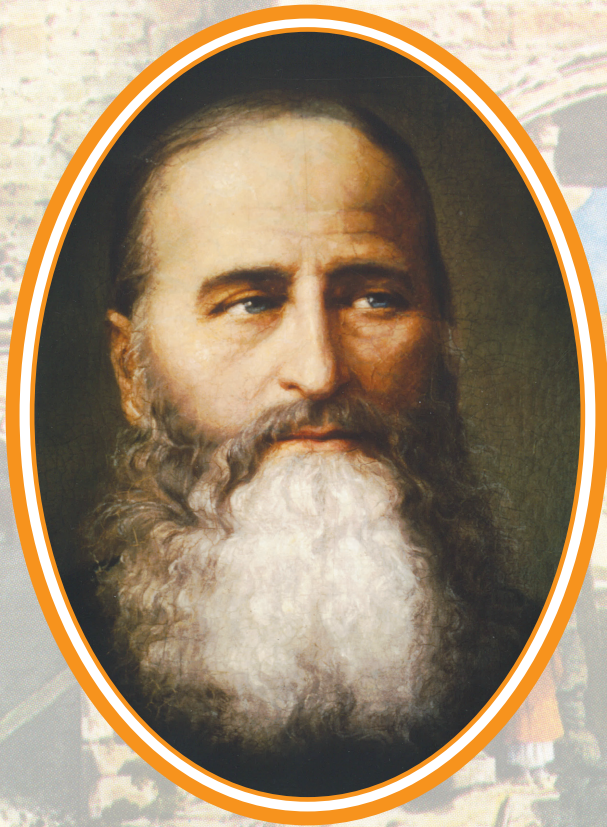


*A Journey from
Rome to Jerusalem*



Alphonse Ratisbonne

1814 - 1884

Cover Illustration
The Ecce Homo Property in 1856,
when purchased by Alphonse Ratisbonne

A Journey from Rome to Jerusalem

Life sometimes holds key pivotal moments, turning points that dramatically influence future direction. Such an event occurred in Alphonse Ratisbonne's life on 20th January, 1842. He entered Sant' Andrea delle Fratte Church in Rome as a Jew; he left, a believing Christian. What happened there? Alphonse later testified that he had had an apparition of Mary. She did not speak, yet in her silence, he understood all. Ten days later, he was baptized a Catholic and after thorough investigation, the event was acclaimed by the Church 'a true miracle'.

What was the impact of this dramatic change? Alphonse would later write, "20th January is a light. And in this light there is another light: Mary – Sion-Jerusalem". After time with the Jesuit Society, he left as an ordained priest, in order to join the newly founded Congregation of Fathers of Sion. His one overriding passion was to work in Jerusalem and to assist in bringing the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion there. In 1855, he arrived in Jaffa, penniless, robbed of all his money, and valiantly made his way to the Holy City.

In mid 19th Century, Jerusalem was still under the control of the Ottoman Turkish government. With the Crimean War raging, the religious and political situation in the Holy Land was in a state of even greater uncertainty. Most of the monuments were in ruins, with piles of rubbish and stones littering the streets of Jerusalem. For all practical purposes, there were no roads. With deep faith and unquenchable hope, Alphonse forged ahead to build the Ecce Homo Convent on the Via Dolorosa, another Convent in the village of Ein Kerem and a Boys' Trade School at St. Peter's (Ratisbonne Monastery), in Jerusalem. Worn out by constant travel, poor health, a heavy workload and constant financial anxieties, Alphonse died on 6th May 1884, just seventy years of age. He is buried in the beautiful Sion cemetery of Ein Kerem.

Today, it could be quite easy to underestimate the courage, indomitable tenacity and deep trust in God of Alphonse and the Sisters who sustained the many hardships of life in Jerusalem in that era. Although the ministries of the Sisters and Brothers have dramatically changed over time, their presence in Jerusalem remains central to Sion's mission in the Church and the world.

Alphonse's Early Years: Alphonse Charles Tobias Ratisbonne was born in Strasbourg, France, on 1st May 1814. He was a younger brother of Theodore and the second youngest of ten children. His mother, Adelaide, died after childbirth when he was just four years of age. Playful and sensitive, Alphonse won the hearts of all by his spontaneity, spiced with charm of the unexpected. He grew up in a family that was wealthy, happy and privileged, yet where little attention was given to religious education. The family's assimilation into French society had brought a progressive weakening of their Judaism which mostly took the form of philanthropy. All the members of the family were noted for their integrity, honesty and generosity towards the less fortunate.

