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Pope Francis leaves Holy Land with hope for peace, prayer

by Melanie Lidman

Francis in the Holy Land

Jerusalem — Pope Francis renewed his call for an end to war on terror as he finished his three-day journey to the Middle East with a marathon of meetings with Israeli political and religious leaders.

The only departure from the packed schedule was a request from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for Pope Francis to stop at a memorial for terror victims near Mount Herzl. Netanyahu made the request after an impromptu stop to pray at the separation barrier in Bethlehem, which divides Israel and Palestinian territories, angered Israeli leaders.

“I explained to the pope that building the security fence prevented many more victims than Palestinian terror, which continues today, planned to harm,” Netanyahu told the pope, according to Israeli government officials.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, a spokesman for the Vatican, denied that the visit to the monument was a political attempt to recoup the graces of Israeli officials. “This act was coherent with the pope’s message to stop terrorism,” he said.

One of the most significant moments of the visit for Israelis was when Pope Francis laid a wreath at Mount Herzl, the resting place of Zionism founder Theodor Herzl. Visiting Herzl’s grave is a regular stop for visiting foreign heads of states, but it is the first time a pope has partaken in the ceremony.

“Herzl is a really major symbol of auto-emancipation of the Jews, and Herzl is really until today the visionary of the reconstitution of Jewish sovereignty in the Holy Land,” Professor Adam Ferziger, an expert in Vatican-Israel relations from Bar-Ilan University, told *NCR*. “From a Catholic theological

perspective, the coming to fruition of Herzl's vision is very problematic.?

When Herzl met with Pope Pius X in 1904 to plead for the establishment of a Jewish state, Pius rejected Herzl's request. ?The Jews have not recognized our Lord; we therefore cannot recognize the Jewish people,? Pius told Herzl. Pope Francis' wreath-laying illustrated the great strides made in Jewish-Catholic relations over the past century.

Pope Francis crammed 10 events and five private meetings into the last day of his trip. He began with a meeting with the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Muhammad Ahmad Hussein. He then visited the Dome of the Rock, which was the first time Pope Francis has visited a mosque during his pontificate, Lombardi said.

Standing with the golden dome behind him, Pope Francis pleaded for ?all communities who look to Abraham? to come together in tolerance and respect. ?May no one abuse the name of God through violence. May we work together for justice and peace,? he said.

Moments later at the Western Wall, the holiest site in the Jewish faith directly underneath the Dome of the Rock, Pope Francis embraced Rabbi Abraham Skorka and Muslim leader Omar Abboud.

The two religious leaders, friends of Pope Francis? from his days as the archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, joined the pope on the entire trip to promote his message of interfaith tolerance. The image of the three faiths embracing in Jerusalem, the home to the three monotheistic religions, was exactly the message the pope hoped to send.

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?It's a dream they've had since a long time ago, and it's really wonderful to see it realized,? Skorka's wife, Silvia Skorka, told *NCR* at the president's residence.

However, Rabbi Alon Goshen of the Elijah Interfaith Institute, who had hoped to organize an interfaith prayer session with the pope, said the pope's decision to travel with a Muslim and Jewish leader was a ?double message.?

?It shows his commitment [to interfaith dialogue], but it sidesteps the local reality,? he said, adding that he wished the pope had chosen a local Jewish and Muslim leader for his entourage. ?We're not in Argentina.?

He added that Pope Francis' call for Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to join him in a prayer for peace would have been even more meaningful in Jerusalem than at the Vatican. Still, he praised the image of the three men embracing at the Western Wall as a significant step toward interfaith understanding.

In continuing the message of interfaith tolerance, Francis also urged Israel to protect the rights of minority Christians and allow free access to all religious sites across Israel.

Another first for the pontiff's visit was the attendance of a Lebanese Christian leader. Cardinal Bechara Rai, head of the Maronite Catholic church, came to Jerusalem as part of a group of senior clergy with Pope Francis, Lombardi said. This makes him the first Lebanese religious leader to visit Jerusalem since the 1967 Six Day War, when Jerusalem annexed the eastern part of Jerusalem.

Ferzinger said Francis' visit to the Holy Land was generally positive, if not earth-shattering. "No one can claim an unequivocal victory or loss," he said. Pope John Paul II's visit in 2000 was more of a "dramatic breakthrough" for Jewish-Christian relations, while Pope Benedict XVI was generally a disappointment to Israelis, he said.

"People were really on guard [during Benedict's visit]. They were hoping, because he had all this baggage, this would be time to clear the air and he could have said much more clear statements of reconciliation and even apologies," Ferzinger said. Benedict was briefly an unwilling member of Hitler Youth, Ferzinger said, and his unclear stances regarding the church's actions during World War II made Israelis uneasy.

"[Francis] doesn't have this problem. He always had a good relationship with Jews in Argentina," Ferzinger said. "This pope comes with a clean slate."

Preparations are also underway for a prayer summit between Abbas and Peres, tentatively to be held June 6, after Pope Francis invited the leaders to pray for peace with him at the Vatican. Both parties accepted.

But people closely involved in the negotiations process warned not to expect anything revolutionary out of the meeting.

"The pope has demonstrated that he has a deep commitment to try to advance prospects for peace," the U.S. ambassador to Israel, Dan Shapiro, told *NCR*. "This commitment is well appreciated by both sides, evidenced by the warm and excited way he was received by both the republics and by their leaders."

"He invited them as a prayer meeting, but negotiations are conducted in other channels," Shapiro added. "We always welcome all channels of communication between Israel and the Palestinians. This is a valuable one that their leaders seem to have taken an interest in pursuing."

Also on Monday, Pope Francis met with the chief rabbis of Israel, Yitzhak Yosef and David Lau. The chief rabbis were noticeably absent from the long line of political and religious leaders -- including leaders from most other religious groups in Israel, such as the Druze and Christian factions -- who greeted Pope Francis upon his arrival in Israel at the Ben Gurion Airport.

Peres, who will retire from the presidency in July at age 90 after almost seven decades of political involvement in Israel, was one of the most eloquent speakers of the day. Pope Francis is one of the last world leaders Peres will welcome to Israel as president, and the pope's message of peace echoed Peres' years of struggle for the same cause.

"Your visit, Your Holiness, is a moving event with the power to motivate the religious leaders into joining forces to enable moral ethics and scientific innovations to enable each person to free themselves from despair, poverty, and violence," he said.

"My dear friend, I was young, and now I am old. I learned that dreams do not age -- and I recommend to all to remember that.

"You walked in pilgrimage to the Holy Land and you paved a road. May you be blessed."

[Melanie Lidman is a freelance journalist in Israel.]

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