

Pomegranate Blossoms

Let us go early to the vineyards,
and see if the vines are in bloom,
If the buds have opened,
if the pomegranates have blossomed;
There will I give you my love.

Song of Songs 7:13

Fruits of Our Monastic Garden

Christ the Bridegroom Monastery
Burton, Ohio

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With the Suffering Servant

During our July 2017 Holy Land pilgrimage, we visited the Church of St. Peter Gallicantu in Jerusalem. Sr. Petra (formerly Sara Lynn), wrote this reflection about her experience at this church before she was named after St. Peter at her tonsure as a rasophore nun on Feb. 1. In fact, she wrote it before she even began to consider the name Petra as one of her three names to submit to Mother (read more about Sr. Petra's tonsure and her connection to St. Peter inside). We hope that these thoughts will aid your prayer during the Great Fast, Great and Holy Week, and moments of suffering.

The places that most moved me on our pilgrimage were locations I didn't know existed—the Tombs of the Prophets Zechariah, Haggai, Malachi; St. Joseph's Cave in Bethlehem where the Holy Family lived in the months after Jesus' birth, and where the angel warned Joseph in a dream to take the Virgin and Child and flee to Egypt; the spring along the Sea of Galilee where Jesus called the first Apostles, Peter and Andrew; and the pit in which Jesus was imprisoned in Caiaphas' house during His trial. In my ignorance, I was able to receive them as a pure gift without any expectations attached. The brief time we spent in the latter is seared into my heart.

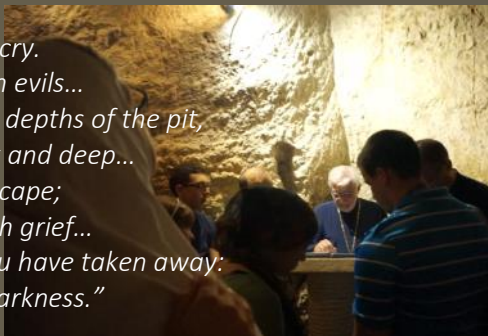
The Church of St. Peter Gallicantu (Latin for "the cock crows") is built on the site of the palace where Caiaphas, the High Priest during Christ's trial, lived on the slopes of Mt. Zion. Jesus was brought here after being seized in Gethsemane, to be questioned by Caiaphas and the scribes and elders (Mt 26:57). The first Christian church on this site was erected in the fifth century. The current church—a golden rooster perched atop the black cross on its domed roof—commemorates Peter's triple denial that he knew Christ during His trial, as well as their reconciliation and Peter's three-fold affirmation of his love for Jesus after the Resurrection. Our guide, George, led us into the middle church of

Continued from previous page:

the three-tiered structure, and directed us to look down a stone shaft into a pit fifteen or twenty feet below us. Then he led us down a couple flights of stairs to the first-century dungeon undercroft.

There we entered a pit, hewn into the bedrock, into which prisoners were lowered (probably none too gently) through the stone shaft, barely the width of a man's shoulders, by ropes or fabric slung under the prisoner's arms. In the first century, there was no other entrance to this prison; stairs were added much later for the sake of pilgrims visiting this holy place. And it was palpably holy, moving me more viscerally than any other place to which we pilgrimaged, even the Church of the Resurrection, perhaps because it appears much as it would have looked to Jesus 2,000 years ago (minus the filth). Bishop Nicholas led us in chanting antiphonally Psalm 88:

*"Incline your ear to my cry.
For my soul is filled with evils...
You have laid me in the depths of the pit,
in regions that are dark and deep...
Imprisoned, I cannot escape;
my eyes are sunken with grief...
Friend and neighbor you have taken away:
my one companion is darkness."*



I pressed my face into the rounded corner of that pit, imagining Jesus, bruised and abandoned, huddling in the darkness, facing His impending crucifixion, surrendering to the will of His Father, consenting to His death out of love. Thinking of the times when I feel imprisoned by my vocation, my choices narrowed by my "yes" to God's call on my life, my freedom circumscribed, my control surrendered, I felt Jesus'

closeness to me in my pains. I believed more deeply than I ever have that my small sufferings are made fruitful by His.

