

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 9, 2014 at 9:33am

Pope Francis calls for 'courage' toward peace between Israel, Palestine

by Josephine McKenna by Religion News Service by Joshua J. McElwee

Vatican City and Washington — Pope Francis dove into the Middle East peace process Sunday, urging the Israeli and Palestinian presidents to act with courage and end what he called the "spiral of hatred and violence" during a historic prayer meeting at the Vatican.

Unclear following the event, however, was what impact it would have on efforts to restart long-stalled negotiations between the two states.

At the beginning of the solemn ceremony, Israeli President Shimon Peres and his Palestinian counterpart, Mahmoud Abbas, warmly embraced and joked together inside the pope's Santa Marta residence as a smiling Francis looked on.

The Middle East leaders were joined by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, considered "first among equals" of the world's Eastern Orthodox Christians, and proceeded to the Vatican gardens for a tightly orchestrated 90-minute ceremony notable for the absence of any religious symbols.

"It is my hope that this meeting will mark the beginning of a new journey where we seek things that unite, so as to overcome the things that divide," Francis said.

The ceremony included musical interludes from a chamber orchestra and prayers from the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths (in Hebrew, English, Italian and Arabic). It ended with the leaders' individual invocations for peace, a handshake as a sign of peace and the planting of a symbolic olive tree in the Vatican gardens.

Assessing the value of the Vatican event during a briefing Friday in Washington, D.C., one American

cardinal said he thought Francis was reaching out to Peres and Abbas as a symbol to show that Israelis and Palestinians can work together to support peace efforts in the region.

"We've had a lot of prayers, but never on this level," said retired Washington Cardinal Theodore McCarrick at a briefing on Capitol Hill sponsored by the U.S. bishops' conference and Catholic Relief Services.

"Peres has often spoken about the need for peace, and Abbas always speaks about the need for peace," continued McCarrick, a longtime human rights advocate who has traveled extensively in the Middle East and who accompanied the pope to the Holy Land in May. "Maybe [Francis is] building up a constituency of reasonable people who maybe will make sacrifices to work together."

Yet if Francis is hoping to stimulate new efforts at negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, there's no doubt that a key leader was missing at the Vatican event: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who would likely be considered the main powerbroker in any negotiations and often stresses Israeli security.

Peres, 90, is set to leave office in July.

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One human rights advocate speaking at the Washington briefing said Francis' outreach to Peres and not Netanyahu was "shrewd."

"In inviting President Peres as opposed to Prime Minister Netanyahu ... I think the pope did something interesting in signaling to people that the Israeli public is not a monolith and that there are different constituencies within the public," said Ronit Avni, an Israeli and American citizen who heads Just Vision, a Washington-based group that focuses on increasing press coverage of nonviolent efforts to resolve the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

"Even if Netanyahu may be opposed to certain things, there's an acknowledgment that even in the higher echelons of power, there are political and ideological divisions," Avni said. "Not treating these societies as monoliths is critical."

Prayers at the Vatican event were said in the chronological order of the founding of the three religions -- Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Speaking at a lectern set between hedges in the Vatican gardens, Francis said people from many different cultures and nations dreamed of peace, and too many children had been cut down as "innocent victims of war and violence."

"How many moments of hostility and darkness have we experienced, how much blood has been shed, how many lives have been shattered," Francis said. "May the words 'division,' 'hatred' and 'war' be banished from the heart of every man and woman."

Peres described Francis as a "bridge builder" who had touched people's hearts regardless of their faith or nation during his visit to the Holy Land in May. He said both Israelis and Palestinians were "aching for peace."

"The tears of mothers over their children are still etched in our hearts," Peres said in Hebrew. "We must

put an end to their cries, to the violence, to the conflict. We all need peace. Peace between equals."

It was the first time the two presidents had met publicly in more than a year, but the ceremony also marked the first time that Jewish, Christian and Islamic prayers were said together in the very heart of the Catholic church.

Abbas thanked the pope "from the bottom of my heart" for proposing the ceremony and for his visit to Jerusalem and Palestine in May. He described the pontiff's visit as "a sincere expression of your belief in peace and a truthful attempt to achieve peace between Palestinians and Israelis."

Before the ceremony, the Vatican had sought to downplay expectations, saying it was unlikely to lead to any immediate breakthroughs in the Middle East's troubled peace process.

In Washington, one prominent scholar suggested that the United States should not try to play a key role in leading to those breakthroughs.

"The American government cannot be an honest broker in the Middle East any longer," said Jesuit Fr. Drew Christiansen, a professor of ethics and human development at Georgetown University who previously led the U.S. bishops' conference's office of international justice and peace.

"Our political ties are just too entangled to enable us to accomplish the work of peacemaking," said Christiansen.

Christiansen said the United States should focus its efforts on playing a background role in future negotiations, akin to the role played by Americans during the Oslo Accords of the 1990s.

McCarrick stressed the powers of prayer and working together in finding solutions. The retired cardinal asked those at the briefing to "put ourselves in communion with" Peres, Abbas and Francis.

"We pray that the Lord may inspire all three of them to see ways clearly that they can find peace," he said. "But peace is not inevitable. It ultimately [comes from] men and women who seek to find a way of living together."

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