His Studies: Little is known of Alphonse's childhood. We do hear though that he learned Hebrew in order to pray in the biblical language. Not understanding what he was saying, he began to pray in French but soon gave up altogether. On his own admission, Alphonse became Theodore's most bitter opponent when he learned of the latter's baptism in the Catholic faith. Then only thirteen years old, he treated his older brother with contempt and reproach for having abandoned his Judaism. Alphonse attended the Royal College in Strasbourg and then another School for the sons of the leading families of the upper and lower Rhine regions. He graduated in law in Paris and spent a year in his Uncle Louis's bank. Alphonse's father had earlier died, leaving his youngest son a large inheritance. Louis, rich and childless, adopted Alphonse, choosing

him in preference to his other four nephews as president of the Strasbourg bank. Louis reproached Alphonse for one thing only: his frequent trips to Paris. Twenty years later, Alphonse wrote, *"My Uncle Louis was right; all I thought about was having a good time and enjoying myself. Business problems made me impatient; the atmosphere of boardrooms suffocated me!"*



Alphonse as a young man

Marriage Proposal: In 1841, Alphonse was engaged to be married to his niece, Flore Ratisbonne, a lively, sensitive and well educated young woman. As she was just sixteen years of age, the family deemed it wiser to postpone the wedding. To fill in the time, Alphonse decided to travel to Naples, planning to spend the winter in Malta in an effort to strengthen his delicate health and to return by way of the Near East and Jerusalem to which he was already attracted. Instead of going to the stage-coach office for a ticket to Palermo, he went, by mistake, to the depot for Rome and so arrived there on 6th January 1842. For some months, a slow evolution had been

happening in Alphonse. His lack of faith and scepticism had given way to a vague deism, a transformation surely brought about by his love for Flore. Human love was making him more open to spiritual experience. He later reflected, *“The sight of my fiancée awoke in me a certain feeling of human dignity. I began to believe in the immortality of the soul. Instinctively, I began to pray to God whom I did not know, whom I had never called upon nor invoked before”*.

A Unexpected Visit to Rome: Once in Rome, Alphonse decided to visit the ancient city. While sight-seeing, he met, by chance, a Strasbourg classmate, Gustave de Bussierre, an ardent Protestant. The latter introduced him to his older brother, Baron Theodore de Bussierre, a recent convert to Catholicism. Alphonse was not very keen to see the Baron because the latter was friendly with his own brother, Theodore. However, he accepted the introduction, hoping to get some valuable information for his return journey. Earlier, Theodore de Bussierre had visited the Near East and had published an account of his travels there.



Theodore de Bussierre

A week later, on 15th January, Alphonse paid a courtesy call on the Baron. After the formal introductions, he gave Alphonse a Miraculous Medal of Our Lady and asked him to wear it. Astonished at first by this *“strange childishness”*, Alphonse gave a flippant reply. Then, with a certain irony, he accepted, seeing it as a kind of game, quite in accordance with his love of jokes. *“I shall wear it to show my good nature and to prove to you that Jews are not as stubborn as people say!”* he replied. Theodore de Bussierre then asked Alphonse to recite a prayer, the Memorare, to Mary. Again he acquiesced, believing it would provide an amusing item for his travel diary.

A Alphonse enters St. Andrea delle Fratte Church: As his time in Rome was drawing to a close, it was the morning of 20th January, Alphonse decided to pay a farewell visit to Gustave and his other friends. To complete his list, he had then only to keep an appointment with the Baron. The two met accidentally outside the El Greco Café (Buon Gusto) on Via Condotti. The Baron invited the young man to his carriage for a last ride around Rome but explained he needed, first of all, to spend a few minutes in a nearby Church, Sant’ Andrea delle Fratte, near the Spanish Steps. There, he had to make arrangements for the funeral of a close friend, Count de La Ferronnays.

Mary's Apparition to Alphonse: Rather than wait outside, Alphonse decided to accompany Theodore de Bussierre into the Church. The latter went directly to speak with the priests in the nearby cloister. Alphonse, left alone, walked stiffly around the Church. He later recalled that suddenly he felt quite agitated. The Church became dark except for a single Chapel, dedicated to the Guardian Angel, with a small picture above the altar of St. Raphael and Tobias. Raising his eyes to this Chapel, now radiant with light, Alphonse saw, *standing on the altar, tall, vibrant and majestic, full of beauty and mercy, the Virgin Mary*, as represented on the Miraculous Medal. *"I fell on my knees on the spot where I had been standing"*, he later recounted. *"Several times I tried to raise my eyes but her radiance and my feeling of respect made me lower them. I fixed my eyes on her hands. In them, I saw the evidence of pardon and mercy. In Mary's presence, although she did not utter a word, I understood all!"*



St. Andrea delle Fratte, Rome

When Theodore returned to the Church, he found Alphonse on his knees, his head resting on the altar rail of the Chapel, his face bathed in tears. So overcome was he that Theodore almost had to lift him to his feet and carry him to the carriage. They drove to the Jesuit Church of the Gesu where Alphonse described the event to Fr. de Villefort. In later reflections, Alphonse always spoke of the Event in terms of light. *"God does not communicate the Godhead except through light which is the expression of Life and Truth"*.

