

JANUARY 20, 1842

Alphonse Ratisbonne was born of a Jewish family but had hardly any religious education. When he was 27 years old, while travelling in Rome, he found himself in the church of St. Andrea delle Fratte with a friend who had business with one of the priests. Alphonse described what happened in these words:

“The church seemed to become dark except for a simple chapel where all the light appeared to be concentrated. Raising my eyes towards that chapel, which was so radiant, I saw, standing on the altar, alive, tall, majestic, all beautiful and merciful, the most Blessed Virgin Mary.....She said nothing to me but I understood everything.....The most intense joy burst forth in the depth of my soul.”

Alphonse was baptized on 31 January 1842 and chose the name of “Marie” and was ordained a priest on 23 September, 1848.

JERUSALEM, 1855

“All my life I had experienced an irresistible attraction for Jerusalem”

Father Mary made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1855 and on 12th September prayed at the church of the Holy Sepulchre. He wanted to find a place where Sion could be established in Jerusalem. An educational institute had already been set up by the two brothers in Paris, where the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion was founded in 1846. Bishop Valega, Patriarch of Jerusalem said to Father Mary, “I give you full authorization to establish your work in my diocese.”

BEGINNINGS OF THE FIRST COMMUNITY 1856

Four sisters, Sr. Noemi, Sr. Electa, Sr. Victorine and Sr. Marthe were named for the foundation in Jerusalem, arriving there in May 1856.

“A provisional house has already been rented...I began an intense search for the permanent place that our Sisters were to occupy in Jerusalem”

A property adjoining the arch, called “Arch of Ecce Homo” was discovered among ruins and rubbish. It was estimated at a value of 17,000 francs and later at 30,000 francs. Finally it was estimated at 70,000 francs when Fr. Marie returned with the money humbly begged from royalty, princes, dukes, counts and earls.

THE ECCE HOMO

On November 24, 1857, thanks to funds advanced by his nephew Edmond, the contract of acquisition was definitively signed.

“Let us begin by buying the ruins in question, and let us also buy as much as we can of the other side of the arcade.”

“The number of workers at the Ecce Homo was considerable; more than 20 bricklayers and nearly 150 laborers. At the quarry, 60 to 70 stonecutters as well as miners and camel drivers.”

“One precious discovery after the other was made....as the work of excavation and clearance continued and was completed.”

“My trust is unshakeable because the Virgin of Sion is faithful to her promises.”

January 20, 1858: First Mass celebrated by Father Marie under the Ecce Homo Arch.
At the time there were eight sisters.

January 20, 1862: Inauguration of the Ecce Homo Convent

1865: There were 16 sisters and 50 children

April 3, 1868: Blessing of the Ecce Homo Sanctuary

“There are Muslims, Greek Orthodox, Greeks and Armenians, Greek Uniates-Copts, Maronites- but the large majority are Latins. Two little Jewesses were confided to us by their father as day students.....along with the Pasha’s daughter.”
(Letter from Sr. Claire)

1881: There were 186 children and 24 sisters.

1882: During the first pilgrimage.....”*About a hundred ladies were welcomed in the Ecce Homo Convent.”*

“Mary took me by the hand and brought me to Ecce Homo Convent.”
Sion is the work of Mary’s gaze. Jerusalem is the work of her heart.”