After the psalm, Fr. Sebastian, our pilgrimage leader, told us we could take time to pray there. We had learned two days before that the "Wailing Wall" in Jerusalem was never actually part of the Temple; it was merely a retaining wall at the base of the foundation far below. Jews today venerate it because it is as close as they can get to the Temple Mount, which is now in Muslim hands. Down in the pit, Fr. Sebastian said, "These are the true wailing walls." A few of my sisters and I sang our Lenten hymn, *Preterpivyj* ("Having Suffered"), prostrating on and kissing the very floor on which our Bridegroom lay as He approached the marriage bed of the Cross on which He would pour Himself out for us. "Having suffered the Passion for us, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy, have mercy, have mercy on us." In this hallowed place, Divine Love entered human misery.

My Grandma died a very painful death of colon cancer during Holy Week of 2017. All during Lent as we prostrated in our chapel, imploring Christ's mercy, I would pray for her as my forehead touched the floor. As we prayed down in that pit, I had a keen sense that Jesus had been with Grandma in her passion and that her suffering was taken up into His suffering and made fruitful for her own soul and the souls of our family. I knew more deeply that we are never alone in our sorrows because "the Man of sorrows, acquainted with grief" (Is 53:3) is ever at our side, having associated Himself with human suffering and transformed it by love so that it is no longer meaningless, but redemptive, and can become a point of loving union with Jesus. In the course of our lives, we will all find ourselves seemingly imprisoned in a pit of desolation: helpless, alone, hurting. May we be strengthened by faith that He suffers with us, and that in our pain, we are truly united with the Suffering Servant.

*Looking up from the floor of the pit
at the hole through which Jesus was
lowered*



*"I believed more
deeply than I ever
have that my small
sufferings are made
fruitful by His."*

WHY DO WE PROSTRATE?

Macarios of the Monastery of Simonos Petra:

“Through its form this physical gesture reveals a rich theological and spiritual meaning. Big or small, the prostration has always three elements: a descending movement, an ascending movement and the sign of the cross. The prostration is not a prayer position, but a dynamic movement. After prostrating to the ground the faithful must immediately rise up and resume his regular position of prayer standing up.”

PRAYERS WITH PROSTRATIONS

The Prayer of St. Ephrem

Lord and Master of my life,
spare me from the spirit of indifference,
despair, lust for power, and idle chatter.
(Prostration)

Instead, bestow on me, your servant,
the spirit of integrity, humility, patience,
and love. (Prostration)

Yes, O Lord and King,
let me see my own sins
and not judge my brothers and sisters;
for you are blessed forever and ever.
Amen. (Prostration)

Then, with a simple bow, the following is repeated four times:

- ✠ O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.
- ✠ O God, cleanse me of my sins and have mercy on me.
- ✠ O Lord, forgive me, for I have sinned without number.

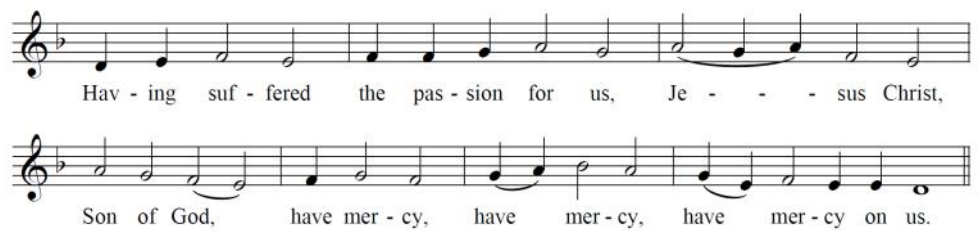
Once more, the Prayer of St. Ephrem is recited, without the usual prostrations. One prostration is made at the conclusion of the prayer.



St. Basil the Great:

“Every time we bend our knees to the ground and rise up, we show through action that by sin we were thrown to the ground, but the love for mankind of our Maker called us back to Heaven” (from “On the Holy Spirit”).

