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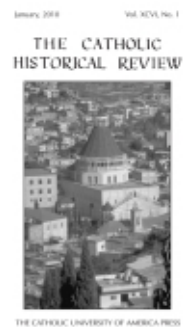
The Politics Behind the Construction of the Modern Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth

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THE POLITICS BEHIND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MODERN CHURCH OF THE ANNUNCIATION IN NAZARETH

BY

MASHA HALEVI*

The Church of the Annunciation is built on one of the most sacred places for the Catholic world. According to the New Testament, this is where the angel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary that she would bear the son of God (Luke 1:26-38). In 1969, an Italian architect, Giovanni Muzio, built the modern church on the site, and this monumental Christian symbol stimulates political struggles to the present day. This article analyzes the various tensions and decisions pertaining to the Church of the Annunciation, including attempts to thwart its construction and to limit its size, as well as the political interests that enabled the largest Franciscan church in the Middle East to be built.

Keywords: Barluzzi, Antonio; Church of the Annunciation; Franciscan Custody; Muzio, Giovanni

The History of the Church

The site of the Annunciation has belonged since the seventeenth century to the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land.¹ The first Francis-

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¹For further information, consult Custodia Terrae Sanctae (Franciscan mission) and Berardo Rossi, *The Custody of the Holy Land* (Jerusalem, 1981); Andrea Giovannelli, *La*

cans arrived in the Holy Land shortly after the establishment of the order in the thirteenth century, and in the fourteenth century Pope Clement VI bestowed the title “Guardians of the Holy Places” on the Franciscans serving in the province of the Holy Land. From that time until 1847, when the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem was re-established, the Custody was the sole representative of the Holy See and the Catholic Church in the Holy Land.

The first attempt of the Franciscan Custody to build a church dedicated to the event narrated in the Gospel—when the angel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary that she would bear the son of God (Luke 1:26–38)—occurred in the eighteenth century with the construction of a modest church (see figure 1). Subsequent attempts were crowned in 1969 with the culmination of Franciscan monumental construction in the holy places in the Holy Land, the modern Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth.

The idea of erecting a monument worthy of the sacred event originated in 1924 as an initiative of Ferdinando Diotalleivi, the custos, or the head of the Franciscan Custody (in office 1918–24), with the approval of Pope Pius XI.² Diotalleivi meant to entrust the building of the church to Antonio Barluzzi,³ a young architect who had already proved his abilities and qualifications by building the Church of All Nations (Gethsemane) in Jerusalem and the Church of the Transfiguration on top of Mount Tabor (1919–24). Barluzzi was asked to submit his plans for the Church of the Annunciation, but for reasons that are still not completely clear and that involved political tensions inside and outside the Custody, the project was aborted.⁴

Santa Sede e la Palestina: La Custodia di Terra Santa tra la fine dell'impero ottomano e la guerra dei sei giorni (Rome, 2000); Alessandro Mombelli, *La Custodia di Terra Santa* (Jerusalem, 1934); Michele Piccirillo, ed., *La Custodia di Terra Santa e l'Europa* (Rome, 1983); Michelle Piccirillo, *In Terra Santa: dalla crociata alla custodia dei Luoghi Santi* (Florence, 2000); Paolo Pieraccini, *Cattolici di Terra Santa (1333–2000)* (Florence, 2003).

²Antonio Barluzzi, *At Nazareth There Is Being Built the Sanctuary of the Incarnation* (Jerusalem, 1954), pp. 5–6, in file Barluzzi Nazaret, the Archive of the Franciscan Custody in Jerusalem (Terra Santa Archive–ACTS). Many documents in the archive of the Custody of the Holy Land cited here are not catalogued. Most of them are placed in cardboard boxes (noted hereafter in the categories *files*, *subfiles*, and *folders*).

³Little was published about Barluzzi outside the ecclesiastical press. More information about his life and work can be found in Daniel M. Madden, *Monuments to Glory* (New York, 1964), and Peter C. Nicholson, *The Churches of Antonio Barluzzi* (London, 1996).

⁴Barluzzi to Giuseppe Monticone, archivist of Propaganda Fide, December 10, 1956, file Barluzzi Nazaret, ACTS.



FIGURE 1. Church of the Annunciation, Nazareth, March 1, 1945. Photo by Matson Photo Service, Matson Registers, vol. 2 (1940–46). G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, reproduction no. LC-DIG-matpc-12641.

The idea of rebuilding the church emerged again fifteen years later when the new custos, Alberto Gori (in office 1937–49), reappointed Barluzzi to the project. By that time Barluzzi was a well-appreciated architect who had rebuilt most of the major churches of the Holy Land for the Catholic Church. Among other edifices, he built the Church of the Flagellation, the second station on the “via dolorosa” (1928–29); the Church of the Beatitudes in Galilee (1937–38); and the Church of the Visitation in Ein Karem (1938–40). He was also entrusted with other important projects: the Church of St. Lazarus in Bethany (1952–54), the Church of the Shepherd’s Fields in Beit Sahour (1952–54), the church of Dominus Flevit on the Mount of Olives (1955), and the incredibly ambitious project of rebuilding the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (the new plan was prepared by Barluzzi and Luigi Marangoni and was not executed).⁵

⁵“Curriculum Vitae di Antonio Barluzzi,” file Barluzzi Nazaret, ACTS. Some of the documents and articles cited in the notes appear without the name of the author. Nicholson, *Churches of Antonio Barluzzi*, p. 8.

Barluzzi's Plan for the Church of the Annunciation: The Church as a Symbol of Evangelical Memory

Barluzzi's goal was to build in Nazareth the most important church on Earth dedicated to the Annunciation and Incarnation.⁶ The church was to serve as a huge architectural symbol that embodies the memory of these Gospel events, transmitting it to the viewers through both the power and grandiosity of the church on the outside and through the interior atmosphere glorifying the unification of man and God that took place at the site. The Franciscan Custody published a detailed description of the plan in 1954 in a twenty-four-page booklet written by Barluzzi (see figures 2, 3, 4, and 5).⁷

The style proposed by Barluzzi was not "modern"; instead, it was eclectic, and its only disposition to modern art was manifested in the use of reinforced concrete (although covered mostly by local stone) and the relative simplicity of the decorations. The church was a concentric building dominated by a large dome and surrounded by four towers dedicated to the four evangelists. The towers symbolized the voices announcing to the four corners of the world the event of the Incarnation. In the plan, the length of the church was 90 meters, and the height from the ground to the cross on top of the dome was 72 meters.

The inner structure of the church was composed of a rotunda that contained the holy grotto dedicated to the conservation of memory and four wings allocated to the requirements of the liturgy. Barluzzi was involved in the smallest details of the inner decoration far beyond the usual level of architectural planning. For each statue he designated a location, character, symbolic meaning, and connection to the main theme of the church. He even dealt with the details of the paving and the mosaics, as well as the number and location of the confessionals.⁸ In 1941, Barluzzi prepared a model on scale of 1:100 and many sketches of the church, and his plans were approved by Father Leonardo Bello, the minister general of the Franciscan order.⁹ Most of the plan was prepared in 1941, but World

⁶Paolo Greganti, "La Basilica di Nazaret," *La Terra Santa* (May-June, 1948), 93-94.

⁷Barluzzi, *At Nazareth*.

⁸More on symbolic meaning that Barluzzi attributed to the church and its ornaments, mosaics, and architectural details can be found in the detailed description in *At Nazareth*, here summarized briefly.

⁹Barluzzi, *At Nazareth*, p. 7; Paschal Kinsel, *The Crusader's Almanac 1955*, pp. 16-17, file Barluzzi, ACTS.