OUR MOST PRECIOUS DISCOVERIES

EXTRACTS FROM THE HOUSE JOURNAL

- 16 May 1859** Today the first work at Ecce Homo commenced. The earth was moved and the excavations begun. There are 25 workmen.
- 21 May 1859** Halil (the general supervisor) has bought a quarry of stones for 1,000 piastres and 2 rotols of coffee (according to local custom). The stones are excellent, they say.
- 27 May 1859** We cannot get enough donkeys to carry away the earth.
- 4 July 1859** Beginning of the foundation digging and the ancient ground of the Via Dolorosa was found to be already there. The huge paving stones testify that our property was probably once a large palace or court.
- 7 July 1859** Today we found a large tunnel probably extending from Herod's palace to the Temple. The stones are marvellous and very well preserved. The architect says it is magnificent work which may date from the time of the Jews.....
- 26 July 1859** Beautiful stones from the time of Solomon were found in the foundations.
- 15 Sept.1859** Something like a large staircase was found which probably led to the underground. The architect hardly knows what it is.
- 23 Sept. 1859** Many other objects were found, such as stones, coins, valuable for antiquarians.
- 25 Feb.1860** About 150 people are working on the building, 6 masons, 60 stone cutters....
- 4 June 1860** The tunnel, which opens on this part of the ground, is full of water, which will be useful in the building work.
- 10 June 1860** A stairway of marvellous stones leading to the tunnel was found
- 16 June 1860** On one side of the rock emerging from the ground and on the other side, one or two steps away, there is a deep chasm or depression.
- 29 Nov.1868** (in the tunnel) A passage 70m. long and 2m. wide between huge rocks which have been shaped.
- 22-23 Mar.1933** When doing some work on the Lithostrotos our mother, (Mere) Godeleine) discovers a new Roman game, very clear and very interesting. There is a crown in this game.

These authentic ruins give the visitors the opportunity to ponder on:

- **the opening of the canal of the Hasmoneans (2nd century BCE)**
- **the cistern of Herod, named Strouthion (35 BCE)**
- **the Roman pavement (2nd cent. CE) and the adjacent Roman street.**
- **the small Roman Arch (2nd cent. C.E.) in the Basilica**

ST. JOHN IN MONTANA (Ein Karem) 1860

In 1860: Fr. Marie rented *“a house close to the sanctuary of the Visitation as a cure for the almost continual fevers”* which were common in Jerusalem at this time.

On January 20 1861: From the terrace of this house Fr. Marie saw
“a rainbow that moved to stand just over the field we had in mind because of its beautiful situation”.

1861: contract of ownership

1862: foundations

1865: 50 children – most of these were Christian orphans who had fled the massacres perpetrated by the Druze.

“The big girl on my right is a Lebanese Maronite. In front of her is a charming child from Gaza. On the other side, a young Greek Orthodox with black eyes. I’m giving my hand to my little Zeli, a very nice Jewess. At my feet, a child from Jerusalem and a Samaritan.”

This house was set up as a boarding school for orphans and later as a school and dispensary at the service of the village which was Arabic at that time. Since the creation of the State of Israel it has been a house of welcome which has helped to foster good relations between Christians and Jews.

1971: A contemplative community of the Sisters of Zion was established on the grounds of the Ein Karem property. It was warmly welcomed by the apostolic sisters.

2001: Chemin Neuf, a community from the charismatic renewal founded in France, whose aim is the unity of Christians began collaboration with the Notre Dame de Zion community in the management of the house.

ST. PIERRE de SION – RATISBONNE –1874

1874: Fr. Marie wanted to set up a training school for young boys. He began on September 8th, a provisional dwelling with 5 staff and 15 young Arabic boys.

1876: Acquisition of grounds

“ There are 70 olive trees and other kinds of trees. From Jaffa Gate the ground gradually rises...that is to the highest point on the horizon.”

1879 In September transfer to the permanent buildings (now Schmueel Hanigid Str.)

“Shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, upholsterers, saddlers, wheelwrights turners, bakers and gardeners are at work”

The school continued until 1948. After the war of Independence, the institution received many Jewish refugees. In 1970, Ratisbonne Institute became the “Centre of Jewish Studies for Christians” under the direction of the Brothers of Zion. Jewish and Christians professors taught along side with the Sisters and Brothers of Zion. In 1985, the Institute Catholique, in Paris assumed the academic responsibility of these studies. A further development in 1986 was the introduction of an English from the Univer-

sity of St. Michael's College in Toronto. Both Institutes granted a Masters in Theology and Jewish Studies. In 1998 this Institution became a Pontifical University. The programs continued even though the property was given to the Vatican in 1984. The closure of this Institute by the Vatican occurred in 2001. At present the Brothers of Sion occupy part of this building and the Salesian seminary occupies the rest. The Brothers of Sion continue to study and to teach the Jewish sources of Christianity and to maintain their prominent library.