Alphonse is Baptized: After ten days, it was decided that, as Alphonse had the necessary knowledge and understanding of the Catholic faith, he could be baptized. His most ardent wish would be fulfilled! On January 31st, in the midst of an immense throng of people, Cardinal Patrizzi, the Pope's Vicar, officiated at the baptism in the Gesu. Alphonse would take no name other than 'Mary', (in French, 'Marie'). Immediately after, he was confirmed and made his First Communion. Marie-Alphonse remained for another six weeks at the Gesu, under the direction of Fr. de Villefort, S.J. On 11th February, the Vicariate of Rome opened an investigation which lasted until 12th April. The Church wanted to examine and verify the facts very carefully. Finally, on 3rd June 1842, the decree was published confirming the authenticity of *"this admirable event"*. Stressing the *"marvelous unanimity"* of the witnesses, it affirmed that *"nothing further is necessary to recognize here the quality of a true miracle"*.

Theodore's Work in Paris: In the intervening years, Theodore Ratisbonne, now a priest, was working as assistant director of the arch-confraternity of Mary at Notre Dame des Victoires parish, Paris, and as chaplain to an nearby orphanage for young girls. Since his baptism, he had felt an irresistible attraction to work within the Catholic Church for his own Jewish People. He was, however, unsure if and how he should proceed with the idea. On 1st February 1842, he received a letter from Theodore de Bussierre relating the story of what had happened in Sant'Andrea delle Fratte Church, Rome on 20th January. In a later letter to Theodore, Alphonse urged his brother to begin a 'Work' for the Christian education of Jewish children, confided to him by their parents. Theodore remained hesitant, feeling he needed further proof that this idea was according to God's plan. "Mary", he prayed, *"I shall do whatever you tell me. If it is you who have inspired my brother with the idea of founding the delicate work he is suggesting to me, show me a sign. Send me one Jewish child and this will be a sign for me of God's Will"*. Before the day had ended, Theodore received a letter from a priest friend, informing him that a dying Jewish lady wanted her two daughters to be reared as Christians. Soon after, several other Jewish women also brought their children to Providence. The 'Work' had begun; Theodore and Alphonse's dream had become a reality.



Theodore as a young priest

Alphonse enters the Jesuit Novitiate: Meanwhile in Rome, Alphonse was feeling a strong attraction to consecrating himself to God in the priesthood. But he was still engaged to Flore and wanted to remain faithful to her on one condition: that she accept to marry in the Catholic Church. On 21st January, he wrote her a preparatory letter, giving some idea of what had happened to him. The next day, he wrote the whole truth to his Uncle Louis, telling him frankly, *"Flore has the right to decide for herself"*. In her reply letter to Alphonse, she gave vent to her pain and surprise, and a month later, gave him her final answer. *"Everything has now changed. The Alphonse of old times has disappeared; I can no longer follow the Alphonse of today. In future, I shall look upon and love you as a brother. Jewish women know how to forgive"*. His engagement broken, the new Christian plunged into prayer for two months at Juilly near Paris, to seek God's will for his future. On 20th June 1842, Alphonse entered the Jesuit novitiate in Toulouse and later transferred to Saint-Acheul, near Amiens. He completed his scholasticate at Laval, France, where he was ordained a priest on 23rd September 1848.

Alphonse is drawn to Sion: For ten and a half years, Alphonse was completely happy and at peace in the Jesuit Society, feeling a deep affinity with the Ignatian spirit. Before pronouncing solemn perpetual vows, however, he experienced a crisis of conscience. His superiors had sent him to Vaugirard College to teach Latin to a class of teenage boys. Alphonse admitted that he had not the slightest aptitude for teaching. More and more, he was haunted by the question, should he remain faithful to the bonds linking him to the Society or should he respond to his deepest desire, to work with the now newly founded community of Sisters of Sion? The illumination of 20th January increasingly pursued him. Deeply troubled as to what God's Will was for his brother, Theodore went to Rome to present the case to the Jesuits and then to the Pope. During the papal audience, Theodore explained to Pius IX that the same drive to work for his own Jewish People had



Pope Pius IX.

been pursuing Alphonse continuously for a number of years and that he felt increasingly impelled to fulfill this mission. The Pope answered, *"We must learn what God's Will is and then fulfill it without any human consideration"*.

New Beginnings: With the Pope's oral consent and permission from the Jesuits, Alphonse left the Society on 18th Dec. 1852. He did not wait for the *'certificate of dismissal'* from his provincial nor did he inform the local superior of his decision. He simply left a note for the Prefect of

Studies, asking to be replaced in class. Overcome by emotion, he went to his brother's house. Collapsing on a chair, he exclaimed,

"I should never have had the courage to leave the Society if I did not love Sion so much!" Ten days later, he wrote to Fr. Roothaan, General of the Jesuits, *"It seems to me now that I am in the vocation for which I have been formed for so many years. It is with great happiness that I find myself in a position to develop a work for which St. Ignatius had the first inspiration"*. Alphonse always remained on friendly terms with his Jesuit brothers. A year before his death, he wrote to a friend, *"I want with all my heart to see the Society of Jesus in Jerusalem, both for the good of the Holy Land and for the good of the Society"*.