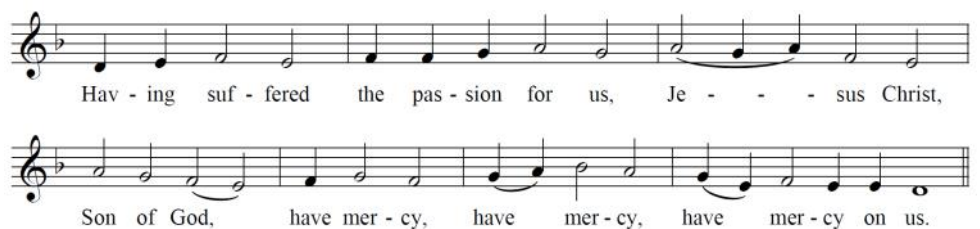
Having Suffered (Preterpivj)



Prostration



Prostration



Prostration

The Tonsure of Sister Petra as a Rasophore Nun



Bishop Milan:

"Jesus, again today, through this liturgical celebration, invites you also, and again repeats, 'Follow Me. Follow Me in your life! Are you prepared to follow me with all? With all sacrifice? Again, with all renouncement of this world? Or no?' Each of us needs to give the answer to Jesus Christ, as today Sr. Petra gave this answer here."



On Feb. 1, during Vespers for the feast of the Meeting of Our Lord with Simeon and Anna, dokimos (postulant) Sara Lynn Gafford was tonsured as a rasophore nun, receiving the habit and a new name: Sr. Petra. She is named after the apostle Peter. She was tonsured (four small segments of her hair were cut, in the sign of the cross) by Bishop Milan Lach, our apostolic administrator. Our founding bishop and bishop emeritus of our eparchy, Bishop John Kudrick, was also present. The tonsure took place at St. Stephen Byzantine Catholic Church in Euclid, Ohio.

"Rasophore" means "robe-bearer," referring to the riassa (religious robe) in which a nun is clothed at this stage in her monastic life. A rasophore nun also receives the tunic, apostolnik (veil), belt, and skufia (hat). "Tonsure" is the cutting of the hair as a sign of consecration and commitment to God.

About 200 people attended the tonsure, including friends and family of Sr. Petra who traveled from Indiana and Columbus, Ohio, the two places where she spent most of her life.

Sr. Petra met our monastic community and began to discern her vocation here in February of 2016 when she came for a poustinia retreat. She entered the monastery as a dokimos on Feb. 1, 2017, and was tonsured exactly a year later. Please keep Sr. Petra in your prayers as she grows in the monastic life and continues her discernment (3-4 years leading to life profession).

To view a video of the tonsure, visit the February 6 post on our website. This video includes the blessing of the habit, the giving of Sr. Petra's new name, her tonsure and a beautiful homily by Bishop Milan.



The entrusting of the new rasophore to the Hegumena



St. Peter the Apostle

Sister Petrá's Feast Day: January 16 (St. Peter in Chains)

Before a dokimos is tonsured, she asks the Lord to place in her heart three names that she will submit to the Hegumena (superior of the monastery). The Hegumena then asks the Holy Spirit for guidance and clarity in choosing one of these names (or another) which the dokimos will receive at her tonsure as a sign of her new life consecrated to Christ the Bridegroom. In our monastery, the dokimos submits to the Hegumena not only the three names, but also a written explanation about each of them. Below are the thoughts that Sr. Petra submitted about St. Peter.

During the past few months, St. Peter has been very present with me in prayer, teaching me Christ's faithfulness in the face of my human weaknesses and failures. As I've touched my own poverty more deeply, I could easily recoil at my unworthiness, could be tempted to flee the One Whom I love so poorly. But Peter gives me courage to remain under the merciful gaze of Jesus, confident of His love for me in the midst of my fear and failure.

I understand Peter's fear of the Cross, his initial rejection of the Lord's revelation of the cost of obedience to the will of the Father. When Jesus revealed to His Apostles that He must suffer and die in Jerusalem (Mt. 16), Peter burst out, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" He wanted to make Jesus avoid suffering, to escape the Cross! How logical this seems. Yet Jesus rebuked Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men." In other words, the urge to escape suffering is not of God. The Christian life is not about avoiding suffering; rather, it is about the reality that Love transforms suffering so that it becomes both redemptive and a *means of union*. Thus, Jesus continued, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." On a natural level, I respond to suffering, to the Cross, the same way as Peter. Yet something—perhaps witnessing the Resurrection of Jesus, perhaps being embraced by His gaze of love after his denial and abandonment of Him, perhaps receiving the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (or, likely, all of the above)—converted Peter's heart so that he would later have the courage to climb up on his own cross and pour out his blood, in imitation of His Beloved. Here, in between

the experience of my own fear and weakness, and my desire to respond to Jesus' love in kind, Peter comes alongside me and intercedes that my heart, too, would be changed, infused with supernatural love and trust.

