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Sent: Thursday, April 05, 2012 9:39 PM
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Subject: Article of Interest....

Vatican, Israel Spar Over Disputed Last Supper Site

This room, known as the Cenacle on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, is venerated as the site of Jesus' Last Supper. Jews and Muslims also consider the building to be a holy site, and it has been a source of contention for years. Israel and the Vatican may be nearing an agreement.

Richard T. Nowitz / Corbis

By editor

- [4:02 - Listen](#)

If there's one building in Jerusalem that represents the city's tangle of religions, this is it. The ground floor is a Jewish holy site said to house the tomb of the biblical King David. The second floor is the Cenacle, a Christian holy site, the room believed to be the site of Jesus' Last Supper. On the roof, there's an old minaret from when this place was marked a Muslim holy site.

One building, three religions, decades of property disputes. And the fight isn't over. Shimon Gibson, an archaeologist from London who has excavated sites connected to Jesus' final week, says he believes the Last Supper — and the burial of King David — happened in other parts of the city. Still, Jews, Christians and Muslims venerate this site.

The building was destroyed and rebuilt a few times over. The original Byzantine church was replaced by the Crusaders.

"You can see pilgrims have left their names on the walls," Gibson notes.

Later it was taken over by Muslim Mamluks.

"You can see a mihrab, indicating that at one point this chapel was once a mosque," Gibson says.

Catholic Franciscan friars took custody in the 14th century; 200 years later, they were kicked out by the Ottoman sultan. After the 1967 Mideast war, Israel took control.

Israeli authorities have wanted to avoid allowing the Vatican to administer any kind of authority over a site that today isn't under the control of the Holy See. So Israel limits organized Christian prayers here to just a few times a year. There are no crosses on the wall; no chapel. Groups of pilgrims from around the world shuffle in, take snapshots and shuffle out. Sometimes stray cats wander around.

"I am a little bit disappointed, because, yes, I was expecting a place where you can go and pray," says Katharina Iacono of Germany, who sat on a bench in the corner. "It is difficult because [it's] very loud. And with cats and with some smells, it's not very easy."

The Vatican says this building belongs to the church, since friars bought it hundreds of years ago.

"The place is so essential, so much an integral part of the Christian narrative," says the Rev. David Neuhaus, a Catholic vicar in Jerusalem. "Needless to say, it's a dream that we could pray there in regular fashion like other holy places."

It's not the first time in history that Christian prayer here has been limited. In the 16th century, the Ottoman sultan prohibited Christians from the room of the Last Supper.

David's tomb is the main attraction today for devout Jews. Rabbi Avraham Goldstein, who directs a seminary at the site, says he has pleaded with Israeli politicians not to cede any control here.

"The minute they'll make it as a church, Jews, halachically, according to Jewish law, are forbidden to go in there," he says. "It's a disgrace for Israel, you know, it's like milk spilled that you can never return it back."

For two decades, Israel and the Holy See have been trying to work out disputes over church properties in Jerusalem. One of the few remaining thorns is the Last Supper room. Shmuel Ben Shmuel, an Israeli negotiator, says the talks are at a critical moment.

"We don't want to go into all the details right now when we are in the midst of negotiations," he says.

A final agreement could come as early as June.

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