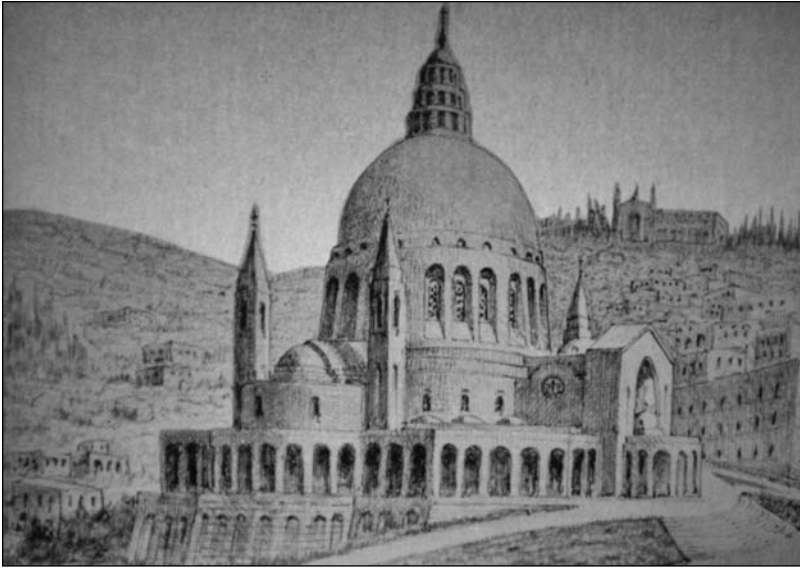


FIGURE 2. Drawing by Antonio Barluzzi of the exterior of the Church of the Annunciation, from Barluzzi, *At Nazareth There Is Being Built the Sanctuary of the Incarnation* (Jerusalem, 1954). Image courtesy of the Archive of the Franciscan Custody, Jerusalem.

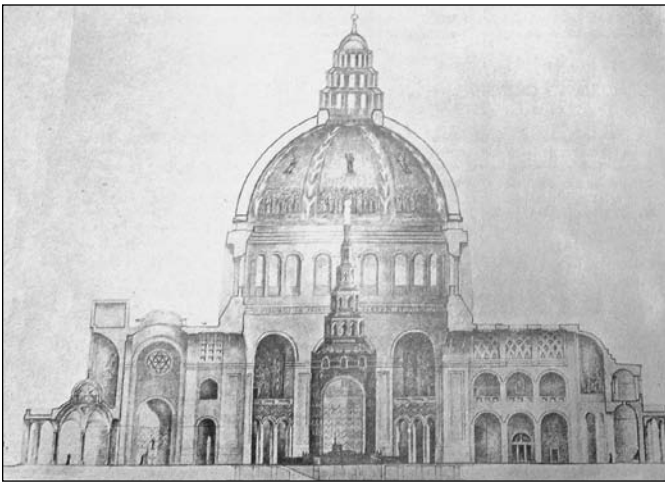


FIGURE 3. Cross-section of the Church of the Annunciation by Barluzzi, from Barluzzi, *At Nazareth*. Image courtesy of the Archive of the Franciscan Custody, Jerusalem.

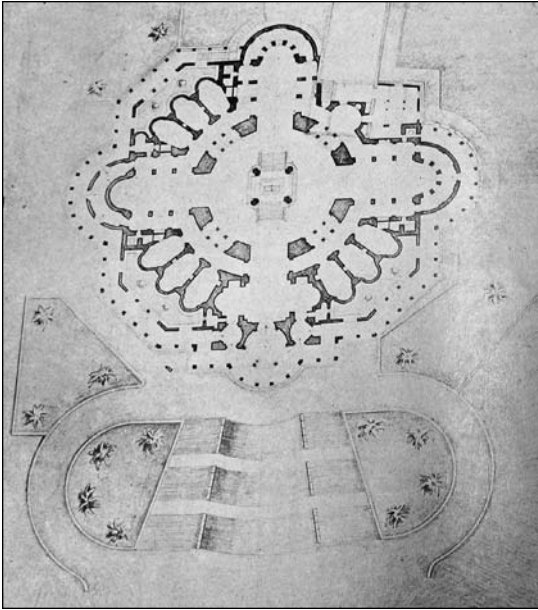
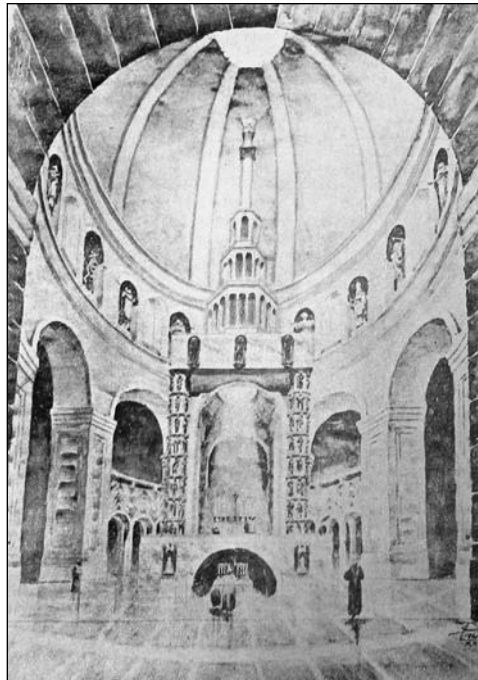


FIGURE 4. Barluzzi's ground plan for the Church of the Annunciation, from Barluzzi, *At Nazareth*. Image courtesy of the Archive of the Franciscan Custody, Jerusalem.

FIGURE 5. Barluzzi's drawing of the ciborium for the Church of the Annunciation, from Barluzzi, *At Nazareth*. Image courtesy of the Archive of the Franciscan Custody, Jerusalem.



War II and the 1948 war between Israel and the Arab nations prevented its implementation.

The Custody continued to promote the project under the new custos, Giacinto Maria Faccio (in office 1950–55). In 1950, the model was exhibited at an exhibition of sacred art in Rome and received very positive reactions.¹⁰ The plan of the church was praised in important newspapers around the Catholic world that encouraged Catholics to participate in its construction through their prayers or financial donations.¹¹ Much money was raised, and the Franciscans started to purchase and empty private buildings as well as relocate the ancient graveyard that was situated on the building site.¹² In 1954, the year designated by the Vatican as the Year of Mary, a decision was made to start the construction of the new church. All the necessary permits were obtained from the State of Israel, and in December 1954, the cornerstone of the church that corresponded to Barluzzi's plan was laid in a crowded ceremony.

However, slandering reports and fierce critiques of Barluzzi's plan had started to emerge in the foreign, especially French, press. The first published critique of Barluzzi's plan appeared in the July–August 1954 issue of *L'art sacré* that was dedicated to Japanese art. Written by Dominican friar Maurice Hyacinthe Lelong, it praised Japanese art and architecture, especially the simplicity of lines and building materials, and compared Japanese architecture to Barluzzi's plan for the Church of the Annunciation. The illustration accompanying the article shows the model of Barluzzi's church and above it an image of a dragon. The

¹⁰Valerio Vigorelli, "Una basilica per il luogo più sacro del mondo," *Arte Cristiana*, 442, nos. 1–2 (January–February, 1956), 9–18, here 10. The current research does not deal with the additional two plans of the church prepared by Barluzzi between the years 1955 and 1957. Those plans were prepared after the publication of the fierce criticism of his first plan and according to changes required by the Vatican. There is no essential difference between those plans and his first plan. The additional plans are less detailed, and Barluzzi's artistic freedom is clearly restricted by contradictory demands he received from the Vatican and the various archaeologists, architects, and other parties who examined his work.

¹¹Pacifico Torres (commissary of the Holy Land), "Una nueva Basílica de la Anunciación se va a levantar sobre al gruta que habitó la virgín como ofrenda y plegaria de la catolicidad en el año mariano," file Barluzzi, ACTS; Cesare Filippi, "La chiesa di Nazaret," *Il nostro tempo*, Anno IX, 44 (November 7, 1954), p. 2; Ignazio Mancini, "Sorgerà sulla Grotta di Nazaret una nuova Basilica dell'Annunciazione," *Corriere di Napoli* (December 3–4, 1954), 3.

