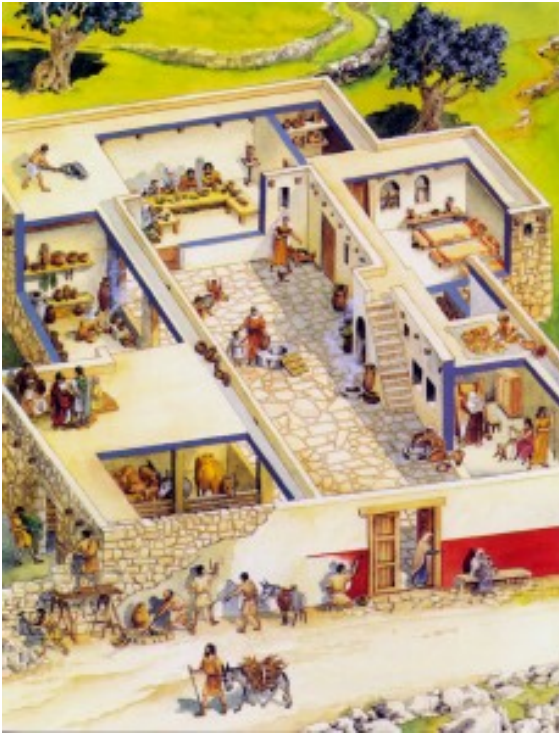


JULY 1, 2014 BY MSGR. CHARLES POPE

What were typical homes like in Jesus' time?



In Jesus' time, the smallest homes of the very poor might be little more than a square, stone structure covered with a whitewashed sort of stucco. There would typically be one larger multipurpose room and a smaller back room for the animals. Some houses in hilly regions were partial cave dwellings, built up against the limestone rock face, perhaps with the front section built onto it. The traditional site at the house of the Annunciation in Nazareth seems to have employed this strategy. However we need not conclude from this that Joseph and Mary were destitute. Many homes employed the "hillside strategy" that made use of hollowed out caves. Such structures were easy to build and there was a certain natural coolness to them.

Another sort of house, also common among the working poor and typical village-dwellers, was one built around a central open court with small rooms opening onto it. (See the drawing at the upper right; click the picture for a larger view). This kind of building had the advantage of needing only short beams for the roof structures, since the central court had no roof. The open concept retained the coolness by allowing air to move freely through. Cooking could also be done in the open central court, when the weather permitted.

If the family had some animals, they were often kept in part of the house at night.

Families, sometimes including several generations, tended to live under one roof and had little or no privacy.

The roof was of real importance in everyday life. It was a flat roof with just enough slope to drain off the rainwater. Rainwater was carefully collected into cisterns or large

containers, for in the more arid climate of the eastern Mediterranean every drop of water was precious. The roof of the house was flat and sturdy, enabling people to venture up on it. Since the roofs were used so often, the law of Deuteronomy required guard rails to be installed to prevent falling.

The roof areas in effect provided an open second floor. On the roof, tools would often be stored, laundry would be put out to dry, and people would often gather to talk, especially in the evening. Scripture also speaks of it as a place to retire and pray. In the evening when it was cool, people sat and talked, and in the better weather would often sleep there. The climate of the Mediterranean provides a rather perfect setting for this at most times of the year. Some also placed tents and other coverings on the roof.

Except for the roof structures, which included wood timbers, the basic building material in Palestine was stone. The limestone provides excellent building material and as the stones were fashioned into a wall, they would be coated with a flat, fixed stucco-like material and smoothed over. Foundations were dug with great care as Jesus also said to build upon rock rather than sand. The mortar was used to bond the stone that was made of clay mixed with shells and potsherds.

As for the structure of the roofs, wooden trusses were necessary, since the roof would be used as a kind of second floor. Then a kind of wattling or firm lattice of straw mats would be covered over and smoothed with hard clay. Yearly repairs were made just prior to the rainy season. Most of the inner doors were narrow; only the door facing the street was wider and had a hinged door that could be secured.

In poorer homes the floor was simply pounded earth. The more affluent might have pebbles or baked clay tiles. Wooden floors could be afforded only by the very wealthy.

