

## INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

# Religious leaders show humility, respect, openness

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Last week, we discussed Pope Francis' historic trip to the Middle East accompanied by his Jewish and Muslim friends from Argentina, Rabbi Abraham Skorka and Sheik Omar Abboud.

The trip was planned to take place 50 years after the historic visit to Jerusalem by the first pope to visit Jerusalem since biblical times. In 1964, while in Jerusalem, Pope Paul VI met with the ecumenical patriarch Athenagoras, ending hundreds of years of estrangement between Catholic and Orthodox branches of Christianity. Pope Francis met with the current ecumeni-



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cal patriarch Bartholomew, including a prayer service inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. That location in many ways symbolizes the division within the Christian community, since the church itself is divided into three separate and often contested parts controlled by Greek-Orthodox, Armenian and Roman Catholic authorities.

As I look back 50 years, I recall the excitement of the ecumenical efforts inspired by the Second Vatican Council through the leadership of Pope John XXIII

and his successor, Pope Paul VI. I had been raised in a very conservative Protestant church that considered the "Catholics" to be almost enemies and certainly not "real Christians." In my father's family of 12 children, it was considered a scandal that three of his brothers had married Catholics. After living for a while in Germany, then continuing my graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin in the 1960s, I had moved on to a more mainstream Lutheran church affiliation. As the spirit of Christian unity grew, I still vividly recall participating in an ecumenical service in a Roman Catholic church, standing next to a nun (still in full habit in

those days), and singing together Martin Luther's famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

We can hope the days of tensions and distrust have passed, and that we can build on the leadership of the pope and leaders from other religious traditions to help all of us embrace interfaith understanding. I find hope in leaders who have shown humility and openness while still holding firm to their beliefs.

Of particular interest is an interview with Billy Graham in 2006 for a cover story in Newsweek magazine. When asked whether he believes heaven will be closed to good Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or secular people, Graham said:

"Those are decisions only the Lord will make. It would be foolish for me to speculate on who will be there and who won't. ... I don't want to speculate about all that. I believe the love of God is absolute. He said he gave his son for the whole world, and I think he loves everybody regardless of what label they have."

Pope Francis and Billy Graham are both clearly committed to their religious principles and at the same time demonstrate humility, respect and openness to those with other faith perspectives and practices. Let us hope and pray for this emerging spirit of "principled pluralism" in all of our faith traditions.

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