¹²Angelo Ahmarani (the parish priest of Nazareth) to Giacinto Maria Faccio (custos), August 14, 1954, file Nazaret costruzione basilica, ACTS.

caption under the illustration reads “Voici la monstrueuse Basilique de A. Barluzzi qu’on est à la veille de dresser sous le ciel de Galilée, à Nazareth, si les chrétiens ne s’élèvent pas contre ce projet insensé.”¹³ The article raises some of the main claims against Barluzzi’s church that would appear in other articles and letters sent to the Custody. One major objection was the amount of money slated to be spent on the church; it was asserted that this money should be distributed to the poor instead. Another important issue was opposition to the grandiosity of the church and its size. Other sources stated that the projected church was too imposing aesthetically and functionally for the little town of Nazareth and its small Catholic community.¹⁴ Architectural and artistic arguments against Barluzzi’s plan criticized his eclectic approach; the lack of modernity; and the shape of the church, which resembled a mosque.¹⁵

Faccio supported Barluzzi and sent an intriguing response to the editor of *L’art sacré*:

Le R. P. Lelong s’efforce de faire remarquer le profond contraste qui existerait entre le projet de la basilique de Nazareth et “les pures images authentiquement évangéliques” qu’il nous a rapportées du Japon. Il sait pourtant qu’un parallèle n’est possible que si les termes de comparaison sont, de par leur nature, sur le même plan . . . C’est ainsi, par exemple, qu’il ne viendrait à l’idée de personne de comparer l’humble chapelle de la léproserie du P. Damien Deveuster à Molokai avec la basilique grandiose qui fut édifiée à Lourdes, et sur les lieux mêmes où la Vierge Immaculée, apparaissant à la petite bergère des Pyrénées, n’avait demandé qu’une humble chapelle. Pourtant ce magnifique sanctuaire de Lourdes n’est certainement pas considéré par les chrétiens comme la “projection accablante de la mésestime” qu’ils ont conçue pour la Pauvreté évangélique, mais bien comme l’expression de la foi vivante et de l’ardent amour de leurs pères. La même réflex-

¹³M. H. Lelong, “Djiring ou Nazareth?,” *L’art sacré*, 11–12 (July–August, 1954), 36–37.

¹⁴Faccio to Paschal Kinsel (commissary of the Custody in the United States), October 5, 1955, file Nazaret Costruzione Basilica, ACTS.

¹⁵Barluzzi’s plan resembles the plan of the church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul after it was converted into a mosque and four minarets were erected around it. As a result, Hagia Sophia (and the Church of the Annunciation) are reminiscent of common mosques in Turkey. It is interesting to note that the mosque planned to be erected in front of the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth in 2000 is similar to Barluzzi’s plan. I did not find, however, in any document a conscious attempt by Barluzzi to create a plan that would appeal to the eastern, Arab Muslim audience. “On voudrait infliger à Nazaret cette basilic!”, *Le Figaro* (December 10, 1955), file Nazaret costruzione basilica, ACTS; Piero Bargellini (a member of Comune di Firenze) to Faccio, January 28, 1955, file Nazaret costruzione basilica, subfile Lavori basilica Nazaret, ACTS.

ion s'imposerait pour nos belles basiliques romanes, nos sanctuaires constantiniens de Terre-Sainte, les cathédrales gothiques ... la Custodie de Terre-Sainte ... a l'intention d'ériger un monument qui soit comme une glorification solennelle de "la plus humble des créatures" et une évocation grandiose du Mystère de l'Incarnation du Verbe ... Serait-ce une insulte et un scandale, que de vouloir glorifier, dans sa patrie terrestre, l'humble Vierge de Nazareth en lui élevant une basilique de gloire? Serait-ce une chose "indécente" que de vouloir réaliser ce rêve séculaire? Pourquoi et en quoi cette œuvre devrait-elle "affliger" et "scandaliser", voire "outrager" le monde catholique? Le R. P. Lelong pense-t-il que, si l'on proposait aux catholiques un choix ... les catholiques répondraient qu'ils pencheraient plutôt pour la première formule: église de village? Nous ne croyons pas cela, quant à nous. Nous pourrions même nous permettre d'affirmer le contraire. Car nous aussi nous connaissons le peuple chrétien.¹⁶

Another criticism of Barluzzi's plan pertained to the preservation of the archaeological remains in the structure of the new church. Barluzzi was reproached for devoting insufficient attention to preserving the remains of the village that was exposed during excavation.¹⁷

Four years later, in 1958, the new Franciscan custos, Alfredo Polidori (in office 1957–62), took the project from Barluzzi and handed it to another architect, Giovanni Muzio, who then managed to successfully carry out his own plan for the church.

On the surface, the discourse around the Church of the Annunciation appears to be a dialogue over architectural-artistic topics, but an analysis of the juxtaposition of the plans of Barluzzi and Muzio illustrates that other nonartistic factors contributed to the change in architectural plans for the church. To proceed with the comparison, it is necessary to understand Muzio's version of the Church of the Annunciation that was eventually carried out.

Muzio's Plan for the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth

Muzio is considered one of the leading architects of the Novecento style,¹⁸ constructing major Catholic and, in particular, Franciscan mon-

¹⁶"La Basilique de Nazareth," *L'art sacré*, 9–10 (May–June, 1955), 28–31, here 28–29.

¹⁷Pierre Benoit, "Une église pour Nazareth," *La vie intellectuelle* (June, 1955), 23–37, here 28–30.

¹⁸The term *Novecento* has contradictory meanings. For some, it describes art nouveau; for others, it means the spectrum of the innovations of the avant-garde movement, while still others perceive it as a synonym for rationalism or as an antistylistic approach.

uments, and building churches, monasteries, and religious complexes across Italy—especially in the Milan area. Muzio's architecture successfully integrated the perceptions and the policy of the Vatican toward sacred art and building design. Among his major works are the Catholic University of Milan (1921–49); the St. Angelo monastery and the Angelicum in Milan (1939); and the Franciscan general Curia in Rome, the seat of the general government of the worldwide Franciscan order (1942–50).¹⁹ Muzio first arrived in Israel in 1958 after being asked to plan the Church of the Annunciation, the first structure he built in the Holy Land.²⁰ The planning and the building of the new church lasted for more than ten years, and the church was consecrated in 1969.

The Church of the Annunciation was planned as a fortress. It was important to Muzio to contrast the new church with the remains of the previous basilicas preserved on the site. With the powerful appearance of the new church, he meant to convey that its fate, unlike that of its predecessors, would be different.²¹ The fortified nature of the church is evident in its size and strength, its seclusion from the urban surroundings, and the details of the building. Muzio intended to create a connection between the existing monastery and the new church, thus creating a mystical setting to embody the sacred remains. His aim was to produce an isolated religious complex segregated and protected from the secular, noisy surroundings of the city of Nazareth.²² This seclusion was obtained by a large court protected from south and west by a tall wall with an inner arcade.

To enable the best possible conduct of the liturgy and to protect the valuable archaeological remains, Muzio erected two churches, one on

In Muzio's case it refers to the negation of eclecticism and estrangement from futurism that stems from neoclassicism and a search for a modernistic change. See "La cultura del Novecento debatio," *Edilizia moderna*, 81 (December, 1963), 60–66, here 63; Guido Canella and Vittorio Gregotti, "Il novecento e l'architettura," *Edilizia moderna*, 81 (December, 1963), 2.

¹⁹Fulvio Irace, *Giovanni Muzio 1893–1982* (Milan, 1994), pp. 208–09; Gianni Mezzanotte, *Giovanni Muzio: Architetture Francescane* (Milan, 1974).

²⁰In 1979, not long before his death in 1982, Muzio planned the Franciscan Casa Nova hospice in Bethlehem. The Church of the Annunciation and the Casa Nova are the only two edifices constructed by Muzio in the Holy Land.

²¹Giovanni Muzio, "Progetti dell'erigenda Basilica dell'Annunziata," *La Terra Santa* (August–September, 1959), 212–19, here 212, 218; Rossi Berardo, *The Custody of the Holy Land*, p. 40.

²²Gaudenzio Governanti, *The Shrine of the Annunciation in Nazareth* (Milan, 1962), p. 36.

top of the other. The lower church functions mainly as a museum. It preserves and exhibits the remains of the Byzantine-era church, which are displayed next to the holy grotto, and the perimeter of the modern church follows the outer limits of the walls of the crusades-era church, left in situ.

The upper church is designated for the celebration of the liturgy. The monastery is connected to the upper church by a suspended courtyard that creates a substitute for a cloister²³ for use by the monks of the monastery. At the same time, the courtyard provides shelter for the underlying remains of the ancient village of Nazareth from the time of Jesus that was discovered during excavation work in 1955.²⁴

The lack of uniqueness in design and the specific adjustment of the Church of the Annunciation to its surroundings can be seen by comparing this church to a St. Antonio church that was built by Muzio in Varese, Italy, a few years earlier.²⁵ It is clear that the church in Varese served as a prototype for the Church of the Annunciation.

By Israeli (and Middle Eastern) standards, the Church of the Annunciation is undeniably a monumental building. The church dimensions are 44.6 meters long and 27 meters wide, and the dome height is 55 meters. The modern style of Muzio's work manifests itself in the extensive use of exposed reinforced concrete, sharp angles, and modern reliefs and engravings that decorate the southern and western façades. The artwork on the façade depicts the biblical events of the Annunciation and the Incarnation. The outer walls are covered in light-colored combinations of local stone. The narrow windows, almost slits, are suitable for the intense light of the Israeli sun and contribute to the fortified perception of the church.