Only the very wealthy could afford to have water piped to their houses. Ordinary people went to the well or spring-fount, or perhaps a local stream, and collected water with skins, jars, and all kinds of pitchers. Some larger towns did have conduits or aqueducts that brought the water to certain public areas. The washing of clothes was done away from the main house lest water run back in.

Generally there was no need for a lot of heating, except in the cooler months of the year. Most of the houses therefore had no fireplaces. If it did grow cold, there were charcoal braziers where small fires would be kindled.

Lighting was not very abundant. Small oil lamps were used. It will be recalled from above that much time was spent out-of-doors so interior lights were less necessary.

Furniture was extremely simple. The chief object in the home was the chest. There were chests for provisions and chests for clothes. For the poorest families, chests doubled as tables. Since clothing was simple, there was little need for many different sets or changes of clothing, and thus there was less need for numerous chests and the sorts of insanely large closets many have today.

Most moderately well off families did have a low table at which to recline and eat. People in this region and time reclined on their left elbow and ate with their right hand. Sitting on chairs at higher tables to eat was rare.

The kitchen as we know it did not exist. In small houses cooking was done out back on an open fire or in a fire pit. Utensils were kept in a chest. In larger houses the courtyard might be the place of the cooking fire and kitchen items were kept in a storeroom. Only the largest homes had a dedicated area with a fiery oven.

Bedding was rolled out on the floor; the bed as a piece of furniture off the floor, as in our homes today, was largely unknown at that time except among the very wealthy. Family members stretched out on mats, covering themselves with their own cloaks. Many slept on the roof in the warmer months.

Many even smaller houses seem to have had a bath of some sort. The ancient Jews were conscientious about cleanliness and saw it as related to holiness and ritual purity. The usual bath (often called a mikveh) was narrow and one stepped down into it. Bathing was for hygiene to be sure, but there were also ritual baths that the Jews took. In the Holy House in Nazareth, a mikveh is located in or near the house and adjacent to the carpenter shop of Joseph.

Latrines were more likely outhouses and were situated away from the main dwelling. They may have been shared facilities between several domiciles, depending on the size and layout of the town or village. There is an excerpt in the Torah in which Moses instructs the ancient Israelites to “build your latrines outside the camp.” It further states, “When you go to the toilet, take a paddle or a shovel with you and use the toilet and then cover it up,” suggesting that some sort of lime was thrown in after the use. Other directions about latrines were that they should be located in discreet, private locations. Certain archeological digs have uncovered the presence of latrines that consisted of a pit dug into the ground and of an enclosed, roofed chamber; basically an outhouse.

It was a simpler time to be sure, but still with all the basic needs of a home.

 **UNCATEGORIZED**

25 Replies to “What were typical homes like in Jesus’ time?”

annaincalifornia

JULY 1, 2014 AT 21:35

Monsignor Pope,

Thank you for the description of past generations’ homes. I know that my mom grew up in such a home too. She often tells me how blessed we are here in America. Her home had space around the ceiling and roof, so bats would fly in and hang overhead. And when it rained, the water would filter through. No electricity, dirt floor, outhouse at back, walls made of clay mix, small fire pit for cooking and heating home, etc. They used newspaper as toilet paper.

She recalls her father bringing home a tile so she could play jacks with her friends.

She had a doll made of sticks with string hair. I can go on and on....

Jas

JULY 2, 2014 AT 19:54

Oh blessed poverty! I don't understand much of envy but when siblings complained about our upbringing Mom used to remind us how 16 (13 at a time, I think) lived in two bedroom house, sharecroppers grateful for the bean sandwich handed to them on the way to pull cotton. Thankful for the tractor battery that could be used for light or disconnected to listen to radio, keeping up with events of war and praying for the boys. Yes, we should always count our blessings and give thanks to God. God bless you.

Jas

JULY 2, 2014 AT 19:58

Truck battery (don't think the truck was any good anyways)

annaincalifornia

JULY 4, 2014 AT 01:03

Jas, I am keeping you in my prayers. You are a kindred spirit.

Jas

JULY 6, 2014 AT 20:52

Thank you for your prayers and I will do likewise. I will have surgery in the coming months but am not afraid. I do not know you, but you have unique insights and gifts, kindred spirits if we both seek Holiness and chastity. I am attracted to Holy things, great Pastors in this Parish, but internet time am mainly drawn to Vatican sites, USCCB for Sacred Scripture and this awesome blog. Again, if you even see this, thanks and God bless!

