

Behind the Mount of Olives, on the way that led to Jericho, is a shrine created in memory of the resurrection of Lazarus. Visited and venerated by ancient pilgrims, it's also been the object of extensive archaeological investigations over the years.

BETHANY

The House of Friendship

(36)

In relation to Jerusalem, Bethany is now on the other side of the wall. It can no longer be reached descending from the Mount of Olives after leaving behind Bethphage on the ancient route which led from Jerusalem to Jericho. The pilgrim buses arrive at al-Azariyeh departing from Jericho after traveling various miles toward the Israeli settlement of Maale Adummim. The Arab place name of the current center recalls the name of Lazarus, "village of Lazarus." Bethany, instead, is the name mentioned in the Gospels and means in Hebrew "house of Ananiah." It is probably the same name of the post-exile village (Fifth Century B.C.) recorded in the Book of Nehemiah (11,32).

If one considers the testimony of pilgrims, the remembrance of this place as the spot of the resurrection of the brother of Martha and Mary is almost uninterrupted.

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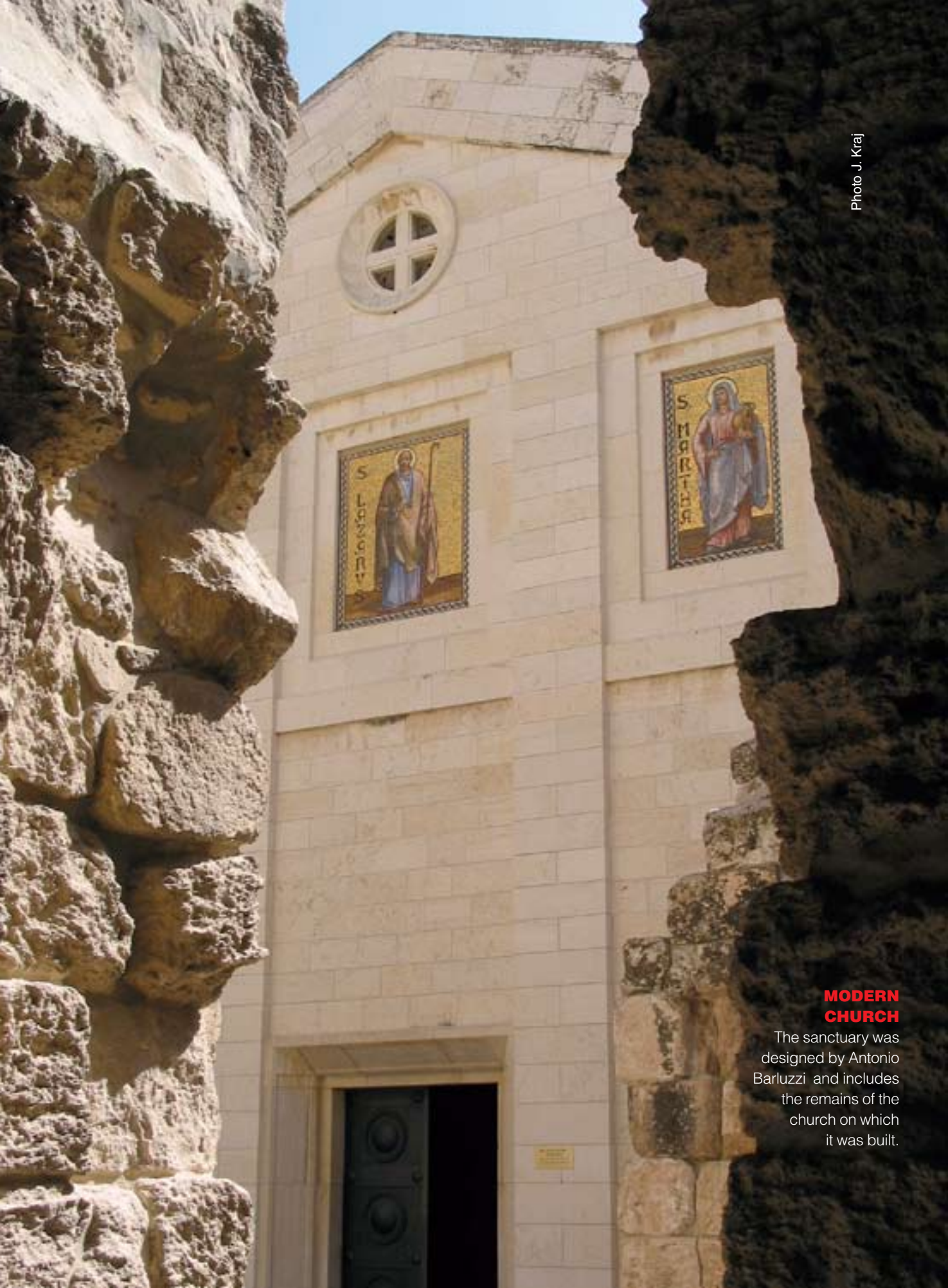
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This should not surprise us because in reading the four Gospels, one becomes aware that at Bethany Jesus had a reference point, a house where he was welcomed. In the episode of the resurrection of Lazarus, the evangelist John reveals to us, through words and actions, the existence of a special relationship of affection between the Master and the three siblings of Bethany. Not by chance did the beloved disciple of Jesus want to fix forever, when writing about the details of the resurrection of Lazarus, the emotion (John 11,33) and tears of the beloved Master: "Jesus began to weep" (John 11,35). Shortly before, He told Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11,25). Only an eyewitness could note that Jesus approaching the tomb of Lazarus was "again greatly disturbed" (John 11,38).

