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Francis's Interreligious Friendships

Soccer & Lunch, Followed by Dialogue

James L. Fredericks

In the search for clues about Pope Francis's commitment to interreligious dialogue, much has been made about Jorge Mario Bergoglio's friendship with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, the rector of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano in Buenos Aires. Less well known, but in some respects equally revealing, is Bergoglio's response to Pope Benedict's infamous lecture at Regensburg University in 2006. Benedict's remarks, which included a gratuitous and unflattering reference to Muhammad by a Byzantine emperor, led to widespread protests, riots, even deaths. Benedict quickly apologized, but seemed somewhat bemused that these obscure observations by a former university professor could cause such an uproar. There were protests in places as far apart as London and Jakarta. Muslims protested in Buenos Aires as well.

Bergoglio's response was not bemusement. He gave a surprisingly strong statement to *Newsweek Argentina* through his press secretary, Fr. Guillermo Marcó, declaring his "unhappiness" with the pope's address. Then Marcó, speaking for the archbishop, said, "These statements will serve to destroy in twenty seconds the careful construction of a relationship with Islam that Pope John Paul II built over the past twenty years." Bergoglio even asked other bishops to offer criticisms of their own. There are reports that high officials in the curia were intent on having him sacked for this insolence. As a shot across his bow, a suffragan bishop, who had also criticized Benedict's lecture, got the axe. Bergoglio handled the situation by begging off from the upcoming meeting of the synod in Rome and inviting local Muslim leaders to gather with him in Buenos Aires. Although he had called the meeting, he insisted on not presiding. The archbishop thought it was time for the church to listen.

And then, of course, there is fútbol. I am weary of the endless—and in my view pointless—discussions of the "foundations" of interreligious dialogue. I refer to the metaphysical positions we are told we have to embrace or the doctrines we must jettison (usually about the centrality of Christ) before Christians can be "ready" for dialogue with our neighbors who follow other religious paths. In Los Angeles, where I work, the basis for our dialogue with Buddhists is just cheese

enchiladas. The monks love them. And the Mexican ladies in the kitchen are delighted to cook them for *nuestros monjitos* ("our dear little monks") when they come to visit. I look forward to the pad thai when I visit them. In Buenos Aires, the basis of Bergoglio's dialogue with his friend Rabbi Skorka was lunch as well, but it began with a discussion of soccer, not theology. Their long and intimate friendship began more than two decades ago when, as archbishop, Bergoglio chatted with Skorka at the annual *Te Deum* liturgy for commemorating Argentina's May Revolution. The archbishop made a joke about the dismal record of the Rabbi's favorite soccer team. The Rabbi countered with a joke about Bergoglio's team and was rewarded with an invitation to lunch. One lunch led to another as they realized they had much more to talk about than soccer teams. Then came visits to synagogues and joint prayer services in parish churches. Eventually, the two friends started a television talk show, producing some thirty episodes on a wide range of subjects. These conversations became the basis of their book *On Heaven and Earth*, now available in English. Through Skorka, the archbishop developed close ties with the Jewish community. In 2007, he attended a Rosh Hashanah service, telling the congregation that he had come to examine his heart, "like a pilgrim, together with you, my elder brothers." Bergoglio built a shrine to the victims of the Holocaust in the Metropolitan Cathe-



Pope Francis embraces Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka and Sheikh Omar Abboud.

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dral and opened its doors to the Jewish community for an annual commemoration of Kristallnacht. The archdiocese and various Jewish organizations joined in sponsoring a program for assisting the poor called Tzedaka, a Hebrew word that means both justice and charity. After the horrendous bombing of a Jewish community center in 1994, Bergoglio was quick to stand with his Jewish friends as the first public figure demanding a thorough investigation of the bombing by the government.

Bergoglio's concern for his "elder brothers" has continued now that he has become pope. Two days after his election, Francis sent a personal invitation to attend his installation to Dr. Riccardo Di Segni, Rome's chief rabbi. He also ordered that no public funeral would be countenanced for Erik Priebke, a Nazi war criminal who had been on the lam for fifty years in Argentina. To thwart the pope's directive, the Society of St. Pius X planned to give the mass murderer a funeral in Italy. An outraged crowd blocked the church. This is not the first time that Francis has had a run-in with Marcel Lefebvre's brood. The SSPX, locally and internationally, had collaborated with the military junta during Argentina's "dirty war" (1976–83). Last November, Lefebvrists disrupted the Kristallnacht service in the cathedral by shouting the rosary. Francis has also asked the Polish hierarchy to go to the aid of the Jewish community there by lobbying against a law that would prohibit the kosher slaughter of meat.