Plans to go to the Holy Land: On leaving the Jesuits, Alphonse placed himself under Theodore's direction. The latter had thought that Alphonse, with his Jesuit formation, might be able to assist with the formation of the small community of the Fathers of Sion. Both soon realized that this was not to be. Alphonse himself proposed the idea of making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Two years later, a turn of events made this dream a reality.

Arrival in Jerusalem: On 9th September 1855, Alphonse disembarked in a stormy sea at Jaffa. The pilgrims had to be quarantined for cholera so their luggage was packed into a boat which subsequently sank; one of the crew was drowned. The following day, the luggage was returned to the travelers. Nothing was missing except Alphonse's wallet that had been stolen. He was there without any money! Fortunately, the Franciscans at Casa Nova and the Patriarchate in Jerusalem welcomed him with open arms. He later wrote, *"All my life, I have had an irresistible attraction for Jerusalem, but from that moment, I was fixed, captivated, and as it were, chained. I would have been happy never to leave this place which is unique in the world"*.

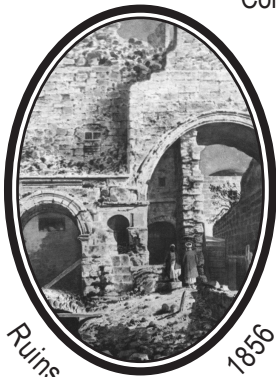
Alphonse went immediately to Nazareth to visit the Patriarch, Bishop Valerga who was on an apostolic visit there. Would he accept to have a house of Sion *"in the Holy Land, still so hermetically sealed?"* At that time, no other Congregations lived there except the Franciscans and two Women's Communities, requested by the Patriarch and the Franciscans - St. Joseph of the Apparition Sisters who had arrived in Jerusalem in 1848 and the Sisters of Nazareth who had come to Nazareth in 1851.



Jerusalem welcomes Sion: On the morning of the interview, 11th October, Alphonse celebrated Eucharist in the Basilica of the Annunciation. Bishop Valerga was anxious to bring more religious Congregations of Sisters to Palestine to reinforce the ranks of Latin Catholics and to open schools. He gave an unconditional 'yes' to Alphonse but added that he could give no financial assistance towards the foundation.

Delighted with the news that a Sion community would be welcome in Jerusalem, Theodore wrote in November 1855, *"I think we should begin by renting a small dwelling and introducing ourselves humbly into Palestine.... Once we are acclimatized, we will seek and find resources, buy and build"*. Theodore's advice was sound. What he did not realize, however, was that to live in Palestine, a person had to own property and the Ottoman Empire allowed Christians to purchase only a verified Holy Place. Such, if found, would be extremely expensive! In a letter to the Princess de La Tour d'Auvergne, in January 1856, Theodore shared his vision of the foundation as a place to welcome pilgrims to Jerusalem. *"A group of Sisters must be established in Jerusalem. Their convent, like the one in Paris, must be a centre of perpetual prayer, to be surrounded by apartments and rooms for ladies who, from every part of the world, will go there on pilgrimage. The Sisters would also help the city's poverty stricken inhabitants, regardless of their religious confession"*.

The Search for a Holy Place: Meanwhile, Alphonse continued to search for a Holy Place that was for sale. On 20th January 1856, while walking along the Via Dolorosa, he met Mathias Marroun, the drogman of the Austrian Consulate, who showed him the ruins of the Ecce Homo that the Turkish owners were ready to sell. These ruins were situated above the remains of a large pavement, the *Lithostrotos*, and close to the Arch of the Ecce Homo. All Alphonse needed now was money! But where was it to be found? The Sisters in Paris were struggling to find sufficient finance for the renovations of the recently purchased property for the Mother House on Rue Notre Dame des Champs.



Correspondence in early April of this same year seems to indicate that Theodore was ready to abandon the dream of a Sion foundation in Jerusalem. He wrote to Alphonse, *“For more than six months now, you have been in Jerusalem. In spite of Bishop Valerga’s kindness, all your plans have failed. You were surely deluded when you believed that you were called to found a colony of Sion in the Holy Land. Do not waste any more time; come home as quickly as possible.”*