The inner part of the church is decorated by works of art dedicated to Mary and to the Annunciation that were donated by different nations. Muzio was not involved in deciding the artistic ornaments that were not directly part of the architecture. The commissariats of the

²³A cloister is an element that forms part of cathedral, monastic, and abbey architecture. It usually consists of four corridors with a courtyard in the middle. In many cases, the cloisters connect between the dwellings of a monastery and a church.

²⁴Mezzanotte, *Giovanni Muzio*, p. 136.

²⁵Luciano Crespi and Angelo del Corso, *Un secolo di architettura a Varese* (Florence, 1990), p. 83; Mezzanotte, *Giovanni Muzio*, p. 136.

Holy Land²⁶ chose acknowledged artists in sacred art from all over the world and ordered specific works of art to adorn the church. Every nation of the Catholic world contributed to the glorification and the splendor of the church, and this global involvement confirmed the ecumenical approach of the basilica's founders.²⁷

The Comparison of the Two Plans for the Church of the Annunciation

The juxtaposition of the plans in view of the criticism is striking in its similarities.

Is Muzio's plan more aesthetic than Barluzzi's? Beauty, as we all know, is in the eye of the beholder. Although there were no complaints on aesthetic grounds of Muzio's church from the Catholic world, widespread criticism came from Israeli journalists covering the building process. They criticized the design as "gray as the highway," called it "a mass of reinforced concrete," and joked about the appearance of the dome that "looks like a pile of hay or a cork of a bottle."²⁸

The criticism of the large sums of money spent on the new church referred to Muzio's plan as well. The budget for the church, according to Barluzzi's plan, was estimated by the Custody as just over \$1 million.²⁹ The final cost of Muzio's built church, according to the Israeli periodical *Christian News from Israel*, was about \$2 million.³⁰

²⁶The commissariats are entities of the Custody that operate outside the Holy Land. The main aim of these commissariats is to have an effective means of spreading Franciscan information about its deeds and to increase the interest in the Holy Land as well as to collect money and donations to the Custody. The commissariats were officially established in the sixteenth century. In the 1920s the Custody had more than forty commissariats in Europe and America. Today there are eighty-two commissariats scattered across the world.

²⁷Benedetto Antonucci, "La nuova Basilica di Nazaret," *La Terra Santa* (November, 1964), 318–21; for more on Muzio and the Church of the Annunciation, see Sandro Vavassori, "L'architetto Muzio ci illustra la sua basilica di Nazaret," *L'eco di Bergamo* (February 26, 1964), 3; "Grazie per Nazaret," *La Terra Santa* (January, 1967), 16–18; Giuseppe Gambirasio and Bruno Minardi, eds., *Giovanni Muzio opera e scritti* (Milan, 1982); Gino Concetti, "La nuova basilica di Nazaret," *Osservatore Romano*, 70 (March 26, 1969), 3. More information about the progress of the constructions can be found in the articles of *Terra Santa* (1961–67).

²⁸The citations are taken from Sandro Vavassori, "L'architetto Muzio," p. 3. All the translations in the text from Italian, French, or Hebrew were made by the author.

²⁹C. W. (probably Chaim Wardi, the editor of the periodical), "The Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth," *Christian News from Israel*, V, nos. 3–4 (February, 1955), 17–20.

Muzio's church is not as high or as spacious as that featured in Barluzzi's plan; still, it is one of the largest churches in the Holy Land, and it is greatly disproportionate to the surrounding city of Nazareth. Muzio also detached the church from its urban surroundings and enclosed it behind a high wall, which contributes to the sense of size. As the church was quickly nicknamed by the local inhabitants *Knise Kbire* (Arabic for "big church"), it is clear that this is not the modest church envisioned by the critics of Barluzzi's plan.

It is notable that Muzio's plan is more suited to the demands of modern art than Barluzzi's, yet many elements transform the church into a largely traditional one—in particular, the traditional church dome and the stone cover. It is certainly not as modern as other churches that were built at the same time around Europe.

Muzio emphasized the importance of the archaeological remains. However, it must be noted that Barluzzi was not blind to the need for such preservation. The main difference between the two architects was not the implementation (or the aims of implementation described in Barluzzi's booklet), but rather the degree of preservation. Barluzzi claimed that in the conflict between the need to preserve the archaeological sites and the aesthetic and symbolic needs of the new church, he would give preponderance to the latter.³¹ Yet close attention to the many churches he built, his meticulous methods of archaeological preservation, his display of archaeological materials at the core of his design, and his detailed plans to implement the preservation of artifacts suggests that the criticism of his work was exaggerated. However, it is important to note that Barluzzi's first plan did not substantially change after the remains of the ancient village were found during the 1955 excavations, and it is quite possible he did not provide the necessary adjustments for the preservation of the new findings.

It seems that the project was taken from Barluzzi and handed over to Muzio in response to criticism leveled against Barluzzi, yet Muzio's plan does not respond to that criticism. In fact, both projects suffer from nearly the same problems.³²

³⁰"Consecration of the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth," *Christian News from Israel*, XX, nos. 1–2 (June, 1969), 12–13.

³¹Barluzzi, *At Nazareth*, pp. 12, 17.

³²The plans of the churches, the critiques of Barluzzi's plan, and the further implications of these critiques are detailed in Masha Halevi, "The Inter-Ecclesiastical Discourse

National Politics and the Franciscan Custody

A case can be made that in spite of the importance ascribed to the architecture, design proportion, archaeological preservation, and the sacred symbolic meaning of the Church of the Annunciation, the main reason for the rejection of Barluzzi's plan was political. The Catholic Church did acknowledge the symbolic importance of the church. Its importance was not only as a symbol of memory or identity but also as a symbol of the power and potency of the Church.

Barluzzi never believed that the criticism against him was pertinent to his plan. As proof, he reminded his critics of the vague circumstances under which the project was first taken away from him in the 1920s. He believed this first rejection was based on political intrigues of French, Italian, and Spanish elements³³ inside the Franciscan Custody (which was an international body with Italian predominance).³⁴ He believed it was a French conspiracy headed by a French cardinal, Eugène-Gabriel-Gervais-Laurent Tisserant, the head of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches in the Vatican. Barluzzi claimed the French wanted to open the design of the Church of the Annunciation to an international competition so as to win it and build the church themselves. Since the French lined up support from a body that was part of

Concerning the Construction of the Modern Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth," *Cathedra*, 126 (2007), 83–102 (published in Hebrew). This article proposes additional explanations for Muzio's choice.

³³From 1740 and until 1920 the French held the protectorate of the Catholics in the Ottoman Empire. The Spanish king, Charles III, proclaimed in the eighteenth century that he was the direct descendent of Robert of Anjou, king of Naples and Jerusalem, and claimed the patronage over the holy places that were created *ex novo* by Robert of Anjou or redeemed by him from the Muslims. Spain renounced the patronage only in 1980. Inside the Custody, by papal decree, the custos always had to be Italian, the vice custos French, and the treasurer Spanish. The members of the custodial council, the discretorium, had to be Italian, French, Spanish, and German. The Spanish in the Custody also held exclusive rights of administration of some convents. See Paolo Pieraccini, "La comunità cattolica di Terra Santa: problemi d'identità," in *Europe, Its Borders and the Others*, ed. Luciano Tosi (Naples, 2000), pp. 15–70; Ignazio Mancini, "L'aggiornamento della legislazione della Custodia di Terra Santa," in Piccirillo, *La Custodia di Terra Santa*, pp. 28–30; Giuseppe Buffon, *Les Franciscains en Terre Sainte (1869–1889): Religion et Politique. Une recherche institutionnelle* (Paris, 2005), pp. 14–15; Daniela Fabrizio, *Fascino d'Oriente: religione e politica in Medio Oriente da Giolitti a Mussolini* (Geneva, 2006), pp. 58–61.

