality of Christian pilgrims, to say nothing of that of the guardians of the various shrines who want to give maximum guarantees to their visitors regarding the authenticity of *their* holy site.

In this context, it is important to point out that Christianity is a religion of incarnation. God came in the person of Jesus, a man living among other human beings. For this reason, his disciples thought it normal to search for the human traces of his passage.

4th to 6th century

When the Roman Empire became Christian (Byzantine) in the 4th century, the monks and local priests tried to localize the places sanctified by Jesus, Mary, and the Apostles, as well as by well-known persons of the Old

Testament. In the process, they created a *geography*

sacred

which began, on orders from Emperor Constantine, with the construction of large churches over the three mystical grottos: those of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the teaching of Jesus about the end of the world (Mount of Olives), and the Holy Sepulcher (Anastasis).

7th to 18th century

This *sacred geography* developed in subsequent centuries. Regarding the house of Caiaphas, 5th-century Christians focused their attention on the

Deep Pit,

engraving and painting a number of crosses on its walls, thereby testifying to the veneration they had for a place they held as sacred. Since there is no formal evidence, it is difficult to know exactly what they were venerating. But we do know that, during the Middle Ages, the site—and therefore the

Deep Pit

—was considered the place where Peter had gone to weep after he had denied his Master.

19th to 21st century

During the last century, the rediscovery of the *Deep Pit* prompted the Assumptionist guardians of the shrine to renew with the ancient tradition that placed the palace of Caiaphas on the eastern slope of Mount Sion. Even if some arguments, when considered independently, seemed inconclusive, their overall convergence suggested that the pit could well have been the place where Jesus was detained while he awaited his interrogation before Caiaphas, and that the area next to it might have been the

common prison

where guards could have watched the prisoners in the pit and scourged the detainees (cf. the rings cut into the stone pillars).

Christian pilgrims, also renewing with the ancient Byzantine tradition, continue to meditate at Saint Peter in Gallicantu on the various events surrounding Jesus' religious trial before Caiaphas. They keep in mind that the courtyard of the High Priest's palace was located "down below" (Mk 14, 66), therefore on the side of a hill, but they relativize the importance of knowing whether the palace itself was located on the precise spot of Saint Peter in Gallicantu or a few meters (yards) higher up this same hill, today called Mount Sion.

IV. Meditating on the Passion at Saint Peter in Gallicantu

Since the events that took place at Saint Peter in Gallicantu lie at the heart of Christ's Passion, it would be difficult to find a more appropriate spot to meditate on Holy Week. [\[xviii\]](#)

Jesus' solemn entry into Jerusalem on "Palm Sunday" (Mt 21:1-11; Mk 11:1-11; Jn 12:12-16)

The crest of the Mount of Olives toward the east suggests the approximate path followed by Jesus and his disciples as they left Bethany to go up to Bethphage and the top of the Mount of Olives. From there, Jesus was able to contemplate, beyond the Kidron Valley, the renovated Jerusalem in which Herod's new Temple sparkled

with particular brilliance. The Dome of the Rock (the Mosque of Omar), with its golden dome, today marks the probable location of the altar of sacrifice.

From the Mount of Olives, Jesus performed two prophetic gestures that the gospels place at the end of his public life:

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The first was **triumphant**. Descending the Mount of Olives, Jesus enters the Holy City amid acclamations, riding not on a horse, the symbol of war, but on a donkey, the mount of a peaceful Messiah. [\[x\]](#)
[\[ix\]](#)

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The second action was **purifying**. Arriving probably through the southern entrance of the Temple mount, [\[xx\]](#) Jesus enters the Temple precincts and drives out the venders, as a sign of the cleansing he would bring to worship through his eventual death and resurrection.

Wednesday in Holy Week

Passover is approaching. Two days before the feast—which, in the year 30, fell on a Sabbath—the Sanhedrin met, most likely in the palace of High Priest Caiaphas, to decide the case of the prophet from Nazareth.

In Herod's former palace, located in the Upper City, approx. 500 meters north of Saint Peter in Gallicantu, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, has arrived from Caesarea to take care of any possible troubles that might arise during the feast.

Everything is in place for the drama about to unfold.

Holy Thursday

The last series of events leading to Jesus' death began with the Supper he shared with his apostles on Thursday night. The room shown today as having been the place where the Supper took place only goes back to the 14th century. But it is almost certain that it is built over a very ancient Judeo-Christian *synagogue* where the first Christians used to meet (today, David's tomb).

Descent to Gethsemane

The Supper is over. The bread Jesus broke and the cup he shared were his way of saying good-bye and, more importantly, of continuing his presence. Judas has removed his mask and left the group to collect his treason money.

Jesus chose to spend that night, not in Bethany with his friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary, but at nearby Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives.

During the night, lighted by the full moon of April, Jesus and the eleven apostles descend Mount Sion toward the Kidron Valley, undoubtedly taking the ancient stepped street next to the Church of Saint Peter in Gallicantu.