Brian

JULY 1, 2014 AT 22:40

My son's Catholic school teacher suggested to me that in those days whoever was the head of the household 'broke the bread'. We were discussing women priests, and her implication

was that if a women was the head of the household she was the priest. What would you say to such a claim? Thanks!

Msgr. Charles Pope

JULY 1, 2014 AT 23:10

Completely made up. Pure fantasy

Shan Gill

JULY 2, 2014 AT 07:14

Interesting note about the 'mikveh'. Am curious as to filling/draining it back in the day. Especially draining it. Also, no mention of gardening near the house. Was all food generally purchased at the market?

Msgr. Charles Pope

JULY 2, 2014 AT 11:45

I couldn't find much on how the mikvehs were drained etc. Frankly there is a lot difficulty in uncovering the more discrete aspects of Jewish life at the time of Jesus. Very little was written of bathing and bathroom matters. Romans and Greeks favored large public baths and toilets and considered the whole matter rather a public event in a way that would embarrass most of us. The Jews seemed to have been more discrete. Further, not to be too curious, but I have always wondered how couples could be intimate with so little privacy in the ancient world. People basically slept in open common rooms. Lots of mysteries and I cannot find much about personal things like this.

Shan Gill

JULY 2, 2014 AT 14:13

Thanks for the info. Back in the 1960's, I heard about some priests who went to Egypt, and paid a visit to one of the old Roman bathhouses that was open more-or-less as a museum.

One priest reported going into a large restroom area in the bathhouse, and it had a bench around the perimeter with holes cut through the top for the person's sitting pleasure. He noted there was no toilet paper, and was told that "after the fact" a slave under the bench would wipe one's bottom with a warm, damp sponge. Have never been able to verify it, but I felt immensely sorry for the poor sucker that got stuck with that duty!

Muzhik

JULY 2, 2014 AT 21:01

It would have been the same with their ancestors living in tents in the desert. One common tent for everyone to sleep in; privacy between couples was either using cloths hanging from the top of the tent to create private areas, or (especially with the poor) simply under the blanket being very quiet. (There's a scene in the film "Enemy At The Gate" in a cramped bomb shelter that demonstrates this very well.)

Think about the extended families living together like that, then think of the strong scriptural admonitions against having sex with the wife of your father, or the wife of your son, etc. Simply put, because the close living and sleeping situations at the time, the opportunities for temptation would have been all around. That's why having sex with someone your parents have had sex with, or (if you're the parent) sex with someone your child has had sex with, was defined as incest.

In 1 Kings 2:13-25 we see how Adonijah, half-brother of Solomon, asked to be given Abishag the Shunammite as his wife. Abishag was the "very beautiful" slave who nursed King David in his old age and helped to keep him warm. Yet even though scripture is clear that David never had relations with Abishag, since she was very beautiful the assumption would have been among the people that David had at one point had relations with her. Therefore, for Solomon to give Adonijah this woman as a wife would have had the appearance of Solomon condoning incest. This is why Solomon ordered Adonijah to be executed.

teomatteo

JULY 2, 2014 AT 07:49

Regarding roof access. It would have been pretty reasonable then to lower the crippled man down thru the roof in the scene where Our Lord heals him.

Vijaya

JULY 2, 2014 AT 11:52

St. Anne Catherine Emmerich has rich descriptions of the landscape, housing, clothing, utensils in her visions.

Maria

JULY 2, 2014 AT 20:10

Came across this article –

<http://abbey-roads.blogspot.com/2013/10/i-was-wondering-when-anna-katherine.html> –

that is trying to warn people about the possible falsity of the visions of Bl.Emmerich .

True, Bl.Emmerich herself often says how she has forgotten the details of her many visions etc ;and no one has to take any of it to be true, to be a good Catholic but the example given by Mr.Dreher, who is, ironically Orthodox, would not be one of such falsity and rather could be just the opposite ..that would add to her credibility ..just that , one has to read , may be a bit more carefully ..

We know that the title ‘ Emeritus ‘ is used by the former Pope ..but there is one who claims equality with The Pope , as ‘Ecumenical Patriarch ‘ – likely because of the force of ‘ tradition ‘ alone any more , a tradition that happened to come by, in the heady old days of The East and in spite of the just objection of the then Pope , centuries ago – seems sadly enough ,that the holders and people under that title have (and still !) paid dearly !