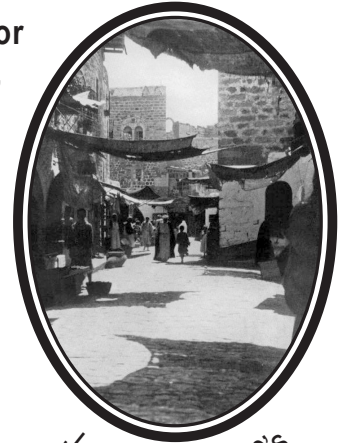
Ruins of Ecce Homo, 1856

An Unexpected Turn of Events: Alphonse was ready to obey. However, the day after receiving his brother’s letter, he fell from his horse while returning from Gifne outside Jerusalem where he had gone to celebrate the Eucharist. With a broken right arm and wrist, it was out of the question to ride on horseback to Jaffa to take a boat. Two days after the fall, Alphonse received from his youngest sister, Ernestine Beyfus, a large cheque, the exact amount that had been stolen from him at Jaffa on the day of his arrival. Immediately, with his left hand, he wrote to Theodore, *“No, I was not deluded. The mission has been marked so visibly with God’s seal that unlimited confidence is an imperative law. Send me the first workers of Sion. All is ready to receive them.”* Immediately, Alphonse began searching for temporary lodgings for the future community. The general council of the Sisters met once more in Paris to reconsider the situation. The decision was made, *“We feel that the intervention of God’s Providence is quite clear in the present circumstances. We have therefore decided to send four Sisters to make a foundation in Jerusalem.”* On 6th April, the names of the future foundresses were announced: Sr. Noemi Heumann, Sr. Victorine Le Boisse, Sr. Electra Valentin and Sr. Marthe Laborde. Alphonse was delighted! He sent a list of seven to eight pages to Paris, enumerating all the provisions to be brought to Jerusalem: *chairs, tables, beds, mattresses, casseroles, matches, lamps, clocks, coffee and other items*. For horseback, the Sisters would also need, *“solid trousers, white veils with broad hats, sun glasses and white umbrellas”*. In mid-nineteenth century, the

Holy Land was on the border of a desert, with few resources and immense poverty. The inhabitants were mainly Jewish and Arab, with some Eastern Orthodox Christians and a handful of Latin Christians, grouped around the Franciscans. All experienced the same harsh conditions; typhus and cholera periodically decimated the population.

***P*lans for the Sisters' Departure for Jerusalem:**

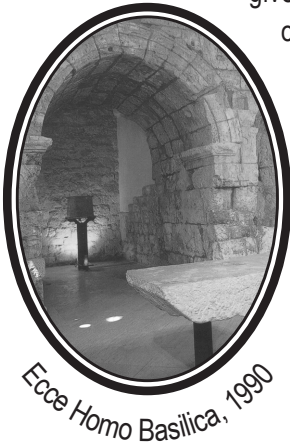
Back in the Mother House, everyone was busy, buying and packing in order to have all ready for the departure. On 20th April, the four young missionaries pronounced their perpetual vows. Theodore believed their final commitment in Sion would give sense and meaning to the foundation. In the name of the Congregation, they could honestly say, *In Sion firmata sum, I am established in Sion.* (Sir.24: 10). On 4th May 1856, Theodore accompanied the Sisters to Marseilles where they took the boat for Jaffa. On their arrival, Alphonse, *pale and trembling with emotion, welcomed them.* The following day, they set out on horseback for Jerusalem. None had ever ridden in their lives before and in the confusion of their departure, the saddles had been left behind in Paris. The journey was fraught with adventures and much discomfort. Finally arriving in Jerusalem, they stayed with the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition before moving into their rented six-room house in the *souk*, near the Damascus Gate. It proved to be very unhealthy, with water seeping through the badly-built terraces and the decayed ceilings. Umbrellas had to be kept open over the beds during the rainy season. The Sisters were to live there for nearly six years.



Jerusalem in 1860's

***E*cce Homo Convent:** On 20th January 1858, Alphonse celebrated Mass on the ruins of the Ecce Homo. The Sisters were up at 4.30a.m. to attend in secret as the official document confirming the purchase had not yet been received from Constantinople. In July of the following year, an entry in the House Journal notes, *"The foundations are being dug and the ground of the old Via Dolorosa has been found, along with immense paving stones joined together which indicate that they must have once been an immense courtyard, as the Gospel notes"* (John 19:13). It was only in 1862, with the construction of the convent and orphanage completed, that the Sisters were finally able to settle on the Via Dolorosa. The work had not been without considerable difficulty, hardship and suffering. The building of the basilica had also begun but was completed only in 1868. The Sisters began by caring for approximately a hundred orphan girls

as free boarders. Classes for day students were added for another one hundred and twenty Moslem and Jewish girls and a dispensary opened where free treatment was given daily to two hundred poor people of all religions. Boarders of more financially secure families were admitted later.



Hardships of the Early Years: As well as constant financial struggles, the Sisters were frequently ill. The first Arab postulant, Sr. Nehemia, died of brain fever in two days. In October 1856, the community was increased with the arrival of another three sisters, accompanied by the Princess de La Tour d’Auvergne. With her third marriage failing, Theodore had taken pity on this rather eccentric and egocentric woman, allowing her to accompany the Sisters to the Holy Land. Unfortunately, records reveal that Sion’s relationship with the Princess was not always a happy one. At one point, she had even tried to have the purchase price of the Ecce Homo property increased so that she could come to the rescue financially and be henceforth acclaimed as its foundress. The relationship ends on a happier note when, after seventeen years of disagreement between herself and Alphonse, we hear *“she gave him a plot of land on the Mount of Olives for the building of a School of Arts and Crafts”*. As the slope on the land was too steep for any construction, Alphonse was unable to use it. For years, it remained a wild olive grove until, in 1980, the area was transformed into a Garden of Prayer, the fulfilment of a dream, shared by three friends, Pope Paul VI, Jules Isaac and Pastor Marc Boegner. With its magnificent view of the Holy City of Jerusalem, the Garden remains a place of prayer for persons of all faiths.