³⁴Barluzzi to Monticone, December 10, 1956, file Barluzzi Nazaret, ACTS; Barluzzi to Angelo Dell'Aqua (the secretary of state for the Vatican), August 26, 1956, file Nazaret, ACTS; Donato Baldi, August 24, 1956, file Barluzzi Nazaret, ACTS. See also note 37 below.

the Vatican bureaucracy, the Vatican started to show an unusual interest and intervention in the church design.³⁵ In a letter that Barluzzi wrote to the Italian ambassador to Israel in 1956, he stated that he did not believe that his new plan would be accepted. The unusual intervention of the Vatican and its ambiguousness made him believe that the last refusal originated from the demands of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches in the Vatican, which was influenced by the French. He claimed that he knew that the *custos* must be aware of the present situation and the political and artistic problem of Nazareth. Although he understood the caution and the considerations required in the relationship with the Vatican, he believed that there must be a way that acknowledged the moral rights he deserved after years of commitment, the large amount of work already done, and the credit he received for his previous works in the Holy Land.³⁶

There are not many documents available to support Barluzzi's theory, but although an Italian architect eventually built the church, his suspicions should not be dismissed. Most of the criticism on the project did come from French sources. The tension between French and Italian elements inside and outside the Franciscan Custody had a long history. It is quite possible that Muzio was chosen as the new architect of the church also because of his excellent and well-documented relationship with the French and his admiration for French culture and intellectuals. Unlike Barluzzi's high level of involvement in his projects (designing a church, supervising the construction, and choosing only Italian artists), Muzio's work was much more decentralized. He designed the church but an Israeli firm built it—a firm that employed local Arab workers who were supervised by a Jewish architect. In addition, artists worldwide donated artworks, further reinforcing the ecumenical aspect of the church.³⁷

³⁵Barluzzi to Cardinal Celso Costantini, September 2, 1956, file Barluzzi Nazaret, ACTS; Barluzzi to A. Cursola (the head of the Franciscan order), September 11, 1956, file Barluzzi Nazaret, ACTS.

³⁶Barluzzi to Benedetto Capomazza (Italian ambassador to Israel), December 5, 1956, file Barluzzi Nazaret, ACTS.

³⁷In this context it is interesting to note that years later, the national tensions inside the Custody were still apparent, as can be seen in the report of M. Mandes, vice director of a department of Christian communities in the Ministry of Religions from 1955. In this report, he referred to a French Canadian monk who complained to him that Faccio started construction of a large number of churches and thus forced the Custody into debts that hurt its financial structure. He also blamed Italian Franciscans for economic fraud, claiming that the money was transferred to their families in Italy and adding that although most of the donations to the Custody arrived from United States and Canada,

The exceptional intervention of the Vatican and especially the Congregation for the Oriental Churches was not a figment of Barluzzi's imagination, but it was not directed against Barluzzi personally. This intervention had political interecclesiastical reasons that were related directly to a perception of the church in a holy place as a symbol of power. It is not certain that Tisserant led or even inflamed the criticism of Barluzzi's plan that came from French sources, but he most probably used it to promote both the Vatican's interests and his own that were opposed to the ones of the Custody in the context of monumental ecclesiastical construction in the Holy Land.

The Relationship between the Vatican and the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land

To better comprehend the reasons for the intervention³⁸ of the Vatican in the construction of the Church of the Annunciation, it is necessary to understand the historical background that led to the unique status of the Custody in the Holy Land and its relations with the Vatican throughout the years.

The Custody served for hundreds of years as the representative of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land and the responsible body of the guardianship of the holy places. Through its long service it gained an autonomous and privileged status. One aspect of the anomaly of the Custody was political and expressed itself in holding official simultaneous connections with various entities of the Catholic Church. On some issues the Custody reported to a range of individuals and institutions such as the minister general of the Franciscan order, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in the Vatican, the Congregation for the Oriental Churches in the Vatican (after 1938), and the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem. When issues involved the holy places, tensions between the Catholic and Orthodox churches, relations with patronage claims regarding the holy places by various nations, and

all the rights were in the hands of Italians and Spanish members of the Custody. The Italians, according to him, wanted to take over the Custody. M. Mandes, "The Report of the Franciscan Custody," December 19, 1955, sec. 98, file 5803.2 1, IAS.

³⁸This section is based mostly on Giovannelli, *La Santa Sede* and Paolo Pieraccini, *Gerusalemme, Luoghi Santi e comunità religiose nella politica internazionale* (Bologna, 1997). Giovannelli first proposed the connection between the inner Catholic struggle and the Church of the Annunciation, and the additional documents found during this research support his original proposal.

other issues, the Custody invariably maintained direct contact with the Holy See, from which it solely received instructions.³⁹

Another aspect that contributed to its unique position was an economic one. The historical circumstances that developed due to the increased needs of guardianship of the holy places, the need to increase the Catholic mission and charitable activities in the area, and the importance of exposing the West to the unique problems the Custody faced in the Holy Land led to creation of a structure that established links between the Custody and the West. In this way, the commissariats of the Holy Land that officially represented the Custody could be established in many countries. In addition, a pontifical decree from 1887 stated that all donations collected in the world on Good Friday were to be given to the Holy Land and managed directly by the Custody.⁴⁰ In this way, the Custody collected donations from all over the world and did not depend economically on any particular nation.

Since the re-establishment of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem in 1847 relations between it and the Custody were extremely tense. The tensions derived, among other things, from the lack of clear definition of the authority of each body. During the British Mandate, there was an attempt on the part of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith to limit the autonomy and the authority of the Custody and to transfer some of its authority to the Latin Patriarchate by restricting the role of the Custody to that of the guardianship of the holy places and by subjugating missionary activity to the patriarch. In 1923 the Vatican published a "*Modus Vivendi*" between the Custody and the Patriarchate that constituted a compromise between the pontifical approach (pro-Custody) and that of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (pro-Patriarchate). The missionary activity of the Custody was reapproved, but it was not allowed to open new schools, monasteries, and even chapels without the permission of the Latin patriarch.⁴¹

A new attempt to diminish the autonomy and the functions of the Custody started with the appointment of Cardinal Tisserant as the head of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches in the Vatican. During

³⁹Giovannelli, *La Santa Sede*, pp. 5–6.

⁴⁰Giovannelli, *La Santa Sede*, pp. 5–6.

⁴¹Ferdinando Diotallevi, *Diario di Terrasanta*, ed. Daniela Fabrizio (Milan, 2002), pp. 9, 30; Paolo Pieraccini, *Cattolici di Terra Santa (1333–2000)* (Florence, 2000), pp. 70–71; Saul Colbi, *Christianity in the Holy Land* (Tel Aviv, 1969), p. 96.

the 1950s, Tisserant tried to achieve a double goal: to reduce the power and the autonomy of the Custody and to diminish the Latinization⁴² of holy space in the Holy Land. His activity to reduce the autonomy of the Custody manifests itself, among other things, in the decree published on July 14, 1955, that restricted the rights of the Custody. The decree limited the right of election of the members of the leadership of the Custody to the head of the Franciscan order and eliminated direct correspondence between the custos and the Holy See.⁴³ The reason for diminishing the status of the Custody lay in the apprehension by Tisserant that the Custody, due to its great autonomy, would not carry out fully the instructions the Congregation for the Oriental Churches issued to the Catholics in Palestine to reduce the Latin influence. This attempt of the Vatican to reduce the Roman Catholic influence in the Holy Land is puzzling without the historical context.

As far as Tisserant was concerned, it was imperative to stop the Latinization process of the Eastern Orthodox and Catholics (various Eastern churches that reunited themselves with the Catholic Church such as Greek Catholic and Armenian Catholic) that was directed by the Custody and the Latin Patriarchate.⁴⁴ For many years Eastern Catholics complained that the two leading entities that represented the Vatican in the Holy Land—the Franciscan Custody and the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem—made efforts to convert Orthodox Christians to the Latin rite instead of facilitating their conversion to the local Eastern Catholic churches. They demanded the right to appoint a Greek Catholic patriarch instead of a Latin one, to put an end to Latin missionary work, and to reduce the number of Latin priests that served in the Holy Land. At this time, Greek Catholics constituted the vast majority of Catholics in the Holy Land, and the Vatican could not disregard their claims. The priests belonging to this community were traditionally involved in the national Palestinian front, and they struggled against the presence of Western Catholic priests in the area who were not fellow Arabs. The Eastern Catholic community claimed that the fact that the Latin priests were foreigners led to a lack of involvement in the difficulties of the local Christian community that derived from the political situation in Israel.⁴⁵

⁴²The term *Latinization* refers to conversion of the population to the Latin rite, and *landscape Latinization* refers to establishing symbols of power of the Western Roman Catholic Church.

⁴³Faccio to Barluzzi, September 9, 1956, file Nazaret, ACTS.

⁴⁴Giovannelli, *La Santa*, p. 222.

⁴⁵Pieraccini, *Gerusalemme*, pp. 106-07, 423-28.

