

Pope Francis Brings Message of Peace to Extremely Volatile Region

Pope Francis arrived in the Middle East on Sunday amidst a great deal of anticipation among the region's people. During his three days here, the pope will visit Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. In Israel, he will visit the Temple Mount and Yad Vashem and will meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Shimon Peres.

He will also be correcting a historical injustice during his visit when he lays a wreath at the tomb of Theodor Herzl. This signifies a change in the Holy See's relationship with Israel, some 110 years after Herzl visited the Vatican to ask for help in establishing a Jewish state and was turned down by Pope Pius X. Pope Francis' trip to Israel is causing a great deal of excitement among the Christian communities. This is not the first papal visit to Israel. Pope Benedict XVI visited in 2009; Pope John Paul II visited in 2000, and Pope Paul VI visited in 1964. But the previous visits do not detract from the expectations or, for some, the fears aroused by Pope Francis' upcoming visit.

Not many people know that during the visit, a summit—the first of its kind in 50 years—will take place between the heads of the most important churches in the Christian world. Two respected figures will accompany the pope on his arrival: the head of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, who will be arriving from Istanbul, and Patriarch Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros a-Rai, the Maronite patriarch of Antioch, who will be coming from Lebanon. Patriarch a-Rai's decision to join the pope's visit to Israel aroused harsh criticism in Lebanon, and he was put under heavy pressure.

High-ranking Hezbollah officials tried to dissuade him from participating in the visit, even summoning him for a meeting in which they claimed that his visit to Israel would have “far-reaching political consequences.”

Waiting for the Holy Trinity

Pope Francis’ visit to the region is described as a journey whose purpose is to convey a message of peace and brotherhood among Christians, Muslims and Jews. In addition to the two patriarchs, non-Christian religious leaders will also be accompanying him: Rabbi Abraham Skorka and Mufti Omar Abboud.

But for the Christian community, the historic summit will be the high point of the entire visit.

“The last time a meeting of this kind took place was 50 years ago, in 1964, during the visit of Pope Paul VI,” says Wadie Abunassar, an adviser for the Latin Catholic community in Israel and the chairman of the media committee for the Catholic Bishops Conference in the Holy Land.

“Besides the spiritual message that Pope Francis seeks to convey, this visit is also a significant statement regarding internal relations among all the various Christian denominations. The pope wishes to bring the monotheistic faiths closer together, and just as important, he also wishes to bring the various Christian denominations closer. That is why the Maronite Patriarch did not give in to the pressure applied to him in Lebanon, and announced that his decision to accompany the journey was final and not subject to change.”

A-Rai is expected to visit Jaffa, Haifa, Acre and Nazareth. During his visit he will meet with families displaced from the villages of Biram and Ikrit in the Galilee. These families are members of the Christian faith who served in the South Lebanon Army and escaped from Lebanon after the Israeli army withdrew in 2000. He will also lead a prayer service for thousands of Maronite Christians.

Abunassar, 44, of Haifa, married and the father of four daughters, says that tens of thousands of Maronites, who live mainly in the north, are excited over A-Rai's upcoming visit.

"We call our priests 'Abouna' ['Our Father']," he says. "We are excited because the pope and the clergymen accompanying him will be meeting with what is known as 'their flock.'"

From Abunassar's statements, one may gather that from Christianity's perspective, all the stops on the visit are part of the same spiritual package deal.

"This has nothing to do with politics," he says. "It is true that the pope is the head of the Vatican state, and as such he is obligated to obey the customary diplomatic rules and hold official visits with high-ranking officials in the Israeli leadership. But from a religious and spiritual standpoint, Christianity views the region where Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the Kingdom of Jordan are located as the Holy Land. That is because the Latin Catholic Patriarchate in Jerusalem is also responsible for the holy sites in these regions."

Although this is the third papal visit in which Abunassar is participating, he is as excited as if it was the first.

"You must understand that the popes, past and present, were not eager to leave their dwelling place in Rome for political visits. The custom in which the pope leaves the Vatican on official visits to countries throughout the world began only in the 20th century."