On the day after his installation as bishop of Rome, Francis gathered with the diplomatic corps accredited with the Holy See. In the course of his address, he made an important statement that reveals much about his hopes for dialogue with Muslims. After noting that one of his titles as bishop of Rome is "pontiff" or "bridge-builder," he expressed his desire that dialogue would be an effective means to bring people closer together. He went on to say that the role of religion is fundamental in this regard. "It is not possible to build bridges between people while forgetting God." But Francis believes the converse of this statement is also true. It is not possible to establish true links with God while ignoring other people. Therefore, he told the diplomats, "it is important to intensify dialogue among the various religions, and I am thinking particularly of dialogue with Islam."

Given this track record, what does Francis think about interreligious dialogue as such? My view of the matter is this: The pope thinks of dialogue with other religious believers more in terms of friendships than formal meetings. This does not mean that he has little interest in theological exchanges. In fact, Skorka has said recently that their conversations will move toward more theological issues in the future. My point is that, for Francis, interreligious friendships are more the basis for dialogue than its by-product. Remember, for Bergoglio and Skorka, soccer jokes and lunches came first. Chicago's Cardinal Francis George captured Francis's view succinctly in an interview with the *Chicago Tribune*: "Once you have

the relationship, then the ideas make sense. Otherwise, it's a debating society. So you don't start with the idea. You start with a person and relationship. The pope is reminding us of this."

This means that Francis approaches dialogue in way that differs significantly from that of John Paul II. In a series of encyclicals, John Paul developed a sophisticated theological understanding of religious diversity based on his belief in the universal presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is active, the pope taught, not only in the hearts of individuals, but tangibly in their religions as well. John Paul also made clear that all salvation is founded in the one great mediation of grace that is Christ, witnessed to by the church. The Second Vatican Council documents are clear that all are offered the gift of redemption by the Holy Spirit. The council fathers did not specify what role the religions might play in the offering of this gift. John Paul took the next step. The Spirit works not only interiorly in the hearts of human beings, but also tangibly in their religions. Thus the universal working of the Holy Spirit compels the church to enter into dialogue with those who follow other religious paths. Based on these theological considerations, John Paul called together leaders of many religions for prayer at Assisi in 1986. For him, theory led to practice.

Francis seems to be largely in agreement with John Paul's theology of religions, although perhaps it can be said that he is more cautious. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, for example, Francis teaches that "God's working" in non-Christians "tends to produce signs, rites, and expressions." But then he notes that, even though these have been "raised up" by the Holy Spirit, they lack "the meaning and efficacy of the sacraments instituted by Christ." This qualification is reminiscent of language found in *Dominus Iesus*, a document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000. I doubt that Francis will try to develop John Paul's thought in any fundamental way or that he will try to reconcile the theological disagreements that separate John Paul and Joseph Ratzinger on other matters. Francis will leave theory alone and focus more on the practical aspects of dialogue. For example, Francis believes that the motivation for interreligious dialogue should be the mutual commitment to peace and justice. Therefore, peace and justice "should become a basic principle of all our exchanges." He does not justify dialogue by appealing to John Paul's theology of religions. Dialogue comes from friendship, not theory.

Rooting dialogue in friendship brings with it an important advantage over more theoretical approaches. Friendships provide an environment that allows for the recognition and honoring of religious differences. Speaking to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Francis warned against any "false fraternity" in our dialogues. He takes up this theme in *Evangelii Gaudium* as well when he warns against "facile syncretism." Dialogue does not mean compromising the basic affirmations of Christian faith in the hope of arriving at some abstract common denominator. For Francis,

the alternative to such pretense is a dialogue that is “friendly and sincere.” Rabbi Skorka is in agreement. The rabbi has said that “God has something to do with our friendship.” Based on this affirmation of faith, the rabbi believes that their friendship allows them “to come together without burying our identities.”

Francis’s turn to friendship as a model for interreligious dialogue is yet another example of what he calls the “culture of encounter.” This expression has quickly become a catchphrase that sums up his hopes for the church’s future. In general, Francis uses the notion of encounter to emphasize the church’s need to get over the self-absorption that is making it “sick” and to reach out to the world with humility. The culture of encounter, therefore, is all about the church’s need to respond to the immense diversity of the world today. Of course, this includes religious diversity as well. The encounter with those who follow other religious paths needs to be “open and fruitful.” In his message for World Communications Day, Francis noted that the culture of encounter demands that we be ready not only to speak, but to listen as well. In keeping with this view, the pope warns in *Evangelii Gaudium* that “fundamentalism” on either side of interreligious dialogue makes true encounter impossible.