Their demands aligned with the interests of the Holy See to avoid the identification of Western Catholics residing in the colonial and oriental countries with their Western “oppressors.” At this time, the Vatican decided to give priority to the Eastern rites in the appointment of local priests. The goal of these ongoing efforts was to turn Catholicism in a direction that allowed significant expression of the local realities in Asia and Africa and to present Catholicism as an indigenous and not a foreign religion imposed by Europe on the local population. Following this line of thought, Pope Benedict XV in 1919 issued a decree, *Maximum Illud*, that stressed the vital importance of the local Catholic churches. Yet the decree did not put an end to Latin missionary activity in the Holy Land promoted by both the Custody of the Holy Land and the Latin Patriarch Luigi Barlassina, who held the position of patriarch throughout the British Mandate in Palestine.⁴⁶

One of the most zealous promoters of anti-Latinization was Tisserant. One way to reduce the process of Latinization was to avoid the building of monumental and pretentious symbols of Roman Catholic power such as the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth. It is not surprising that a few months after the publication of the decree reducing the autonomy of the Custody, an order came from the Vatican to suspend work on the church’s construction.⁴⁷

The custos of the time, Faccio, was an obstacle to Tisserant. The construction of a monumental church in Nazareth was not only a fulfillment of years of work and longing by the Custody but also was a declaration of its power against the power and authority of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches.

The correspondence between the two sides documents a fierce and obstinate struggle. An example of the vital importance that Faccio attributed to the building of the church in Nazareth was the fact that the ceremony of the laying of the church cornerstone was set for December 1954. Previously, in May 1954, Tisserant wrote to the head of the Franciscan order complaining that the custos collected funds for the church at a time when the Holy See was not at all convinced that the project should proceed. In July 1954, Tisserant applied directly to the custos:

⁴⁶Pieraccini, *Gerusalemme*, pp. 106–07, 423–28; Pieraccini, “Il Patriarcato latino di Gerusalemme (1918–1940): Ritratto di un patriarca scomodo: mons. Luigi Barlassina,” *Il Politico*, LXIII, no. 2 (1998), 207–56 and no. 4 (1998), 591–639.

⁴⁷Giovannelli, *La Santa*, p. 220.

Questa S. Congregazione si sente in dovere di esprimere il suo dispiacere nell'aver appreso che ella, nel far propaganda per la costruzione della basilica dell'Annunciazione in Nazareth, si è servita e si serve della lettera che la medesima Congregazione le ha scritto a tal riguardo il 13 marzo scorso, adoperando solo la parte favorevole e tacendo completamente la riserva che riguardava l'incertezza politica in Terra Santa.⁴⁸

Despite the obvious dissatisfaction with his actions, Faccio continued to promote the building of the church. He decided on his own to schedule a ceremony for the laying of the church's cornerstone, which occurred after the publication of fierce criticism against Barluzzi's plan and without the final approval for the construction from the Vatican. Faccio did not invite to the ceremony (or even notify) the apostolic delegate, the representative of the Vatican in the region, a fact that enraged Tisserant.⁴⁹ In January 1955 the Congregation for the Oriental Churches wrote again to Faccio in an attempt to prevent him from building the church on the basis of its large, dominating proportions. In response, Faccio claimed that the value of a work of art is not determined by its size. The philosophy that always guided the Custody in the construction of churches was its testimony of faith to the Christian and Muslim worlds. Faccio announced that work on demolition of the old church had already started and that once the demolition was completed, work would commence on the archaeological excavations and the laying of the foundations to the new church.⁵⁰

In making this unilateral decision, Faccio stated that the right of the Custody to make its own decisions to construct churches in the holy places of the Holy Land and its right to promote the mission of the Latin rite there were longstanding and valid. In both cases, the church in Nazareth served as a tool and a symbol for reaching those goals. As stated previously, in July 1955, the Vatican published an official decree with substantial changes to the status of the Custody, and a few months later the secretary of state of the Vatican announced to Faccio the suspension of work on the church in Nazareth to allow for a review of Barluzzi's plan.⁵¹ The Vatican's next step was the removal of Faccio from his position as a *custos* six months before the official end of his

⁴⁸Qtd. in Giovannelli, *La Santa*, p. 220.

⁴⁹Agostino Sepinki (head of the Franciscan order) to Cardinal Eugène Tisserant (the head of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches), file Nazaret costruzione basilica, subfile Lavori basilica Nazaret, ACTS.

⁵⁰Giovannelli, *La Santa*, p. 221.

⁵¹Giovannelli, *La Santa*, pp. 221–23.

term of office. It is important to note that the rebuilding of the church by Muzio started in 1959, the year Tisserant resigned from his position as the head of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, suggesting perhaps more than mere coincidence.⁵²

The Church of the Annunciation was perceived by all the entities involved (the Custody, the Vatican, and the Eastern Catholics) as the symbol of the power of the Roman Catholic Church as well as that of the Custody. For that reason as well as political internal interests, the Vatican tried to prevent its construction or, at the very least, to drastically reduce its size.

The Relations with the Israeli Government

The attitude of the recently founded State of Israel to the process of building the Church of the Annunciation in Israel was extremely important, since it was the Israeli government that issued the permission to build the church in 1954. Granting permission to build a monumental church is not an easy decision for a non-Christian government. The only massive churches that were built in the Holy Land were built during Christian regimes, and even then, the government was often reluctant to grant a permission to build imposing churches.⁵³ It is worthwhile to examine the reasons that led the Israeli administration to allow the construction of the biggest Franciscan church in the Middle East, which was believed by the Israeli authorities at the time to be one of the largest Christian churches in the world, second only to the basilica of St. Peter in the Vatican.⁵⁴ The permission to build a monumental church is more startling given the fact that the church was to be built in a city with a mixed Christian-Muslim population and would surely be regarded unfavorably by the Muslims. Indeed, the best example of the rivalry that developed over the holy landscape of the city was the Muslim effort to build in front of the Church of the

⁵²Since the Vatican's documents pertaining to the secretary of state of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches are not yet accessible, the direct influence of Tisserant's office in the replacement of the architects or the date of the beginning of the actual works cannot yet be determined.

⁵³For example, in the case of Barluzzi's construction of the Church of All Nations in Gethsemane (1919–24), the British authorities limited the size of the church and asked to reduce its already modest dimensions. See Harry Charles Luke (assistant governor of Jerusalem) to Luigi Barlassina (Latin patriarch of Jerusalem), September 2, 1921, ATQ/1625, the Israel Antiquities Authority Archives (hereafter IAA).

⁵⁴"New Nazareth Church to cost \$1,500,000" (March 31, 1954), S71.1655, the Zionist Archives, Jerusalem (hereafter ZA).

Annunciation a huge mosque dedicated to Shihab a-Din, the nephew of Saladin, in 1999. The mosque was supposed to be higher than the Church of the Annunciation, and its construction commenced, not by chance, to coincide with the Christian millennium.⁵⁵

The dual approach of the Israeli authority to its Christian population should be noted. The majority of Christians in Israel were Arabs, with all the implications and the associations implied. At the same time, the Catholic Church in Israel was considered the representative of the World Catholic Church and the Vatican, a perception that bestowed on it power and political importance far beyond its relative proportion of the local population. It seems that the permission to build the church was beneficial to Israeli politics on both of those levels of perception.

The Israeli-Arab war of 1948 had negative consequences for the Christian presence and interests in the Holy Land. During the war, much church property was damaged and confiscated, many Catholic religious orders left the area, and many Christian Arabs became refugees.⁵⁶ Many Christian inhabitants left their homes and villages but stayed in the territory belonging to Israel, thus becoming refugees forbidden to return to their homes. Five thousand refugees crowded into Nazareth, a main center for Arabs in the State of Israel. About two-thirds of the Arabs living in Nazareth were Christians, although their number was declining due to emigration.⁵⁷ Until 1952, these refugees received their refugee certifications from UNRWA,⁵⁸ which distributed food and assisted them with finding employment. In summer 1952, the State of Israel declared that the assistance and the employment of these

⁵⁵The Israeli government issued a permission to build the mosque as well but soon after the laying of the foundation, it was cancelled due to immense international pressure. More about the affair can be read in Raphael Israeli, *Green Crescent over Nazareth* (London, 2002); Raphael Israeli, "The Anti-Millennium: The Islamization of Nazareth," *Nativ*, 73, no. 2 (2000), 52–57 (published in Hebrew); R. Shaked, "The Apparent Compromise in Nazareth: A Mosque to Be Built in the Area of the Dispute," *Yedioth Abronoth* (September 30, 1999), 12 (published in Hebrew); R. Weiss, "The Mosque Destroyed without Resistance," *Yedioth Abronoth* (July 2, 2003), 23 (published in Hebrew).

