

Brothers in Christ Carry on Unholy Battle for Christianity's Holiest Site

The site where many Christians deem to be their holiest—where Jesus was crucified, entombed and resurrected—seems to be encountering the opposite affect of the peace Jesus had envisioned.

In a situation that has carried on for centuries, Egyptian Coptic monks and Ethiopian Orthodox monks continue to be embroiled in a conflict over control for a small monastery built on the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the site where it is believed Jesus suffered, died and then rose again.

And according to DNYUZ, the site has become one of “petty quarrels that occur on a near-annual basis, and sometimes the quarrels boil over into violence.

The conflict has stunned some monks that visit the site annual during Holy Week, expecting anything other than fighting among men of the cloth.

“When I first arrived in Jerusalem I was shocked,” said Markos Alorshalemy, an Egyptian monk, told DNYUZ. “I was expecting to see a holy land, where everyone is living in peace and light. But instead, I found a place where everyone is constantly fighting, even inside the holiest church.”

Yet it has been going on for hundreds of years, including on the eve of Palm Sunday in 1757, nearly 300 years ago. On that day, Greek Orthodox Monks attacked Franciscan Catholics inside the church with “clubs, maces, hooks, poniards and swords,” historian Simon Sebag Montefiore wrote in his book, “Jerusalem: The Biography.”

But the battle for the monastery, and ground near the church, hasn't been limited to past centuries. As recently as 2008, a violent brawl broke out between Greek and Armenian Orthodox clergy over the route of a procession, which led to arrests.

And while last the conflict calmed to that of nocturnal graffiti—where on the eve of Palm Sunday an Egyptian Coptic monk painted a large Egyptian flag at the door to a courtyard he believed was being illegally occupied by Ethiopian monks—it doesn't seem like the type of peaceful solution that Jesus would have orchestrated.

During this past Holy Week, only two weeks ago, Orthodox Christians reacted angrily to police restrictions on the numbers of worshipers who could attend the “Holy Fire” service in the cramped church that Saturday. Orthodox Christian leaders said it was a restriction on worship.

The police said it was to prevent a stampede.

In all, six Christian denominations attempt to share control over the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the conflicts, which sometimes become bloody, seem inevitable considering the chaotic arrangement.

Many of the major issues surrounding the church were resolved by a 19th-century Ottoman-era decree called the ‘Status Quo,’ which is still in place today. It requires that no changes be made to the church, no matter how minute, without consensus.

□ But the fighting still becomes heated and, reports, can be set off by something as small as the placement of a chair. In 2002, several monks were hospitalized from a fistfight that followed when an Egyptian monk moved his chair to the shade of a nearby tree. Five years ago, tensions rose again over the renovation of a ceiling and led to the arrest of an Egyptian monk.

Another Egyptian monk, Father Theophilus Alorshalemy, says

that, when all is calm, the neighbors “barely interact beyond occasional nods and greetings.”

“At the end of the day, we are fathers in Christ,” Father Alorshalemy said.

May the peace of Jesus be with all of them and with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

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