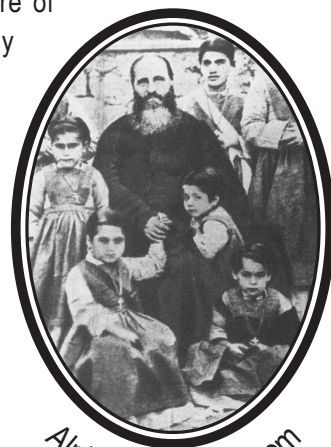
Theodore visits Jerusalem: In October 1858, Theodore had the joy of visiting Jerusalem for the first time. Two days after his arrival, he wrote to the Sisters in Paris, *“After an absence of eighteen centuries, I have at last returned to my country. In Jerusalem, everything impresses me, everything moves me”*. Theodore’s visit was urgent in view of the various difficulties facing the community. A letter to the Sisters reveals what being in Jerusalem meant to him, *“I have no need to see the Holy Places. All I need do is to contemplate from my window, the ruins of the Mountain of Sion and the Mount of Olives. They make a deep impression on me, especially in the evening, the early morning or in the moonlight. Then I listen to the mystery of silence”*.

Continuing Difficulties: During the first years in Jerusalem, Alphonse was obliged to leave frequently for Europe, either for reasons of health or to raise the necessary finance for the building of Ecce Homo. Among his many benefactors were Flore and her husband, Alexandre Singer, who took a special interest in the establishment of Sion in the Holy Land. Each time Alphonse visited Paris, he dined at their home, bringing gifts for their two young sons. Life, however, was far from easy for Alphonse who had never had robust health and now suffered from a debilitating facial neuralgia and an inflamed throat which left him without any voice for months on end. At the time, he wrote, *“It would fill volumes if I were to tell of all the journeys, letters, dangers, contradictions, fatigues, humiliations and work that have filled those first years. If I had not felt upheld by a special strength from on high, I would surely have lost courage a hundred times.”*

The Beginnings at Ein Kerem: Knowing that the Sisters suffered greatly from the summer heat of Jerusalem and frequent bouts of fever, Hanna Carlo, the drogman of the French Consulate, offered to rent the Sisters a country house that he had just completed in the village of Ein Kerem, near the Church of the Visitation. Assured of the religious services there, the Sisters moved into the rented accommodation on 1st May 1860. The Druze massacre of Christians in Lebanon in that same year had left many orphans in need of care. The country house was quickly transformed into an orphanage-school, an additional responsibility for the Sisters who continued to develop the school and pilgrimage site at Ecce Homo. Within a few months, the four-room house was inadequate so Alphonse purchased a nearby larger property.

On 20th January 1861, while walking on the terrace of the rented house, Alphonse saw a rainbow stretching from the fountain to an adjoining hill. He took this as a sign from Mary that he should buy the land. He kept the negotiations secret, using an intermediary for the purchase.

Even the Sisters did not know until six months later when the contract was signed. Alphonse considered Ein Kerem ideal for the second community. The Franciscans were nearby, there was fresh air, good water, beautiful countryside, fertile land and it was just a ‘healthy walk’ from Jerusalem.



Construction at the 'Rainbow' Site: The first step was to build an immense cistern to collect water during the rainy season as construction of stone buildings required large quantities of water. Before the cistern could be built, however, the workers had first to dynamite the stone. Then a road had to be constructed so that the Sisters would not be isolated from the parish Church. Ha-Ahayot Street, (The Sisters' Street) still leads from the Ein Kerem main road to the Convent. Alphonse again went to Europe to raise money for the constructions. While he was absent, the Sisters managed to get work on the new orphanage started.



Alphonse's House in Ein Kerem

On his return in May 1864, Alphonse was delighted to find that a small house had been built for him in the garden. Aghast at the costly design of the Convent/orphanage, however, he halted its construction in view of a simpler design to be built towards the back of the property. The main house would be completed only in 1883 as funds became available.

