Mount Tabor to Gethsemane
a path between darkness and light

This year marks the 100th anniversary of two of the most beautiful Basilicas of the Holy Land: the Church of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor and the Church of All Nations or Gethsemane on Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

A gigantic task: two enormous construction sites, separated by almost 100 miles. Not easy in 1924. So why did the Custos of the Holy Land of the time, Fernando Diotallevi, insist on completing both projects at the same time?

After World War I, the Ottoman Empire had been replaced by the British, with much greater openness to the construction of churches—but probably also because the two mysteries there celebrated are related.

On Mount Tabor, on his way to his Passion, Jesus is transfigured in front of three of his disciples: Peter, James and John; He will also bring them to Gethsemane. His Light shines on them at the Transfiguration to prepare them for what they will live at Gethsemane. It’s the confrontation between the mystery of Light and the mystery of Darkness. Even in the darkest hours, the disciples of Christ are invited to remember the Light, like no other, that comes from Christ.
The projects were entrusted to the Roman architect Antonio Barluzzi, assisted by his brother Giulio. These were the first two churches he built of almost a dozen Sacred Shrines that pilgrims visit today, so he is known as the “Architect of the Holy Land.”
Construction of the Basilica of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor started in 1912. Halted by the start of World War I, it resumed in 1919 and was completed 5 years later with the support of the Commissariat of the Holy Land of Washington. A pilgrimage was organized with the American donors for the consecration of the Basilica.
The result is impressive. The three naves represent the three tents St. Peter wanted to make for Elijah, Moses and Jesus. Full of light, the Basilica also contains beautiful mosaics of other “transfigurations”—moments in which God showed Himself in a different way: the Birth of Jesus, the Eucharist, the Lamb of God and the Resurrection.
The Basilica of the Agony was built here, surrounded by walls which on the left side protect the Sacred Garden with the eight oldest olive trees known to this day. Despite their age, they are incredibly healthy and unaffected by any of the twelve viruses hurting other olive trees on the Mount.

The Mount of Olives was mostly empty space in 1910, with very few olive trees. A huge contrast with today, seen in the lower photo, opposite page.
Construction started in 1919 on the ruins of the Crusader church commemorating Jesus’ agony. During excavations 6 feet under the foundation of the medieval church, work stopped with the discovery of the remains of a Byzantine church. What had been done so far was taken down so the new Basilica could be built on the foundations of the older, 4th century church.

The Franciscans continued through the past century to develop the area surrounding the Basilica, creating a hermitage to the right of the church. Work is ongoing on a tunnel to bring pilgrims from the Basilica under the street to the Kidron Valley (lower portion of photo).
The Basilica of Gethsemane is today called the Church of All Nations, since many countries joined together to finance this great sign of hope after the divisions that had led only a few years earlier to the First World War.

At the center of the church, in front of the altar, a stone reminds us of Jesus’ prayer to his Father and the blood-sweat that came out from His skin due his deep-felt anguish.
The immensity and beauty of these Basilicas inspire us to live the truth of our faith: even when it seems to surround us, darkness is dispelled by God’s Light.

In our moments of Gethsemane, of agony, anguish and despair, we remember the Light that comes from Christ, and we recall that He is truly, as the Father said on Mount Tabor, the beloved Son of God. If we listen to Him, as the Father asked, we will too, one day, contemplate the Light of his Glory.