After the Resurrection, after he had denied and abandoned his Friend and Master, Jesus met His disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and called Peter apart, asking him three times if he loved Him. Keenly aware of his unfaithful denial, Peter neither tried to defensively excuse himself, nor did he count himself out of Christ's merciful Love in a spirit of self-condemnation (as had Judas). Rather, he referred his love to Jesus' knowledge, laying open his poor heart to Christ's omniscient gaze: "Lord, *You know everything*—You know I love You." He also knows everything about me: He knows my sins, my past, my secret selfishness, the shabbiness of my love, my weakness, my wandering heart that is always looking for a resting place among mere creatures. He knows my fear, my reluctance to suffer, the ways I've tried to avoid His Cross. And yet, He also knows that I love Him, so He continually renews His call on my life to follow Him. "I know whom I have chosen," Jesus said at the Last Supper, fully cognizant of what would follow (Jn 13:18). Jesus knows me, too, the woman He has chosen. I can trust that I can't disillusion Him so that He removes His love from me. He knows me, loves me, calls me—calls me by name!

Peter's faith in the Resurrection taught him to embrace suffering, especially the suffering of violence and persecution, even unto martyrdom. The man who ran from the Cross would later run to the Cross! He writes of this hope in his first epistle: "We have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials...For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly...For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps...By His wounds you have been healed...Do not return evil for evil."

This fisherman from Galilee was chosen to be the chief shepherd of Christ's Church on earth; his successors continue to guard the Faith built on the rock of Peter. He is a tremendous intercessor for the unity of the Body of Christ, having heard Jesus' high priestly prayer "that they maybe one, even as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You" (Jn 17:21).



RENOVATION UPDATE



As we shared in our winter newsletter, renovations are underway on the “old farm house” and “former rectory,” two buildings attached to our chapel. The project is being made possible by the many donors at our Bridegroom’s Banquet the past two years, as well as local business owners who donated some of the materials. We are so grateful for the outpouring of support.

The renovations are transforming these old, unusable buildings into three beautiful retreat spaces which will primarily be used for individual retreats.

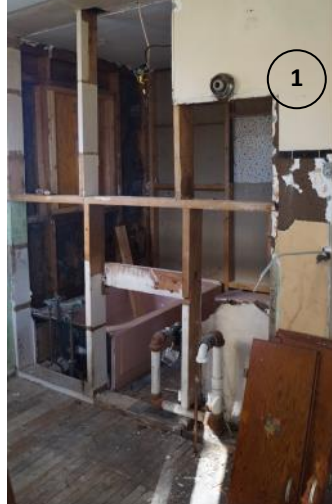
In the farm house, drywall was installed or repaired, the bathroom was gutted and completely redone, the wood floors were sanded and refinished, new windows, kitchen cabinets, appliances and lighting were installed, and new flooring was installed in the kitchen. In the loft, new flooring and lighting will be installed. Work will be done in the basement to eliminate water leakage.

The former rectory was completely gutted. The exterior walls and rafters were reinforced, and work was done to square up the walls as much as possible before interior construction began. New windows and doors were installed. The roof was re-shingled. The siding will be replaced. Dead or problematic trees and stumps were removed from the perimeter of the building. Old cement porches were removed. The interior walls are currently being built to create two separate poustinias (retreat houses).

All three retreat spaces will be furnished with new or lightly-used furniture. The gutters will be replaced on both buildings. The driveway will be repaired, probably with crushed limestone, and a few parking spaces will be added. We will name each of the retreat houses after a saint or biblical story.