The conflict between Israel and Palestine is certainly playing a more prominent role in this pontificate than in any other in history. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew invited Francis to go to Jerusalem with him to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the meeting between Paul VI and Athenagoras at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Francis visited Amman, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem in May, meeting Bartholomew at the Holy Sepulchre. The stated goal of the trip was ecumenical, but even the meeting with the patriarch had an interfaith dimension. The Middle East is being wiped clean of its ancient Christian population, largely because of the predations of Muslim and, increasingly, Jewish religious extremists. Therefore, the joint communiqué of the two patriarchs included a call for continued dialogue with Jews and Muslims and their concern for Christians of the Middle East, especially in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.

True to his instincts for relying on friendships, Francis brought Rabbi Skorka along with him on the trip. For added effect, the rabbi and the pope were accompanied by Sheikh Omar Abboud, the director of the Islamic Center of Buenos Aires. Abboud is also a longtime friend and collaborator of Bergoglio’s, although perhaps not as intimate a friend as Skorka. There is an affecting photo of the pope, the rabbi, and the sheikh embracing at the Wailing Wall, before ascending the Temple Mount to visit the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem together (see page 13). With the Grand Mufti, Francis gave a reflection on the practical implications of our common Abrahamic roots.

The Wailing Wall was not the only wall visited by Francis. The day before, while in Bethlehem, he spent a moment

in silent prayer leaning his head against the security wall the Israeli government has built through Palestine. Many Palestinians took the pope’s gesture as a sign of support for their plight as an occupied and increasingly colonized people. Some Jews saw it that way too. Rabbi Riccardo de Segni bristled that he would listen to the pope’s criticism of Israel’s barrier when the Vatican tears down the walls that surround its own territory.

Soon after his election, both Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas were eager to invite Francis for official visits to Israel and Palestine. They were equally eager when Francis reciprocated by inviting them to visit him in the Vatican. This took place on June 8, Pentecost Sunday in the Latin liturgical calendar. Both presidents arrived in Rome and met with Francis separately. In the evening, Peres, Abbas and the pope were joined by Bartholomew for prayers in Hebrew, English, Arabic, and Italian. The leaders praised the God of creation, asked pardon for sins, and begged God for the gift of peace. After their prayers, the two presidents gathered the two patriarchs for private discussions.

In Israel, Francis said this event would be “an encounter in prayer,” which suggests that he was thinking, once again, in terms of the “culture of encounter.” There is a dimension of this phrase that does not come through well in English translation. Much more than an “encounter,” an *encuentro* connotes a search that is both deeply personal and transformative. It is useful to remember that, in Spanish, *encontrar* means “to find.” A culture of encounter, therefore, strongly suggests a mindset in which we are searching for something important to us and that we are living in the “joyful hope” that what we seek is being fulfilled even as we seek it. Despite what some in the secular press have said, the meeting of Peres and Abbas on Pentecost Sunday was intended to be an *encuentro*, not a photo-op.

This helps us to recognize one more important point regarding how Francis understands interreligious dialogue. Dialogue is an integral expression of the ministry of the church. By inviting Peres and Abbas to his home for prayer, Francis was not behaving like a head of state. He was making the church happen. Obviously, in this case, “making the church happen” does not mean using interreligious dialogue as a covert method to convert a Jew and a Muslim to Christianity in an unguarded moment. Interreligious dialogue goes to the heart of the church’s mission to serve the world as a kind of “field hospital,” as Francis has famously observed on several occasions.

More broadly, I hope that Francis uses dialogue with Jews as a way to challenge the church to develop its theological understanding of Judaism. John Paul II famously said to Jews that the Mosaic covenant has “never been revoked.” Similarly, Cardinal Walter Kasper has said that the church has “no mission to the Jews.” Francis has taken a similar position. In a letter to the journalist Eugenio Scalfari of *La Repubblica*, Francis reflected on the Mosaic covenant in terms of the Holocaust. Even when confronted by this

atrocities, he wrote, Christians must say, along with Paul in Romans, that the covenant with Israel has “never failed.” Such statements are easy to make. They certainly ring sweetly in Jewish ears. Their theological implications for Christians, however, are another matter. Is it the case that Jews have no need for the “new and eternal covenant” that has been established in Christ? Are the covenants in Moses and in Christ independently valid and self-sufficient paths to salvation? Are Jews exempted from the missionary mandate in Matthew 28:19, where we are instructed to “go out and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them”?