JOURNEYS

The foundations of Ecce Homo, Ein Karem and Ratisbonne were possible only through the efforts of Fr. Marie.

1st trip: June 23 1856 to October 2, 1857

Begging tour in view of buying Ecce Homo – France, Spain, Belgium

2nd trip: April 15, 1858 to March 20, 1860

Begging tour for Ecce Homo – France, Belgium, Scotland, Ireland, England

3rd trip: April 24, 1862 to April 28 1864

Begging tour for St. Jean in Montana – France, England, Monaco

4th trip: August 13, 1866 to May 20, 1867

Called to his sister Ernestine who was very ill and who died on Oct.31 1866.
Begging Tour France, Germany, Prague, Austria.

5th trip : September 5, 1873 to June 12, 1874

Begging tour for Ratisbonne – France, Turkey

“Since Alexandria the weather has become awful. We are three days late, there is incredible suffering, a five-day quarantine in the Marseille lazaret, unrelenting fevers.”

6th trip: September 26, 1877 to July 22, 1878, returning to see Fr. Theodore again,

who was seriously ill. Theodore died on 10 January, 1884.

France, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Italy, England.

THE FINAL JOURNEY MAY 1884 AT THE AGE OF 70

April 1884: *“I am asking the Blessed Virgin to let me die at the age (70) as she did and she is so good that I am sure she will give me this!*

“ But there is no proof that the Blessed Virgin died at that age.”

the sister replied.

“That is my belief and I will be the proof”

He was 70 on 1 May. On the same evening he fell ill with influenza.

Tuesday, 6 May:

“A little before 8 o’clock a brilliant light suddenly illumined Fr. Marie’s face which became radiant. His head was slightly raised. His eyes opened and were full of life, expressing first surprise then rapture. They fixed on the corner of the room whence the Light came. This ecstasy lasted a few minutes. Then gently the light disappeared. His eyes closed again and Fr. Marie gave two gentle sighs.” (Mother Eleonore)

His very simple grave is at Ein Karem.

EDUCATION FROM 1856 TO 2006

“From 1856 to 1876 the number of sisters increased from 4 to 22; the children from 12 to 110: Christian orphans boarders and young girls, Catholic day boarders, children from the neighbourhood” (Annals, P. Marie).

Very soon, the orphans (named “Bleuettes”) and the boarders formed two groups to which a third was added which was called “the Neophytes” “Second Boarders” or “St. Alphonse Class,” at various times.

A moving account records the arrival at Sion in 1890 of 7 Jewish children, because the German charitable organizations were no longer able to look after them. One of the children became Sr. Gila, who was deported from France and perished in a concentration camp in 1944.

One of the Superiors, Mother Godeleine, was very important in the history of the Ecce Homo. At her funeral (15 June 1960), a young boy walked in front of the coffin carrying a cushion with the decorations she had received: Legion d’Honneur, Nichan arabe, Aigle Blanc de Serbie, Medaille de la Propagation de la Foi. Mother Aline succeeded her as Superior. She wrote her Ph.D thesis on the Lithostrotos (May 1955, Sorbonne, Paris). Whether under the reign of the Sultan (1956-1922), the British Mandate (1922-1948) or the Jordanian authority (1948-1967) the school continued. An English school had been opened at the request of the Latin Patriarch, at first at the Ecce Homo and then at Katamon between 1934 and 1948.