The group exits the city through Water Gate and walks along the edge of the ancient City of David (visible from the Belvedere). After reaching the bottom of the Kidron Valley, they walk past the ancient Hellenistic tombs dating from the 3rd century BC and still standing today.

At this spot, their path crosses the Kidron whose waters, swelled by the spring rains, are probably gushing through the valley, all the way to the Dead Sea. On the left, they pass in front of the gigantic mass of stones that form the southeast corner of the Temple, known as the *pinnacle*.

Jesus then enters the property of Gethsemane (*oil press*, in Aramaic), surely a place where he usually spent the night when he came to Jerusalem.

The olive grove was about to become the place of Jesus' agony, i.e., of the struggle during which he would pray very intensely to his Father that he be spared the *cup* of suffering, but during which he would trustingly surrender himself to him.

[\[xxi\]](#)

It was here that Jesus was arrested. [\[xxii\]](#)

Arraignment before High Priest Caiaphas

After being arrested by a band of Roman soldiers, their tribune, and the Jewish guards, Jesus, in Saint John's gospel, is brought first to Annas for questioning. But, in the three synoptic gospels, he is simply arrested by the Temple guards and led, bound, to the palace of Caiaphas. This palace, regardless of its exact location, was in the Upper City (today Mount Sion), either at the top or on the slope. It is therefore probable that the escort walked up the ancient stepped street next to Saint Peter in Gallicantu to reach the palace.

Jesus' appearance before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin marked the hour of his confrontation with the Jewish religious authorities: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus answered: "I am" (Mk 14:61-62).

It also marked the hour of the denial of Saint Peter who, at Caesarea Philippi, had recognized Jesus as the Messiah, i.e., as the Prophet anointed by God.

The shrine of Saint Peter in Gallicantu is an excellent place to meditate on the many forms that denial can take. The glance Jesus gave Peter in the courtyard of the high priest made him realize his frailty, but it also strengthened his native generosity.

According to the gospel of Saint John, Jesus would have been interrogated all night long, first by Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, then by Caiaphas himself. However, the three synoptic gospels do not speak of the trial before Annas. In Saint Mark's gospel, the interrogation before Caiaphas could have lasted all night. [\[xxiii\]](#) And, in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, there would have been two interrogations, one during the night, the other at daybreak. In this case, Jesus would have been kept somewhere between interrogations. A very ancient tradition says that it would have been in the *Deep Pit* at Saint Peter in Gallicantu.

At any rate, according to Saint Mark's gospel, the high priest declared, after hearing Jesus say that he would sit at the right hand of God: "You have heard the blasphemy. What is your verdict? They all concurred in the verdict "guilty," with its sentence of death" (Mk 14:64).

Good Friday: Jesus is condemned to death by Pontius Pilate

Day had just dawned. The servants of the high priest led Jesus to the Praetorium (the hall of judgments) of the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, who had installed himself most probably in Herod's former palace on the north side of the Upper City (today the Citadel next to Jaffa Gate).

Very early, Jesus was brought before the governor who was intrigued by the Galilean. According to the evangelists, Pilate looked for ways to free Jesus. But exasperated by the obstructionism and threats of Jesus' Jewish accusers, he "had him scourged and handed him over to be crucified" (Mk 15:15).

Death and Resurrection

Starting at the Praetorium, it becomes impossible for a pilgrim standing at St Peter in Gallicantu to follow visually the route taken by Jesus on his way to Golgotha, the hill on which he was crucified just outside the then-existing walls of the city.

From Saint Peter's, therefore, it is not possible to see the two domes of the basilica marking the place of Jesus' death and resurrection, the church which Western Christians call the Holy Sepulcher, but which Eastern Christians call the Anastasis (Resurrection).

Ascension and Pentecost

But from Saint Peter's Belvedere, it is possible to localize the traditional site of the Ascension which took place 40 days later on the Mount of Olives, as described by Saint Luke (Lk 24:50; Ac 1:4). It is also possible to see the Upper Room where, 50 days after Passover, the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles and Mary:

After [the Ascension], the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives—a mere Sabbath's journey away. Entering the city, they went to the Upper Room where they had been staying (Ac 1:12).

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit (Ac 2:1-4).

The early Christians understood the event as heralding a new action of God in the history of salvation, viz., the initiation of a New Covenant with its unique gift of his Spirit. As the new People of God, the first community of believers in Jesus began gathering there to pray in his name. They first transformed the place into a Judeo-Christian synagogue and eventually into a church, known as the “Mother of all churches.”

Later, in fact much later, the Upper Room where the Last Supper took place, would be localized there, as would the place of the Blessed Virgin Mary's Dormition.

The Assumptionist guardians of the shrine, as well as the Oblate Sisters of the Assumption who are stationed there, are pleased to welcome you to this Holy Site which speaks so movingly to Christian pilgrims from around the world.

They make theirs the greeting found in Greek on the 5th-century mosaic located next to the church and repeated in Latin on the lintel over the main entrance of the church: “May the Lord bless you as you enter and as you leave.”

Notes

[i] Bargil Pixner, *Wege des Messias und Stätten der Urkirche*, Brunnen Verlag, Giesse/Basel, 1991.

