

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Can a religious leader help bring lasting peace?

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While we in America celebrated Memorial Day Weekend, Pope Francis was making symbolic visits in a conflicted part of the world: the Middle East. His trip was particularly memorable to me, since just a few months earlier, I also visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Dome of the Rock, the Western Wall, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum and the dividing wall in Bethlehem.

Last weekend, the pope, a sheik and a rabbi boarded a plane together to travel to an area sacred to all three faith

traditions. This past week saw not only a pope visiting the Holy Land, but also a courageous display of engaging people who traditionally have been divided. Traveling with his Argentinian friends, Rabbi Abraham Skorka and Sheikh Omar Abboud, the pope displayed to the world these three Abrahamic faiths can respect each other. In an area marked by division, Francis sought to bring understanding and peace.

His choice of traveling companions represented a longtime

openness to other faiths that marked his time when he was known as Jorge Mario Bergoglio, archbishop of Buenos Aires. In 2006, in response to an interfaith prayer service called by the archbishop to seek healing between Christians and Muslims, Abboud, the leader of Argentina's Muslim community, said dialogue among religions is not just symbolic but "a genuine and well-reasoned commitment under construction, because we know that we cannot get by without this dialogue."

Last weekend, Pope Francis said while in Jordan, "I grasp this opportunity to renew my esteem and respect for the Muslim community and show my apprecia-

tion for the work carried out by His Majesty, the king, which is promoting further understanding between peoples of different faith."

Also travelling with Pope Francis was Skorka, with whom he co-authored a book in 2010 titled, "Between Heaven and Earth."

Skorka said, "Dialogue means, above all, learning how to step into the other person's shoes, to increasingly open our hearts and share the thoughts of the other person, even if we are unable to find agreement." In the introduction to their book, then-Cardinal Bergoglio wrote, "With Rabbi Skorka, I never had to compro-

mise my Catholic identity, just like he never had to with his Jewish identity, and this was not only out of respect that we have for each other, but also because of how we understand interreligious dialogue. The challenge consisted in walking the path of respect and affection, walking in the presence of God."

While the political situation and past efforts in the Middle East have failed to bring real peace, let us hope and pray the example of these religious leaders will renew hope. Peace among the religions is a necessary step to bringing peace in our world.

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