The school continued to grow in numbers and became known for its high standard of education. Students finishing high school could get into universities with their three Matriculation Certificates in hand: the General Certificate of Education, the French Brevet and the Arabic Tawjihi. Boarders and day-students came from Arab countries; Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

After June 1967, there was a new adaptation and urgent need to face the reality of the situation. A great transformation took place thanks to a deep desire and aspiration of Mother Aline and Kalman Yaron (Director of the Martin Buber Centre for Adult Education in the Hebrew University) to change the empty school into an “oasis of peace” by teaching Hebrew to Palestinians and Arabic to Israelis, and encouraging them to know and respect each other’s culture. In spite of the difficulties, the success of this project revealed the great need to meet under the same roof in a neutral place. This ulpan was transferred to the newly built University on Mount Scopus. (1974)

In 1981 a Biblical Renewal Program in French and English was inaugurated. The focus of the program is a study of the Bible through the text and excursions to explore the land and for a deeper understanding of Jesus and his heritage. It is very important to remember that our Christian roots are in Jewish traditions which shaped the religious experience of Jesus, and later, the Church. A Spanish program will soon begin.

THE PILGRIMAGES

“Through his connections with Europe Fr. Mary greatly contributed to an awakening love for the Holy Land. For the last 30 years this love has been expressed in an ever greater number of pilgrims”.

(letter of P.Mattieu Lecomte, 1884)

This comment of 1884 reflects what has been lived at Ecce Homo from 1860. The first visitors were the marine crews of cruiser-ships, torpedo boats and battleships. Very soon the “whole world” arrived by “caravans” (in convoy). Innumerable religious dignitaries, diplomats, the “heads crowned” and later “uncrowned”! Having generously welcomed Fr. Marie on his begging tours it is likely that these eminent benefactors wanted to meet him again and reflect on his work. The total number of annual visitors was around 200,000 during the greater part of the 20th century.

ECCE HOMO TODAY

At the Ecce Homo Convent, one can see a Roman Arch, a Pavement, a Roman street and a Herodian Cistern. The arch, for some time known as the Ecce Homo Arch actually dates from Hadrian in 135 CE. It is thought that this arch was an entrance to a large Roman place. The large paving stones found below the convent are believed to have been transported from the Antonia Fortress which was in ruins from the year 70 CE. A cistern built by Herod in 35 BCE is also visible at this site. This was an open cistern (Strouthion) which helped to meet the needs for water of both the Temple and the Antonia Fortress. In 135 CE, Hadrian had a vault built over this cistern. Adjacent to the pavement is a Roman street dating from the 1st century CE.

Ecce Homo has always been a house for pilgrims and guests. At the closing of the school (1967) the classrooms and offices were transformed into guest rooms in order to accommodate a greater number of guests. It is a wonderful privilege to be in the Old City, in the Arab quarter, near to the Holy Sepulchre, close to the Western Wall and to view the city from the beautiful terraces. It is an excellent location for guests and we welcome people from all over the world. Over the years reservations often had to be made a year in advance by those who wished to enjoy the beauty of the house and its unique terraces. During many years students from the “Centre Richelieu” (Sorbonne, Paris) came by the hundreds with well known guides, Pere Lustiger, among others. American colleges (St. Olaf, Dickinson) registered at the Ecce Homo for their university courses.

The Biblical Program continues to offer a variety of courses in both French and English. Through the guest house we can provide work for about 20 persons and so contribute to the economy of the country. We have always been blessed with wonderful volunteers and associates who have assisted us in the various tasks of the house.

The mission of Ecce Homo is to welcome pilgrims, guests and students as well as to provide opportunities for experiencing the Word of God, the People and the Land. Our inspiration is God’s faithful love for the Jewish people with whom we, as Christians, share a common heritage. It is an **“*involvement in the service of the Church, the Jewish People and the world.*”** (Constitutions NDS. 1984) Through this ministry of reconciliation with all peoples we are called to work for peace and justice. We believe that the uniqueness of this land and its religions heighten our awareness of the essential need to treat each one with sensitivity and respect.

“To speak of Jerusalem is to speak of our charism: Jerusalem incarnates our charism. Its position at the heart of the land of Israel is an enduring witness of God’s promise to the Jewish people for all humanity. Jerusalem is a unique place to live the integration of our charism.” (General Chapter, NDS. 2004)