How can the weeping of Jesus be interpreted in this page of the Gospel? By reading further the reason for the emotion over the death of his friend Lazarus is explained. "See how he loved him!" said the Jews accompanying Mary when they saw Jesus weep (John 11,36). We know that Lazarus probably died from an illness and that Jesus resurrected him. Even so, as Lazarus returned to life so will he die again. Naturally, we are speaking of his earthly life.

There are so many Gospel episodes which show Jesus always ready to meet the needs of the people he encounters or visits. How many people who died did Jesus hear about: relatives, friends and strangers? Because of this, the





**MODERN
CHURCH**

The sanctuary was designed by Antonio Barluzzi and includes the remains of the church on which it was built.

FRIEND OF JESUS

The mosaic of Lazarus on the facade of the shrine. On the following page, the entrance to the tomb.

weeping for Lazarus and his sisters perhaps goes beyond the episode in itself. It includes and exceeds the feelings of profound friendship and affection which bound them. Does it express the compassion that Jesus shows in relation to our humanity deeply wounded by sin? It is a legitimate question.

Also at Bethany an episode takes place which the evangelists Matthew (chapter 26) and Mark (chapter 14) place on the eve of the passion of Jesus. Who does not remember that woman – her name has been erased – who spontaneously, while Jesus is at table in the house of Simon the leper, enters and pours precious perfumed oils on the head of Jesus? And who does not recall the reaction of some of those present who are scandalized by this squandering and hide behind the most hypocritical argument that can be imagined?

For this ointment could have been sold for more than 300 denarii, and the money given to the poor” (Mark 14,5). Mark gives us the figure while Matthew is more generic: “This ointment could have been sold for a large sum” (Matthew 26,9).

The evangelists note that the critics become angry with the woman, as if she could not do what she wanted with her ointment and as if she had taken something away from the poor. What injustice! But Jesus did nothing to avoid



the squandering. Did those present, perhaps, reprimand her for Him?

Jesus was always concerned with the poor but those scandalized then (and now) forgot this or made believe not to know it. Why did He not do it now? Didn't any of them have perfumed ointment or other precious objects to sell so they could give the proceeds to the poor and, thus, satisfy their sense of justice?

The following words of Jesus are clear. Here it is only worth repeating the conclusion: “Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of

her.”

And so it was. Shortly after, Judas Iscariot will turn over Jesus (which is the same as selling Him) for 30 denarii, nine times less than the perfumed oils.

John (11,18) tells us that the Bethany of the three siblings was 15 stadi (2 miles) from Jerusalem. Mark and Luke put Bethphage and Bethany near the Mount of Olives.

In his “Onomasticon” (in Greek), Eusebius of Caesarea (Third to Fourth Centuries) writes: “Bethany, a village at the second milestone from Aelia (Capitolina), at the feet of the Mount of Olives,

Ancient pilgrims already referred to a shrine constructed in memory of Lazarus.

where Christ resurrected Lazarus. There, still today, can be seen the place (tomb) of Lazarus.”

St. Jerome (Fourth and Fifth Centuries) in 390 in his Latin translation of Eusebius adds: “A church built there has his tomb (that of Lazarus).” Thus, a church was built on the tomb of Lazarus.

Egeria (380) does not mention the village but uses Lazarium to indicate the shrine built on the tomb. The oldest sources, in fact, refer solely to the tomb of Lazarus. Only in Medieval times was the tradition of the house of Martha and Mary and the house of Simon the leper added.