Benedict brought this issue into the open in 2008 with his revision of the Good Friday prayer for Jews in the restored Tridentine rite. The original prayer was a prayer for conversion. It evoked the “faithlessness” of the Jews and their need to acknowledge Christ. The 1970 version for the reformed liturgy does not speak of conversion. Rather, the church prays that the Jews might continue to grow in faithfulness to God’s covenant and arrive at the fullness of redemption. By rehabilitating the Tridentine rite, Benedict also brought back the problem of the old Good Friday prayer. At the request of Jewish groups, Benedict revised the prayer. But his revised prayer is still a prayer for conversion. Today, Tridentine worshipers ask God to illumine the hearts of the Jews “that they acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Savior of all men.” Jewish organizations have continued to protest. The prayer in the Roman rite, of course, remains unchanged. The theological question remains. Is it the case that the church has no mission to the Jews? In Cardinal Kasper’s view, this point is factually resolved, but the church’s theological thinking about Israel needs to develop. Where is Francis going to take this?

Of course, Francis will have to deal with Muslims as well as Jews. There is a pressing matter that has already landed on his desk. In the past, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue had a regular program of consultations with scholars from al-Azhar University in Cairo, the greatest center of learning in the Muslim world. In January 2011, Benedict condemned the bombing of a Coptic church in Alexandria that left twenty-one dead and more than ninety wounded. He called for government protection of Christians in Muslim countries and the guarantee of religious freedom for religious minorities. In response, Sheik Ahmed al-Tayyib, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, froze relations with the Vatican, citing interference with Egypt’s internal affairs. He may have been under pressure from the Mubarak government, which had recalled its ambassador to the Vatican because of those comments. A little over a year later, the sheik extended his congratulations to Francis soon after his election. A spokesman for al-Azhar expressed a hope to see “signs that productive dialogue might resume.” Francis himself responded to this opening, apparently at the insistence of the sheik, with a proposal that there be a meeting on “promoting mutual respect through education” so that “sincere and lasting friendships can grow.”

There is also the difficult problem in Muslim-Christian relations that is often referred to as “reciprocity.” On more than one occasion, Benedict criticized certain Muslim governments for the relative lack of religious freedom afforded to Christians compared with the freedoms enjoyed by Muslims in Europe. Muslims are free to build mosques in European countries, but it is impossible for Christians to build churches in Saudi Arabia and difficult to do so in many other Muslim countries. By raising this issue in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis is following in the footsteps of his predecessor. Francis notes that, in Europe, Muslims have become a significant presence and are “free to worship and become fully a part of society.” Moreover, Christians should embrace Muslim immigrants with “affection and respect.” Francis is also quite explicit in contrasting the freedoms enjoyed by Muslims in Europe with the curtailment of religious freedom by some Muslim governments. Christians should have the “freedom to worship and to practice their faith, in light of the freedom which followers of Islam enjoy in Western countries!” Reciprocity may be an issue for the Vatican’s diplomatic relations with Muslim countries, but Francis should never allow “reciprocity” to become a requirement for Christian-Muslim dialogue itself. Interreligious dialogue is an integral part of the work of the church, whether or not certain governments afford Christians religious freedom.

Benedict’s Christmas address to the curia in 2012 is a remarkable document that has gone largely unnoticed. His words reveal a great deal about this complicated man. They suggest to me that he already had decided that a long and difficult labor had to come to an end and that he would retire a few months later. They are the words of a man who had spent a lifetime in conflict with the secularism and relativism of the modern world. They are also the words of a man who had claimed, not too many months earlier, that interreligious dialogue, in the strict sense, was not possible. In the latter half of his address, Benedict reiterated what he has said in the past about dialogue. There can be no dialogue about the church’s fundamental teachings. Dialogue must never be allowed to blur the distinct identity of the Christian believer. But then, Benedict said something surprising. In the attempt to preserve Christian identity, he said, we must never assert ourselves in a way that “blocks the path to truth.” Moreover, Christians can afford to be “supremely confident” that dialogue will not rob them of their identity, because “we do not possess the truth, the truth possesses us.” And the truth, of course, is Christ who takes us by the hand, makes us free and keeps us safe as we venture into dialogues with those who follow other religious paths. Christ will not let go of us, Benedict told the curia. This is an astonishing expression of trust from a man who was so deeply suspicious of interreligious dialogue. I take these words of Benedict as a kind of passing of the baton. Benedict’s endpoint has become the starting point for Francis. ■