Continuing Difficulties in Ein Kerem: Despite efforts to improve relations with the village residents, the construction of the house at Ein Kerem continued to be hampered by disputes over land and water. Interminable negotiations were needed to receive the final official deeds from Constantinople. Although the construction took up much of his time and energy, Alphonse also supervised the development of a garden to provide food for the Sisters and orphans and to enhance the beauty of the environment. By April 1865, the Sisters and orphans had moved into the new building, just in time for the end of the five-year lease of Hanna Carlo's house. Alphonse summed up these years of building in Ein Kerem, *"No one thought of it, no one wanted it – the Pasha, Franciscans, employees of the French Consulate, the Patriarch himself, all opposed it. All used their authority and influence against it. Rome also, through Cardinal Barnabo, protested about this humble house of Sion."*

St. Peter's School for Boys, 1874: Alphonse's labours were not yet completed. He wanted to found one final work, a School of Arts and Crafts for Boys. At St. Peter's (Ratisbonne), almost one hundred boys were taught a trade as a baker, carpenter, tailor, weaver, cobbler, harness-maker, sculptor, etc. Every year, two to three hundred youths had to be refused. Alphonse lamented, *"Unfortunately, I must say to numerous boys from Bethlehem and Nazareth, 'There is no place for you'. It is a real torture to my heart."*

Thanksgiving Pilgrimage to Rome and Lourdes: Late in January 1878, Alphonse returned to Rome to celebrate Eucharist at Sant' Andrea's and to visit Pope Pius IX who was nearing his death. He later wrote to Theodore, *"As I approached the altar of the Madonna, I trembled all over.... I felt a great tenderness well up within me when I saw that the altar opposite is dedicated to the Ecce Homo."* From Rome, Alphonse traveled to Lourdes where he prayed for several hours at the Grotto where Mary had appeared to Bernadette. He wrote to his friends, *"I prayed fervently for all of you who have been so good to us in Jerusalem. Have confidence! Mary is with us."*

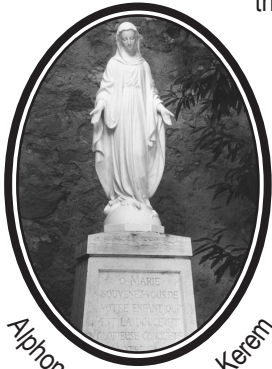
Unwavering Hope amid Continuing Problems: Alphonse returned to Jerusalem only to be beset by continuing financial problems. How was he to feed three hundred mouths as well as Sisters and provide for the upkeep of the Schools and dispensaries? Ironically, some people thought he was extremely wealthy. Intrigues were created against him; jealousy and calumny were unleashed with the unbridled passion of the Orient. *"Jerusalem"*, he wailed to a friend in 1881, *"is an enclosed garden with every sect, every national rivalry, every jealousy and every misery to be found on this globe"*. But Alphonse's courage and trust in Mary never wavered. *"We have not come to the East to erect buildings but to fill them with life"*, he wrote at this time. *"We can only regenerate the country by education of the children."*

Union of Heart and Soul between the two Brothers: Beyond the differences of personality of Theodore and Alphonse, a deep spiritual bond created open dialogue between them. In 1876, Theodore suffered a slight stroke. Alphonse wanted to leave immediately for Paris to visit his brother but unfortunately was unable to do so. The next year when a serious attack of pneumonia endangered Theodore's life, Alphonse did manage a surprise visit to Paris. It would be the last time that the two brothers would meet. Theodore wrote, *"I cannot tell you how much consolation this dear brother gives me. The life of Jesus Christ radiates in his heart."*



Alphonse's Last Years: Returning to Jerusalem, Alphonse continued to consolidate the three works of Sion, Ecce Homo, Ein Kerem and St. Peter's. In spite of being half-blind, often ill and crushed by the workload, he never lost confidence. He continued to draw inspiration from the fact that he had been granted the privilege of

“pitching his tent” in Jerusalem. He lived continually in Mary’s presence. News of Theodore’s death, 10th January 1884, left Alphonse deeply saddened. With his own health declining and eyesight failing, he would sit alone in his small house looking towards Mary’s shrine in the garden of Ein Kerem. A few weeks before his death, he confided to Fr. Estrate, the revered superior general of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Betharram and Alphonse’s Spiritual Director, *“I do not know why I, a poor sinner, not only do not fear death but long for it. My ardent wish is to die with the Memorare on my lips”*. Alphonse also made



Alphonse's Tomb in Ein Kerem

this request to Father Estrate, *“When I am on my death bed, do not suggest to me the invocations usually suggested to the dying. Say only one word, ‘Mary’. This word will penetrate the depths of my soul”*. A few hours before his death which occurred on 6th May 1884, Alphonse exclaimed, *“Why are you killing me with medication? The Blessed Virgin is calling me and I am ready. Just Mary! For me, she is everything. The word, ‘Mary’, contains all.”*

The Requiem Mass for Fr. Marie-Alphonse Ratisbonne was celebrated in the Ecce Homo Basilica with more than two hundred priests attending. A large crowd of people from all religions and classes followed the funeral procession to the picturesque cemetery at Ein Kerem which overlooks the Church of the Visitation. Earlier, Alphonse had made this simple request to Fr. Estrate, *“On my tomb put only two words, ‘Father Marie’.”* Alphonse’s grave is the focus of visits of many pilgrims from various countries. By sheer force of character and an indomitable spirit, Alphonse had established three large Institutions in Jerusalem despite a maze of obstacles from Church, European governments and the Ottoman bureaucracy. Cardinal Simeoni, Prefect of the Propagation of the Faith, declared at the Funeral, *“Fr. Marie did more for the good of Jerusalem in a few years than others have done in two hundred years!”*