Abunassar says that Pope Francis' decision to make this trip stemmed from the special status that the Holy Land has in his faith.

"The Holy Land is the cradle of Christianity," he says. "It has its own significance in the Christian world, and no other land is the 'Terra Sancta.' Pope Francis is a very humble and

modest man, so he does not travel abroad much. Such trips cost a great deal of money—hence the great importance and excitement of his trip to our region.”

Besides this current trip, Pope Francis visited Brazil—a trip that was planned during the previous pope’s tenure. Millions of young Christians waited eagerly for his arrival, and after Pope Benedict XVI announced that he was unable to continue in office, Pope Francis wanted to fulfill the Church’s obligation so as not to disappoint the believers who had waited so hopefully. Pope Francis also plans to visit South Korea in August—“and that’s it,” says Abunassar. “From here, we can conclude how important the Holy Land is to the Church, and how significant the pope’s visit here is for it and for the believers alike.”

‘We are Trying Not to Disappoint’

Without a doubt, the believers have a hard time suppressing their feelings. Abunassar says, “Thousands of people are planning to come on Saturday to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, where Mass will be held on Sunday, to get a place. Everybody wants to see him and be near him. I have been getting an enormous number of requests, and we are trying not to disappoint anybody.” Apparently, that will be hard to do, since “unlike previous papal visits, this time the visit will be brief and crowded. The pope will not be visiting all the sites that are sacred to Christianity. Instead, he will concentrate on Jerusalem and Bethlehem.”

But it is impossible to talk about the trip’s plans without speaking of the cloud of fears that looms over it. Not at a time when the media continually reports about hate crimes and “price tag” incidents, including against Christians. Even so, Latin Catholic Church officials say that the fact that the visit is taking place at such a tense time is not expected to have any effect.

"The church's position is that the Israeli government could be doing a great deal more against the price-tag incidents and the hate crimes," people are saying, "but the pope has no intention of speaking about the matter directly because there is no desire to make dealing with this topic into the main issue of the visit, though some members of the papal entourage will definitely mention the matter indirectly. The trip is defined as a spiritual one, for the purpose of conveying a message of peace and brotherhood, and that is how we want to keep it. We also hope very much that during the visit, there will be no incidents similar to the price-tag incidents that took place recently."

Let us return to the gap between the ideal and the real. In the nature of things, some are displeased with the character of the pope's visit and his itinerary. A high-ranking official of the Latin Catholic community told Israel Hayom that of the tens of thousands of believers who live in the Galilee and the north of Israel, some were upset that the visit would not be including a trip to the Christian holy sites in that part of Israel.

"It is no doubt disappointing that the pope did not include the holy sites in the north on his trip," the official said. "He should have come to visit Nazareth at least, even if for a few hours. It is very frustrating, but we respect the pope's wishes and we have nothing to complain about other than what has already been said."

Still, the official adds, "The previous papal visits lasted more than five days, no less than that. In the Palestinian Authority and in Jordan, the Christian believers are rather disappointed that the visit is so short and that the pope will be spending most of his visit in Jerusalem and in Israel for meetings with officials."

Fear of Extremists

Along with the frustration, the official says that everyone has fears of serious and unexpected incidents.

“Unlike previous popes, Pope Francis does not want armored vehicles and reinforced security. That could be a big problem,” he says. “We fear that extremists may try to harm him or create an incident that will cloud the visit. We all hope that this visit, which carries with it a message of brotherhood and peace, will take place quietly, with no irregular incidents. We hope that the message that Pope Francis brings with him, together with those accompanying his entourage, will help calm the charged atmosphere that has developed in the region.”

But the honored guests accompanying the pope will not help to defuse the tension. The official added, “Although the pope’s people, and he himself, say that the significance of the visit is solely spiritual, not political, it is obvious that this trip to the Holy Land also has political ramifications.

For the first time, the Maronite patriarch from Lebanon, Bechara a-Rai, is accompanying him, and his visit to Israel has enormous implications. Thousands of Maronite believers are waiting eagerly for him, because it is possible that this will be the first and last time in their lives that they see him and meet with him. That is why all of us hope that the visit will go peacefully.”

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