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Building a new Jerusalem

by Michael Binyon



Tourists outside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem's Old City last week

Photo: CNS/Debbie Hill

Crumbling masonry, huge tax demands and falling congregations have brought the squabbling Christian communities in Jerusalem together for the first time in over 500 years

The agreement announced last month by the leaders of the three Churches guarding the Holy Sepulchre to undertake extensive repairs to its drains, electricity and other infrastructure confirms that, for the first time in centuries, Jerusalem's Christian communities are coming together to agree on how to protect the site where Christ is believed to have been entombed after his crucifixion.

The multi-million-dollar restoration will be the second phase of recent efforts to prevent the Holy Sepulchre from collapsing. Earthquakes, throngs of pilgrims, candle soot, grime and the wear and tear of centuries have left the ancient marble structure dirty and dangerously insecure. The Israeli authorities briefly closed the entire complex in 2015, declaring it unsafe, and threatened to step in to make compulsory repairs.

For centuries, the marble shrine, known as the Edicule, which was extensively rebuilt in Ottoman times, has been controlled by the Greek Orthodox, Armenian and Catholic Churches

(known as “the Latins”). So fierce was their rivalry, and so jealous were they of their privileges, that they rarely agreed on any changes or repairs, however small.

After a severe earthquake in 1927 the entire building became unsafe. For years it was propped up by emergency scaffolding erected by the British during their mandate.

The agreement by the three Churches to undertake major repairs – and to share the cost – is a far cry from only 20 years ago, when pilgrims used to arrive at the Holy Sepulchre to find monks fighting each other with broomsticks for having “trespassed” by sweeping a fragment of floor area belonging to a rival church. The rivalry was so bitter that in 1810, when workmen employed by the Greek Orthodox Church began to repair the Edicule, armed Armenian monks opened fire on them from a nearby gallery, killing eight of the workers.

The eagerness of the Churches to cooperate now reflects the common threats that they face: the huge emigration of Christians from the city, sweeping new Israeli taxes on all Church property and the scandal of the hotly contested sale of leases on key Christian sites in the Old City to an extremist Jewish settler group, aiming to “judaicise” Jerusalem. As a result, the Churches have set up a council of all 13 Churches in the city to co-ordinate their views. The Anglicans provide the secretariat, which convenes the council every two months.

Two years ago the former mayor of the city, Nir Barkat, suddenly announced new property taxes on Church land. Backdated for the past 27 years, the bill amounted to some \$200 million. Fearing that this would bankrupt them, the Churches reacted swiftly. In February last year they took a step not seen for at least 500 years. The Holy Sepulchre was closed for three days. This caught the attention of the public around the world, especially in the United States. It also alarmed the Israeli Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, who was eager to underpin White House support for his government. Within days the new tax had been set aside. But the Churches fear fresh attempts will be made to tax their extensive properties.

Another huge challenge that the Churches face is the fallout from the sale of leases in dubious circumstances 15 years ago by the Greek Orthodox Church to Ateret Cohanim, a right-wing settler organisation whose long-term aim is to “redeem” land in Jerusalem and expel some of the city’s long-term residents. When news of the secret deal was splashed across an Israeli newspaper in 2005 it caused fury and consternation among the Christians in Jerusalem, who are mostly Palestinian Arabs. The Greek Orthodox Patriarch, who claimed he did not know the details, was deposed within weeks and reduced to the status of a monk.

A new patriarch, Theophilos III, was elected and promptly declared that the leases had been obtained by bribery and fraud, without the agreement of the Holy Synod or the signature of former Patriarch Irineos, and were invalid. But according to a judgment issued by the Supreme Court last week, the properties were legitimately acquired from the Patriarchate by foreign intermediaries acting on behalf of Ateret Cohanim. They include the Imperial and the Petra hotel, just inside the Jaffa Gate, at the most popular entry-point into the Old City, and also the junction of the Christian, Muslim and Armenian quarters. Unless new evidence can be found, there is now no further appeal.

This is a huge blow to the Christian communities. They fear that it will increase the pressure on their dwindling congregations and encourage Israeli politicians to impose new taxes or pass laws to make them release land for housing.

Most worryingly, the judgment is seen as a challenge to the Status Quo, the set of customs

and agreements, many dating back to Ottoman times, under which Church rights and properties are regulated and protected. There has been an informal agreement with the Jerusalem mayor's office and with the Israeli government that this freezing of the Churches' standing in the city should not be changed until the overall political status of Jerusalem has been settled in an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

The Catholic Church in Jerusalem is especially concerned at recent events. Like most of the other Churches, it has a loyal Palestinian membership, which puts pressure on the leadership to take a more overtly pro-Palestinian political position. The Catholic Patriarchs of Jerusalem – Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa is currently apostolic administrator of the Latin Patriarchate pending the appointment of a Patriarch – like the heads of the other Churches, have been reluctant to do this, fearing it would jeopardise working relations with the Israeli authorities and ensnare the Church in political disputes. The head of the Franciscans in the Holy Land, Fr Francesco Patton, is the *custos* – literally, “guardian” – of the Holy Sepulchre, which the Franciscans own and administer in common with the Greek and Armenian patriarchates. All three communities need a good working relationship with the mayor's office.

But with the shift to the right in Israeli politics, and with the widespread support for Ateret Cohanim and its aims in key Israeli institutions, including the judiciary, the mayoral office and the Knesset, the Churches fear that they will soon be the target of a new political campaign against their position. “They want to keep the Churches as museums for tourists without any of the Christians here,” is how one anxious Palestinian expressed the widely felt fears.

The threat to the survival of ancient Christian communities in the Middle East has done more to cement Church unity in Jerusalem than 500 years of frigid co-existence. The *custos* and other senior Catholic clergy welcome this unity. They see it as more relevant to the day-to-day work of the Churches in trying to bolster the embattled position of Christians in the Holy Land than conferences on ecumenism or joint statements on doctrine. And for the pilgrims arriving in ever greater numbers in Jerusalem, the new welcoming atmosphere in the repaired Holy Sepulchre increases their veneration and awe for this historic birthplace of their faith.

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