Egeria tells us that a procession was held there with the reading of the passage from John about

the resurrection of Lazarus and the announcing of Easter. Arculf gives testimony to the existence of a church and a monastery. An anonymous source of the Seventh Century refers to a memorial to the house of Simon the leper. All the sources, starting with Egeria, mention a church.

The Crusaders built a church there which was entrusted to the Benedictines by Queen Melisenda (1138), the Armenian wife of the Latin king of Jerusalem. The visible ruins of two towers show that the monastery was fortified. Archaeological digs have provided the identification of three churches built on the same site and a fourth over the tomb. Also found were the remains of housing, baths and water tanks which range from the Persian era (Fifth Century B.C.) to the Byzantine period. These discoveries are the work of Father S.J. Saller who from 1949 to 1953 undertook, on behalf of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, excavations on property obtained by the Custody of the Holy Land after the war. It was an area which was added to a plot of land acquired in the 1800s thanks to the help of the Venerable Marquise Pauline de Nicolay.

The oldest church is the one spoken of by Jerome, with an atrium and a hall with three naves divided by columns. It had the design of a basilica and seemed to have been dedicated to Mary Magdalene. It was destroyed by

an earthquake and atop it was built a second church with a vault held up by thick pillars. The technically different construction was due to the lack of timber during the Arabic period, making it impossible to construct ceilings using a network of beams and bars.

In both churches mosaic flooring was discovered. The pavement of the first church, visible in a few places, is under the stone flooring of the current church. The first church’s flooring shows a level of refinement superior to the mosaics of the second.

Saller dates the original church to the Fourth Century and the second one to the Fifth Century. Today, the dating of the second church is placed between the Sixth and Seventh Century. The third church is nothing more than the restoration of the second done during the Crusader era.

The principal remains of all the churches are incorporated in the structure of the modern church, designed by architect Antonio Abruzzi (1884-1960), consecrated in 1954 and named for St. Lazarus. Inside, three ample rear windows crown mosaics representing Gospel episodes occurring in Bethany: the resurrection of Lazarus, the conversation of Jesus with Martha and Mary, and the anointing in the home of Simon the leper.

The organization of the tomb of



Photo J. Kraji



**In Memory
Of Martha and Mary**

FOCUS

The Franciscans of the Custody of the Holy Land, the local faithful and pilgrims head twice a year in pilgrimage to Bethany. The first time, midway through Lent, commemorates the death and resurrection of Lazarus; on the second, July 29, they commemorate both the memory of Lazarus and that of his sisters Martha and Mary (in the painting in the mosaic in the apse). Readings and liturgical texts highlight the characteristics of these friends, disciples and hosts of the Lord. St. Lazarus is a friend of Jesus, and in him, the dead has been resurrected. The Lord shows the glory of the Father. His (Lazarus) figure is summarized in the silent abandonment to the mystery of being beloved in which his death and resurrection assume the value of a prophetic revelation. The impetus of faith, hope and love shine in Martha and Mary. In the Gospels, the characteristics of their personalities emerge in the relationship each has with Jesus. In the house of Lazarus the first fruits of the Church are celebrated. It is the house which welcomes and oversees the visit of the Lord and which becomes the place of His kindness and of His rest.

Lazarus is the result of successive adaptations. With the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem the church and monastery were abandoned. In the 16th Century a mosque was built on the tomb and pilgrims no longer had free access to the tomb-crypt. The descending step steps carved into the rock are from 1590 while the entrance to the mosque is walled over. The barrel-shaped vault of the tomb is probably from the Byzantine era.

The stories told in the Gospels occur in different places. More recent traditions place the house of the three siblings in the area of the Franciscan shrine and identifies the tomb of Lazarus with the tomb a little ways beyond today's mosque. Recalling the meeting of Jesus with Mary and Martha is the "dialogue stone." It is about three-tenths of

a mile from the church on the road to Jericho, in the area of the Greek Orthodox church built apparently atop medieval ruins, where the stone is safeguarded. Next to nothing is left of the Bethany of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. It is thought that the village disappeared during the Jewish wars. This further sharpens the marvel of the continuity of this memorial here, an indirect proof of the noteworthy antiquity of this remembrance.

Jesus, during his earthly stay, visited many houses and we know that He loved to stay in some. He did so voluntarily, it would seem, at the home of the three siblings of Bethany. Because of the relationship which linked Martha, Mary and Lazarus to Jesus and because of the episodes which they witnessed, those simple rooms where they lived may reasonably be called "the house of friendship."