[ii] See page 25 for an analysis of the excavations carried out in 1971-72.

[iii] Item exeuntibus Hierusalem, ut ascendas Sion, in parte sinistra et deorsum in valle iuxta murum est piscina, quae dicitur Silua.... In eadem ascenditur Sion et paret, ubi fuit *domus Caifae* sacerdotis, et *columna adhuc* ibi est, in qua Christum flagellis ceciderunt. Intus autem intra murum Sion paret locus, ubi palatium habuit David (D.

Baldi,
Enchiridion Locorum Sanctorum,
Jerusalem, 1982, No. 833).

[iv] Noli negare Crucifixum. Si enim negaveris..., arguet te *domus Caiphae*, quae praesenti sua devastatione ostendit potentiam eius, qui ibi iudicatus est (
Cat.
13,
PG
33, 817).

[v] Athanase Renoux, "Le Codex Arménien, Jérusalem 121," *Patrologia Orientalis*, 35, 163 et 36, 168, Brepols, Turnhout/Belgique, 1971.

[vi] Inde [de sacrario sanctae Sion] vadis ad *domum Caiphae*, ubi negavit sanctus Petrus. Ubi *est basilica grandis sancti Petri* (D.

Baldi,
p. Cit.
No. 836).

O

[vii] In directum autem ad orientem [ecclesiae S. Stephani in Sion] est *ecclesia* in honore *beati Petri* in loco in quo Dominum negavit (D. Baldi,
Ibidem,
No. 840).

[viii] Sub muro civitatis forinsecus, in declivio montis Syon, est *ecclesia sancti Petri quae Gallicanus* vocatur, ubi ipse in cripta profundissima, sicut ibi videri potest, post negationem Domini se abscondit, ibique reatum suum amarissime deflevit (D. Baldi,
Ibidem,
No. 845).

[ix] D. Baldi, *Ibidem*, No. 846.

[x] D. Baldi, *Ibidem*, No. 849.

[xi] D. Baldi, *Ibidem*, No. 863.

[xii] De sancta Sion ad *domum Caiphae*, quae est modo *ecclesia sancti Petri*, sunt plus minus passi numero L (D. Baldi, *Ibidem*, No. 835).

[xiii] M. Broshi, "Excavations in the House of Caiaphas, Mount Zion," in Yigal Yadin, *Jerusalem Revealed*, Jerusalem 1976, 57-60.

[xiv] Murphy O'Connor, *The Holy Land*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York, 1998, p. 107.

[xv] Albert Storme, *La Terre Sainte*, November-December 1993.

[xvi] Bargil Pixner, *Op. Cit.*

[xvii] Bargil Pixner, *Ibidem*.

[xviii] Our description of Jesus' last week follows the official *lunar* calendar of the Sadducees and Pharisees of the time, which the evangelist John would also have followed. But it is interesting to note that, in Jesus' time, a *solar* calendar also existed that was followed by the Essenes, and eventually, from a liturgical point-of-view, by a certain number of Christians who were close to this milieu. Several ancient Christian sources mention such a calendar, particularly the *Didache* (2nd century), the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (3rd century), and Epiphanius of Salamis (4th century).

According to this second calendar, Jesus would have celebrated the Passover with his disciples on Tuesday evening and would have been arrested at Gethsemane in the early hours of Wednesday morning. According to the *Didache*, this explains why Christians fasted on Wednesday and Friday. While Jews fasted on Monday and Thursday, Christians wanted to underline the day of the arrest and death of the Lord.

After his arrest, Jesus would therefore have gone first to Annas, then to Caiaphas. The presence in the palace of Caiaphas of the column to which Jesus was tied for his scourging, noted by the Pilgrim of Bordeaux, would suggest

the possibility that he might have been scourged there (40 lashes, less one). His trial before the Sanhedrin would have taken place on Wednesday. The following day, Thursday, he would have been brought before Pilate where he spent that day and night. He was crucified on Friday. This spacing of the events would have respected Jewish law, which required a waiting period of one day between the issuance of a death sentence and its execution. (Bargil Pixner, *Ibidem*, as well as *With Jesus in Jerusalem*, Corazin, Rosh Pina, 1996)

[xix] According to tradition, Jesus would have entered through the Golden Gate which, though closed today, is still visible.

[xx] Excavations have allowed archaeologists to restore the entrance to the area where the vendors were located. The steps leading up to the Temple can be seen from the Belvedere.

[xxi] The Garden of Olives is barely visible from the Belvedere, but the onion domes of the Russian Orthodox Monastery of Saint Mary Magdalene help locate it.

[xxii] Today the Church of All Nations, on the edge of the Kidron, commemorates Jesus' agony.

[xxiii] The interrogation of Jesus by the high priest and the Sanhedrin is one of the most complex problems associated with Jesus' Passion. Did they have the authority to condemn someone to death? Cf. Jean Potin, *Jésus, L'histoire vraie*, pp. 453 and ff. Le Centurion, Paris, 1994.

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