***S* developments from Alphonse’s Era to the Present Day:** In light of the enormous political changes and developments that have taken place in the Land since Sion’s arrival in the mid-nineteenth century, the Sisters’ ministries have evolved dramatically. These past one hundred and fifty years have seen the Holy Land become the modern State of Israel, with an increasing Jewish population, the development of large modern cities and towns and the continuing conquest of desert areas into fertile, arable land. No longer is there need for schools, orphanages and dispensaries, organized by the Sisters. The welcome of Christian pilgrims does, however, remain an important ministry.

In 1965, the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church summed up its deep desire for better future relations with the Jewish People, free of antisemitism, as follows, *“Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is so great, this Sacred Synod wishes to foster and recommend mutual understanding and respect, the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies, and of brotherly dialogue (Nostra Aetate 4).* Sisters and Brothers of Zion in Jerusalem are presently involved in organizing, in several languages, Biblical courses that underline the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Programs range from a study of the Hebrew Scriptures to that of the Gospels, with emphasis there on the Jewishness of Jesus. Travel to Biblical sites is included, with stress laid on the importance for Christians to know more about Judaism as a living reality today. The Sisters are also engaged in inter-faith dialogue among Jews, Moslems and Christians and in movements for peace, holding out a hand in friendship to both Israeli and Palestinian. They endeavour too to support, in various ways, the decreasing number of Christian Palestinians. In Ein Kerem, a contemplative community of Sisters daily recites, in Hebrew, the psalms of the Office of the Church.

Sisters, Brothers and Friends of Zion are presently involved in 22 countries of the world, in the various fields of education: biblical, theological, catechetical, recalling to the Church its Jewish roots. The Sisters also work in ministries to promote justice, reconciliation and peace. The words of Alphonse, written to Theodore, his brother, over 150 years ago, are still as true today as they were then.

“Jerusalem is the heart of the Congregation.”

M. Alphonse Ratisbonne, 9th Nov. 1858

*Texts in italics, taken from Congregational Journals and Writings, edited by Sr. Marie Carmelle.

Chronology of Significant Events in Alphonse's Life

- 1814, May 1 *Birth of Alphonse Ratisbonne in Strasbourg, France*
- 1841 *Engagement to Flore Ratisbonne*
- 1842, Jan.6 *Alphonse arrives by mistake in Rome.*
- 1842, Jan. 20 *Mary's Apparition to Alphonse*
- 1842, Jan.31 *Alphonse is baptized in the Gesu Church, Rome*
- 1842, June 3 *Rome's decree confirms the authenticity of the Apparition*
- 1842, June 20 *Alphonse enters the Jesuit Novitiate, Toulouse, France*
- 1844, June 21 *Alphonse pronounces his first vows with the Jesuits*
- 1847, May *First Sisters of Sion pronounce their vows*
- 1848, Sept.23 *Alphonse is ordained a priest in the Jesuit Society*
- 1852, Sept.19 *Alphonse writes to the General of his desire to join Sion*
- 1852, Dec.14 *Pope Pius IX grants a Laudatory Brief to Fathers of Sion*
- 1852, Dec. 18 *Alphonse leaves the Jesuit Society*
- 1854, Oct.11 *Alphonse speaks to Theodore of Jerusalem*
- 1855, Sept 12 *Alphonse arrives at the Port of Jaffa*
- 1856, Jan.20 *Alphonse buys the Ruins of the Ecce Homo, Via Dolorosa*
- 1856, May 6 *First four Sisters of Sion arrive in Jerusalem*
- 1858, Oct *Fr. Theodore visits Jerusalem*
- 1860, April 30 *A second Sion Community begins in Ein Kerem*
- 1861, Jan 20 *Alphonse sees a rainbow on the future site of Sion, E.K*
- 1861 – 1865 *Construction of the Cisterns and Convent in Ein Kerem.*
- 1862, Jan. *Sisters move to the Ecce Homo Convent on Via Dolorosa*
- 1868, April 3 *Consecration of the Ecce Homo Basilica*
- 1876 *A small Boarding School is opened at Ecce Homo Convent*
- 1878, Jan.27 *Alphonse celebrates Mass in St. Andrea's in Rome*
- 1878, Feb.1 *Alphonse speaks with Pope Pius IX about Jerusalem*
- 1878, Feb.21 *Alphonse visits Mary's shrine at Lourdes, France*
- 1880, *Sisters direct the Parochial School in Ein Kerem*
- 1883, *Main Building of Ein Kerem is completed*
- 1884, Jan 10 *Fr. Theodore dies in Paris, France*
- 1884, May 6 *Fr. Marie Alphonse dies in Ein Kerem, Jerusalem*
- 1890 *Opening of the Chapel in Ein Kerem*

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