⁵⁶Giovannelli, *La Santa*, pp. 180–87. The list of the closed institutions and the religious orders that left the area during the war is to be found in the archive of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem in *Statistiche miscellanea*.

⁵⁷In 1952 about 14,000 Christians and 7,000 Muslims resided in Nazareth. See "The Tension in Nazareth Raised This Morning," *Yedioth Abronoth* (April 15, 1952), 1 (published in Hebrew).

⁵⁸United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

refugees was the responsibility of the Israeli state, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs determined that there were no more refugees inside the borders of Israel. Shortly afterward the Ministry of Labor initiated a large-scale effort to find employment for the refugees.⁵⁹

According to the emergency regulations in effect after the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, the occupied territories, which belonged to the Arab state, entered under military government. The area under the military government (that operated from September 1948 until 1966) included the Galilee, the triangle in Samaria, and the Negev, as well as the cities of Ramla, Lod, and Ashkelon. The northern parts belonged to the northern military government (its southern limit passing near Nazareth and Valley of Jezreel).⁶⁰

One important effect of the military government on the population of Nazareth was its contribution to the rise in the unemployment rate. It reduced the number of permits for workers who worked outside of the city, causing them to lose their jobs, but could not offer enough employment within its limits.⁶¹

The difficult situation of the inhabitants of Nazareth influenced the relationship of the State of Israel with the Vatican as was noticed in 1948 by Jacob Herzog, then the director of the department of the Christian communities in the Ministry of Religion:

In the circular letter from 18 November 1948, I pointed out to some of the ministers the difficult situation of the residents of Nazareth because of the unresolved problems of unemployment in the city and its surrounding area. The officials from my office who communicate with the residents reported about the bitterness prevailing in the city and quoted the clergy who claimed that the government of Israel did not take the necessary steps to win the sympathy of the town residents by providing for their basic needs. Steps, which should have been taken *in preparation for the international discussion that will be held regarding the fate of Nazareth* [emphasis added]. I have explained the difficulty of providing necessary work places for Nazareth. There are not enough working places inside the city and bestowing the needed amount of permits for work outside the city will

⁵⁹Hillel Cohen, "The Internal Refugees in the State of Israel: The Struggle for Identity," *The New East*, 43 (2001-02), 83-102, here 94-95 (published in Hebrew).

⁶⁰Sara Ozacky Lazar, "The Military Government as a Mechanism of Controlling the Arab Citizens: The First Decade 1948-1958," *The New East*, 43 (2001-02), 103-31, here 104-05 (published in Hebrew).

⁶¹G. Giladi, "What Was Nazareth Agitated about?" *Hamishmar* (August 4, 1953), s71.1655, ZA (published in Hebrew).

pose a serious security problem. The answer of a special representative of the apostolic commissioner to this claim was that the government of Israel should be responsible for its actions. If it wants to control the city and its surroundings it should take care of the needs of the population. *I would like to state that the current state of things can cause troubles with our relationships with the Vatican and other Christian elements around the world that are very much interested in Nazareth* [emphasis added]. Therefore, I would ask that everything possible be done to ameliorate the situation, and perhaps the prime minister will agree to appoint an inter-ministerial committee that will take care of this problem.⁶²

The relationship between the Vatican and Zionist adherents, already tense before the foundation of the State of Israel for theological and political reasons, was further aggravated. The interest of the Vatican in the Holy Land was first and foremost to maintain the rights of Catholics in the holy places and therefore to keep them safe from the danger of a Jewish takeover. The Vatican also opposed the arrival of the Jewish pioneers in Palestine because they were perceived as Bolsheviks who would endanger the traditional way of life in the Holy Land. Mostly, the Vatican feared that the Zionist immigration would drive the Christians out of Palestine and destroy its Christian character and that the Jews, along with the modernization they were bringing with them, would radically alter the way of life of the local population and damage their morals.⁶³ When the Jewish state in Israel became a reality, the Vatican, in the hope of minimizing the damage, strove to internationalize the holy places, including those in Nazareth. To accomplish its goal, the Vatican collaborated with the United Nations and in September 1949 tried to reach an agreement with Belgium to accept guardianship over Nazareth, particularly its holy places.⁶⁴ The demands for internationalization of Nazareth still prevailed among the Christians in Nazareth in 1954, the year the permission to build the Church of the Annunciation was granted.⁶⁵

Since military government usually takes place only in occupied territories of a hostile state, which are not regarded by the occupying

⁶²Jacob Herzog, "Speech Proposal for the Minister of Religion for the Governmental Meeting," February 13, 1949, the Ministry of Religions, sec. 98, file 3 5811/10, ISA.

⁶³Sergio Minerbi, *The Vatican and Zionism: Conflict in the Holy Land 1895-1925* (New York, 1990), pp. 3-4, 116, 133, 147-48.

⁶⁴"France Asking for Protectorate over Bethlehem," *Yedioth Abronoth* (September 11, 1949), 1 (published in Hebrew); "With a Majority of 9 for, 6 against and 2 Abstained the Subcommittee of Jerusalem Decided to Establish a Trusteeship," *Yedioth Abronoth* (December 2, 1949), 1 (published in Hebrew).

⁶⁵J. Waschitz, "Don't Remove the Nazareth Affair from the Public Agenda," *Hamishmar* (June 25, 1954), s71.1655, ZA (published in Hebrew).

state as an integral part of it, it was claimed that the existence of military government in Galilee contributed to the communist demands for the assignment of Galilee to the Arab state as well as facilitated Christian demands for the internationalization of Nazareth.⁶⁶

Israel opposed any attempt of the United Nations and the Vatican to internationalize sections of its territory but at the same time did not wish to destroy the more cordial relationship with the Vatican that was beginning to take root. The Vatican did not have any official diplomatic relationships with Israel and was affected more by Arab claims (most of the Christians in Israel were Arabs), but its relations with Israel warmed up gradually until the Vatican's official recognition of Israel in 1993.⁶⁷ An example can be found in the private meeting between Moshe Sharett, the Israeli minister of foreign affairs, and Pope Pius XII in 1952.⁶⁸

In addition, there was a matter where Israel and the Vatican had a mutual interest: the fear of communists. In July 1949 Pius XII published a decree that excommunicated Catholics who voted for communist parties or parties that had a joint front with the communists.⁶⁹ The impetus for the publishing of the Papal Bull was the rise of the Communist Party in postfascist Italy.⁷⁰ In Israel, an active communist party, MAKI, was part of the political equation. It was a mixed Jewish-Arab political party and the only one that expressed the national aspirations of the Arabs in Israel. In those years, Christians took a notable part in MAKI, both as leaders and voters, although most of the Christians in MAKI were Greek Orthodox and Anglicans.⁷¹ The fact that the Christians who supported MAKI belonged to the Eastern and Protestant rites only strengthened the anticommunist stand of the Catholics in Israel, a position that was well integrated with the official stand of the Vatican.

In 1954, the year in which the State of Israel issued the permits to build the Church of the Annunciation, the tension in Nazareth among

⁶⁶Lazar, "The Military Government," p. 117.

⁶⁷Sergio Minerbi, *The Vatican and Zionism*, p. 236; article by Aharon Lopez, Israeli ambassador to the Vatican from 1997, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, <<http://www.jcpa.org/jl/jl401.htm>>.

⁶⁸"Mr. Sharett's Visit to the Vatican," *Christian News from Israel*, 3, nos. 1-2 (June, 1952), 3.

⁶⁹Daphne Tsimhoni, "The Political Organization of the Christians in Israel," *The New East*, 32 (1989), 139-64, here 142 (published in Hebrew).

⁷⁰The first pope who initiated negotiations between the Vatican and the communists was John XXIII in the early 1960s.