Each step of the project has brought us great joy, and we look forward to spending time in solitude and prayer in these new poustinias and to be able to say “yes” to more retreat inquiries from outside the monastery!

In our video from our Nov. 2017 Bridegroom’s Banquet, “Silence, Prayer, Poustinia,” we and a couple of guests shared our experiences of the gift of silence, especially while on a poustinia retreat. To view, visit our Nov. 20 blog post, or search “Silence, Prayer, Poustinia” on YouTube.



Farm house kitchen
renovations (Steps 1-4) ▲



Please help us: To further our poustinia project, our goal is to raise \$50,000.



In the former rectory before construction



◀ Gutting and rebuilding the walls ▼





RECENT TALKS & VIDEOS

- Sr. Natalia spoke to middle school girls at St. Mary Church in Hudson, Ohio, about her vocation story.
- Mother Gabriella and Sr. Natalia talked to some of the classes at St. Francis de Sales school in Akron, Ohio, during Catholic Schools Week.
- A few new episodes were filmed for the online cooking show, Eastern Hospitality, co-hosted by Mother Gabriella. Additional funding is needed, however, before the production can be completed. To donate or to view past episodes of the show, please visit www.easternhospitality.org.

UPCOMING EVENTS

The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete

Thurs. March 15

Join us in a deeply-moving, once-a-year Lenten experience at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, 1900 Carlton Rd., Parma, Ohio. The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete takes us on a journey through the entire Bible, placing us in the shoes of the penitents of the Old and New Testaments and teaching us from their examples. The hundreds of prostrations unite our body and soul as we repent of our sins and experience God's mercy. We will also listen to the life of St. Mary of Egypt and venerate her relic. The opportunity for the Mystery of Holy Repentance (Confession) will also be available. A simple Lenten meal will be served 5:00-5:45 p.m., and the Canon will begin at 6:00 p.m. All are invited to come for part or all of the Canon, even if you are not physically able to participate in the prostrations. The duration of the Canon is approximately 3.5 hours. Please RSVP by email or phone.

Great & Holy Week

Visit the "Liturgy & Events Schedule" tab on our website

Bridegroom Matins

Wed. March 28

Celebrated only on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week, the readings and hymns rouse the heart to conversion and vigilance for the coming of the Bridegroom and offer strength to His Bride the Church as we journey with Him in His passion. We invite you to join us on Great & Holy Wednesday. The service begins at 8:00 a.m. and will be followed by a light breakfast. Please RSVP by email or phone by Friday, March 23.

Spring Work Day & Cookout

Sat. May 26

Join us for a day of outdoor and indoor work projects, prayer, food and fun at the monastery and the Shrine of Our Lady of Mariapoch. Volunteers of all ages and abilities are welcome! The day begins at 10 a.m., includes lunch, and closes with vespers at 5 p.m. followed by a cookout. Come at whatever time you are available, and bring a side dish to share if you can. Please RSVP by Monday, May 21.

Girls Camp

June 21-24

Girls Camp is for girls 13-18 and provides an opportunity for teen girls to discover the different vocations in the Church and develop a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. We will pray together, listen to inspiring talks, engage in group discussions, enjoy various activities and have fun! The camp, sponsored by the Eparchy of Parma, is hosted by our monastery and led by us and young adult women. Registration information will become available on our website and at www.parma.org. Space is limited and will fill up quickly. The Boys Camp, for boys 8-18, will take place at the same time at the Shrine of Our Lady of Mariapoch.

Mariapoch Pilgrimage

August 18-19

Join us for the annual Eparchy of Parma pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Mariapoch (across the street from the monastery) for a weekend of prayer and fellowship in honor of, and in supplication to, the Mother of God. Come during the day or camp out overnight. More information will become available at www.shrineofmariapoch.com.



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The newly-tonsured Sister Petra, center

From the prayers of the bishop during the tonsure service:

“O Master and Lord our God, grant the power and grace of Your divinity, which is from You, to Your handmaid, Sister Petra, who has come to You in spirit, soul and body, and who has received the beginning of the holy schema...”

“Count her worthy to live rightly in this angelic estate and protect her from the snares of the devil; preserve her soul and body pure even unto death, and make her worthy to become Your holy temple.”

