Opinion
Guest Voices



Pope Francis walks with Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka after praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem in this May 26, 2014, file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

by Abraham Skorka

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Archbishop Víctor Manuel Fernández

Cardinal-designate Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith is pictured in this Oct. 6, 2015, file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)



Rabbi Abraham Skorka, pictured here in 2013, praises Pope Francis and Cardinal-designate Víctor Manuel Fernández for their openness to dialogue with Jews. (CNS/David Agren)

As the rector of the Pontificia Universidad Católica Santa María de los Buenos Aires, Fr. Fernández actively contributed to the conversations, and was clearly deeply engaged in learning from others. We strove and delighted in delving into the deeper meaning of verses we pored over. For nearly three years, we felt the study of the

biblical texts bringing us closer together, despite our differences.

Some years later, in 2012, he would describe the experience in this way: "It was not just about discussing issues that could interest Jews and Christians; it involved a greater commitment. It was the communal study of the Bible by rabbis, priests, and evangelical pastors."

It is important to point out what a sea change such interfaith endeavors and friendships represented in terms of the attitude of the Catholic Church toward Jews in Argentina. In the 1930s and 1940s, certain clergymen regularly voiced virulent anti-Jewish sentiments. Feelings of suspicion and antipathy persisted in many parts of the Argentine church until the Second Vatican Council.

To mark the 50th anniversary of that historic council's commencement, the leadership of the Pontifical University of Argentina, its grand chancellor, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, and its rector, Fernández, did me the great privilege of bestowing a doctoral degree honoris causa on me, the first Jew in the history of Argentina to be so honored.

It was during this ceremony on Oct. 11, 2012, that Fernández recalled our Bible studies together. "As far as dialogue with Judaism is concerned, we Christians can speak of an 'irreducible complementarity,' " he said. He continued:

> It is irreducible in terms of the theological issues on which we do not agree. But it is also a true complementarity because we have in common the treasure of the Torah, what we Christians call the Old or First Testament. Christians and Jews receive that Word in different traditions that allow that revealed Word to develop different powerful insights. For that reason we can enrich each other.

Less than two years later, Cardinal Bergoglio, as Pope Francis, would echo these words in his first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*:

> While it is true that certain Christian beliefs are unacceptable to Judaism, and that the Church cannot refrain from proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Messiah, there exists as well a rich complementarity which allows us to read the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures together and to help one another to mine the riches of God's word.

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The impact of the degree ceremony on those present was palpable. Norberto Padilla, professor of constitutional law at the university and former secretary of Cults of the Nation (of Argentina), approached me and said, "Ten years ago, this event could not have taken place." A member of my own Jewish community said, "I was in the classroom the day the Nazi henchmen took my teachers out and I never saw them again. All my life that pain has haunted me; today I received a glimmer of hope."

Fernández, reminiscent of Pope John Paul II's desire "to deepen dialogue in loyalty and friendship, in respect for one another's intimate convictions," spoke of me in words that I believe also apply to himself: "He has the ability to take up the questions and challenges of others, recognizing the values of others, but without ever betraying his own convictions and those of his believing community."

As he becomes prefect of the dicastery that was long known as the Office of the Inquisition and that persecuted Jews and forced converts from Judaism, may Cardinal-designate Víctor Manuel Fernández be blessed in his ministry and may he be a blessing for the ongoing work of building understanding, friendship and mutual enrichment among Jews and Catholics.