⁷¹Tsimhoni, "The Political Organization," p. 147.

communists, Catholics, and the State of Israel reached its peak in the democratic municipal elections held in Nazareth on April 12.⁷² In the elections in Nazareth religious parties composed of Muslims, Orthodox individuals, and Catholics ran against the Communist Party. The representatives of the Latin and Eastern Catholic congregations decided to join forces against the communists. The communists claimed that the Vatican was actively interfering with the elections in Nazareth; however, in spite of the alleged intervention, the communists won the elections. The Catholic party came in second and received half as many votes as the communists. The failure of the collaboration between the Catholic congregations led to fierce polemics between two groups: the Greek Catholic congregation, headed by Bishop George Hakim (later Patriarch Maximos V Hakim), and the Latin congregation, headed by Monsignor Antonio Vergani, the patriarch's representative in Israel. Vergani and Hakim left separately for Rome to report on the situation to the pope.⁷³

The political advantages Israel gained from authorizing the building of the monumental Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth were both in international relations with the Vatican and in the internal affairs of the state, as part of the solution to the social and political problems of the city.

Since Nazareth is one of the holiest places for Christendom and was then the city with the largest Christian population in Israel, the Vatican was unusually interested and active in its affairs. Its interference shifted from the global level, an attempt to internationalize the city, to great interest and perhaps even intervention in local municipal elections. Israel refused to discuss any possibility of internationalization, but by

⁷²For more about the municipal elections in Nazareth, see "The Leaders of the Congregations in Nazareth Protesting against the City Council," *Haaretz* (March 2, 1951), file S71.804, ZA (published in Hebrew); "Civil Disobedience against the City Council of Nazareth," *Haaretz* (July 12, 1953) (published in Hebrew); "Red Flag over Nazareth," *Maariv* (September 16, 1952), s71.1655, ZA (published in Hebrew); "Nazareth: 'Hard Nut' That Was Not Cracked," *Yedioth Ahranoth* (April 11, 1954), 2 (published in Hebrew); Saul Colbi to the chairman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 14, 1954, the Ministry of Religions, sec. 98, file 2 5811/10, ISA; A. Shaanan, "The Elections in Nazareth in the British Press," *Davar* (April 15, 1954), 1 (published in Hebrew); "MAKI Won the Elections," S71.1655, ZA.

⁷³"The Pope Will Receive a Report on the Situation in Nazareth," *Hador* (May 16, 1954), s71.1655, ZA (published in Hebrew); "Conflict among the Catholics in Israel Following Their Failure in the Elections in Nazareth," *Haaretz* (May 11, 1954), s71.1655, ZA (published in Hebrew).

granting permission to build such an important monument in Nazareth, it communicated to the Vatican its willingness to collaborate when possible and stressed its liberal attitude to the Christian holy places and to Israeli Christian citizens.

A good example of this approach can be seen in the periodical *Christian News from Israel* that was issued by the Ministry of Religion in Israel and abroad:

The church that is about to be built [in Nazareth] is going to be one of the largest in the Middle East. The church is built not only due to a local demand but it represents a symbol and a monument. The Custody is going to spend on its construction about three or four million dollars that it hopes to collect from the Catholic faithful around the world. *The State of Israel holds to its liberal principles and willingly allowed the construction* [emphasis added]. The size of the church that was built in 1730 was 22 meters long and 17 wide and it was extended a little during the nineteenth century. The new church is going to be 90 meters long and 72 meters high—larger than the Crusader basilica.⁷⁴

It is interesting that the article mentions the dimensions of Barluzzi's planned church so specifically as well as indicates the State of Israel's approval so clearly. But the advantages for Israel were substantial. The local population benefited through the promise of jobs for many workers over several years. After Israel took responsibility from UNRWA for the refugees there was a pressing need to find job opportunities for the Arab refugees to show the world that the Israel could manage its affairs and that the refugee problem no longer existed. The suppression of unemployment could also remove from the communists one of their leading issues, and as stated above, Israel and the Vatican shared the objection to the communists. Vergani wrote:

The decision [to build the basilica] has been taken at a moment of special and humanitarian value. Statistics and accurate calculations establish the fact that at Nazareth today a third of the laborers are without work; consequently a third of the population (of 21,000 souls) is without bread . . . in the name of the little town of the Holy Family, of which I am proud of being an honorary citizen, I thank your Paternity and the Ven. Discretorium for your courageous initiative, regarding an undertaking of religious and social significance and I am looking forward to seeing very soon the majestic cupola of the Annunciation dominating the little town of the Annunciation.⁷⁵

⁷⁴C. W., "The Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth," pp. 17–20.

⁷⁵Barluzzi, *At Nazareth*, p. 8.

Paschal Kinsel cited the Latin Patriarch Alberto Gori: "... often I have asked myself what can be done to eliminate Communism in Nazareth, where it began to take root in 1948 (the time of the partition of the Holy Land), and the answer has always been: provide work for the people by the construction of the basilica."⁷⁶ Kinsel added: "Anything you can do to encourage this necessary undertaking for the suffering labouring class of Nazareth and the honor of Mary Immaculate will be much appreciated by the Franciscans in the name of holy Mother Church."⁷⁷ At the bottom of the brochure was printed in a large, bold font: "Combat Communism in Nazareth. The building of the basilica of the Annunciation will provide work for the poor and needy."⁷⁸

Israel emphasized the fact that the church would be built with local materials and by the local population.⁷⁹ In fact, one of the leading architects and the local work director were Jewish—the architect Lewkowicz (who was a past disciple of Muzio) and the building company was Solel Boneh (a Jewish company). Many of the local workers were Arabs.

When the request of the Franciscans to build the church was received, it was discussed at the highest levels including the prime minister, minister of foreign affairs, and minister of the interior. They instructed the minister of religion to be understanding toward the Custody and to try to facilitate the work and ease the administrative matters.⁸⁰ Not many documents regarding the matter have been found, probably because many of the files regarding the relations of the State of Israel with the Christians inside its borders are still confidential. However, a record exists of a discussion in the cabinet regarding the Church of the Annunciation that was initiated by Israel Rokach, the minister of the interior. Rokach described the monumentality of the church and stated that since it was a public building there was no legal way to refuse permission to build, at least not on technical grounds such as building regulations, the strength of the building, or similar matters. He added that the construction was about strengthening the Catholic Church in Nazareth and that the building of the church would

⁷⁶Kinsel, *Crusader's Almanac*, pp. 16–17.

⁷⁷Kinsel, *Crusader's Almanac*, pp. 16–17.

⁷⁸Kinsel, *Crusader's Almanac*, pp. 16–17.

⁷⁹Israel Rokach (minister of the interior) to Faccio, March 7, 1954, the Ministry of Religions, sec. 98, file 5803/2 א , ISA.

⁸⁰Saul Colbi to the district commissioner of Jerusalem and Mr. Giler from the Ministry of the Interior, December 31, 1954, the Ministry of Religions, sec. 98, file 5803/2 א , ISA.

create job opportunities for its residents for a year or longer. Prime Minister Moshe Sharett mentioned that withholding permission would result in an international scandal, but steps should be taken to ensure that the funds for the construction would pass through the Ministry of Finance.⁸¹ This comment illustrates one reason why permission was granted, as the funds for the construction of a multimillion-dollar church would add considerably to the state treasury. Probably this also was the reason for the Ministry of Finance's refusal to the repeated requests of the Custody for a lower rate of exchange due to the large amount of money exchanged.⁸²

It is hard to accept that Rokach was right about the impossibility of restricting the building of the church. Since the Franciscans built on land that belonged to them he probably could not have forbidden the construction, but he surely could have restricted its height and size as the British and the Ottomans had done in the past. Since Israel granted the Christians the same rights that were given to them in the past by the prior authorities, it seems that there were sufficient reasons to allow the Franciscans to pursue their plans without interference. The permission to build a monumental church contributed to Israeli relations with the Vatican and the Catholic Church around the world as well as on the internal level as a partial solution to the problems of Nazareth, a city that received many refugees, suffered from extremely high rates of unemployment, and served as a base for the activity of the Communist Party.

Conclusion

This article highlights an apparently bizarre contradiction. The center of the Catholic faith, the Vatican, whose expected role was to encourage the building of an imposing monument celebrating its power in one of the holiest places in Christendom, tried to arrest or at least to limit the size and the importance of the new church. At the same time the Israeli government, which would be expected to object to the construction of such a monumental building in a city with a mixed Muslim-Christian population, encouraged it, or at least did not obstruct the Franciscans. The story behind the construction of the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth reveals a fascinating narrative of politics, struggles, and various interests that ultimately led to its present structure.

⁸¹Governmental meeting no. 32/314, February 28, 1954, ISA.

⁸²Faccio to the Israeli Ministry of Finance, February 16, 1954, file Nazareth Costruzione Basilica, ACTS.