And as much as there is quite that is lovable about the Patriarch and one does not want to show any disrespect for someone of his role, age and all that , in this case , to help undo confusion and calumny , one is sort of forced to try to correct the error , to help with the truth.

Bl.Emmerich is right , in how the once proud

‘ New Rome ‘ has fallen in dire straits and thank God for the moves for unity !

May the prayers of St.Thomas, whose remains were removed from India to Edessa , in Turkey (unsure under what circumstances – some report, by stealth !) Now , they are in Italy and India – may his prayers too help to bring the grace and power of the shed Blood of our Lord , into many situations and lives, to wash off all that is of the fallen nature , to sustain hope and love !

Ellen in KY

JULY 2, 2014 AT 12:52

One of our parish priests brought a replica of a small oil burning lamp when he preached on the wise and foolish virgins. It was very tiny and gave hardly any light at all, but Father said we must remember that there were no streetlights and to the people then, it would have at least allowed them to see where they were going.

@FMShyanguya

JULY 2, 2014 AT 14:20

Msgr. Pope, what are the authoritative sources for your article?

Msgr. Charles Pope

JULY 2, 2014 AT 14:34

Daily Life in the Time of Jesus (Henri-Rops)

Jesus and His Times (Kaari Ward (Ed))

Daily Life in the Time of Jesus (M. Vamosh)

Nelson's Illustrated Ency. of Bible Facts (Packer, Tenney and White)

melinda

JULY 2, 2014 AT 15:19

Very nice musical selection.

This is interesting and for me, shines a light on how ridiculous Americans have become over their residential dwellings.

There is some much energy spent on physical housing and so little on the spiritual housing.

Maria

JULY 3, 2014 AT 11:16

While this description makes me very grateful for the blessings I have, i don't think it makes Americans seem ridiculous at all. We live in different times and we have different needs. If my husband and I didn't need to travel for work, we wouldn't need a car . . . But we do have to travel. Locally grown food is no longer possible to obtain for most, so we need supermarkets. We don't live in a temperate climate, hence larger, heated homes, etc. We have to be adapted to our own times!

Faustina

JULY 5, 2014 AT 22:59

We really don't need big houses. My husband and I lived on a sailboat of about 200 square feet for 3 months and loved it. I dare say we could do it full time. Check out the tiny house movement. Millions of people in New York City live in pretty small apartments. I found living on the boat to be what I imagine living in a monastery might be like. One needs to be very patient and considerate and quiet.

CatholicVince

JULY 3, 2014 AT 08:03

Great article! I can't wait for the reaction of my 3 young, adult children, who will read it ASAP.

Years ago, I had the experience of entering an old ranch home miles from the city of Fresno, California. I made the mistake of removing my shoes at the doorstep. On sandy, dirt floors I saw what life could be like without floors, a garage, and weekly garbage collection. I was shocked. Life in first-century Palestine is way beyond my imagination. Thank God we have a pope who has witnessed true poverty and has Jesus' compassion for the poor.

Judy DeAngelis

JULY 3, 2014 AT 13:42

Judy is 75 years young. She would love to live in such conditions (the most natural described.) Our lives are ignorant of what really matters. Jesus, Mary & Joseph had it all. Each other + a kitchen garden too!

Thanks for a great article Msgr. Pope

Gina Brown

MARCH 12, 2015 AT 13:18

Thank you, Monsignor Pope! We are a homeschooling family. When my five-year-old daughter asked questions this entire school morning about the life of Jesus, I was able to read this to both of my daughters and further answer their questions. I really appreciate this article and the time you took to research it for us. It also gives me time to reflect with the children as to how blessed we are to live in the pure luxury we enjoy in our home. After all, just having a solid roof and covered floors is a great luxury for which we must be grateful. Private bathroom facilities are also a wonderful blessing. This is a timely Lenten reminder. Thank you and may God bless you in all your works for our Church!

All God's Blessing to You,
Gina from Texas

Isobel

JUNE 6, 2016 AT 21:18

Hi, great article!
I was wondering if you had any scripture references when the housing was mentioned?
Thanks!

Comments are closed.