

Franciscans to repair Nazareth's Annunciation grotto

JERUSALEM - The Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, which coordinates Christian pilgrimage sites, will close the grotto of the Basilica of the Annunciation for four months for conservation work on the grotto's rock.

The work will begin Nov. 10 at the grotto in the basilica's lower church in Nazareth, Israel.

"There is a constant flow of people walking past the grotto as there (are) a lot of people coming to Israel now, and most of those people go inside the grotto, and that creates a serious problem," said Franciscan Brother Ricardo Bustos, superior of the convent of the Most Holy Annunciation at the basilica.

The rock of the grotto is very fragile, he said, and even the temperature change within the grotto caused by visitors' body heat is damaging the rock, plus many people touch the rock, Brother Bustos told Catholic News Service. Some people, seeing that the rock is crumbling, help themselves to a chip to "take the grotto home with them," he said, adding that flash photography is also extremely harmful.

Last year a team of experts from Italian universities in Milan, Pisa and Turin began analysis work on the site. The experts said the site must be closed to accurately measure the atmospheric conditions inside the grotto, said Brother Bustos.

Depending on the work that needs to be undertaken to strengthen the rock, Franciscans hope that the grotto will be able to be open in time for the feast of the Annunciation March 25, he said. The experts will determine under which conditions the grotto should be open to visitors, he said.

Brother Bustos emphasized that the Basilica of the Annunciation and its lower church will continue to be open to visitors while work is going on in the grotto.

According to Catholic tradition based on the Gospel, the grotto is the site where the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would give birth to Jesus. A smaller

church located a few miles away at the other end of the city is revered by the Greek Orthodox Church as the site of the Annunciation, and most pilgrims to Nazareth visit both sites.

Until two years ago the Franciscans, who have been responsible for the Catholic site since 1620 and built their first church there in 1730, provided limited access to the site, said Brother Bustos. They extended visiting hours in 2005 to better accommodate the increase in visitors, he said.