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Pope Francis cements reputation for deft diplomacy

By David Willey

Vatican expert, with Pope Francis in Jerusalem



Pope Francis paid his respects at a monument to Israeli victims of Palestinian attacks on Monday

By personally inviting the Israeli and Palestinian presidents to the Vatican to pray with him together for peace, Pope Francis has seized an unusual diplomatic initiative.

Bypassing the Secretariat of State, his often protocol-obsessed ministry of foreign affairs, he has effectively downgraded the formal machinery that normally conducts Vatican foreign policy, in favour of a dynamic new personal diplomacy.

The invitation was to visit "my home in the Vatican".

Pope Francis has chosen as his home not the sprawling papal penthouse at the top of the imposing and majestic Apostolic Palace next to St Peter's Basilica, the residence of previous popes in modern times, but the House of St Martha.

This is a much more modest guesthouse, which is also home to about 50 senior Vatican cardinals and bishops.

The St Martha guesthouse, a 19th Century structure originally built as a quarantine station in case of a cholera epidemic in Rome and rebuilt in the last decade of the 20th Century, provides lodgings for cardinals who come to Rome to elect a successor when a pope dies.

Official Vatican guests and visiting bishops are also provided with hotel

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accommodation and meals there.



On Sunday, the Pope prayed at the Israeli security barrier that separates Bethlehem from Jerusalem

As a thoughtful gesture at Pope Francis' request, the kitchen also occasionally provides kosher meals for visiting rabbis and Jewish dignitaries.

Pope Francis lives on the second floor of the guesthouse in a modest three-roomed suite, and conducts many private meetings in adjoining conference rooms, preferring the simple informality of St Martha to the elaborately-frescoed formal audience halls of the Apostolic Palace.

'Shamed'

The Pope's invitation to Israel's President Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to visit the Vatican was accepted by both sides in record time - within hours.

Commentators in Jerusalem may point out that the speed of the acceptance by Mr Peres was most likely dictated by the fact he is due to end his term as president this summer, and that he will have no official negotiating powers.

Nevertheless, those behind the papal diplomatic initiative will hope it can kick-start new talks between Israelis and Palestinians after the collapse of the latest US-brokered direct negotiations at the end of April.

Pope Francis' whistle-stop tour of the Holy Land has provided not only significant religious symbolism, but also some powerful political images.



Pope Francis' invitation to Shimon Peres - and Mahmoud Abbas - has bypassed formal Vatican diplomacy

On successive days he paused to pray in front of two of the most significant walls here, bowing to touch them with his forehead and his

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hand.

First in Bethlehem, an 8m-high, graffiti-covered concrete section of the barrier that separates the Palestinian territories of the West Bank from Israel; then, in Jerusalem, the Western Wall, the holiest place where Jews can pray.

Just to show that he was not capitulating to Palestinian propaganda while visiting Bethlehem on Sunday, Pope Francis on Monday stopped briefly, again off-schedule, to pay his respects at a monument to Israeli victims of Palestinian attacks.

Pope Francis has shown greater diplomatic skill than his predecessor, Pope Benedict, during his Holy Land visit in 2009.

At the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, Pope Francis paid eloquent tribute to the sacrifice made by six million Jews who died at the hands of the Nazis all over Europe.

Drawing on the book of Genesis, Pope Francis said: "Adam, where are you? Here we are, Lord, shamed by what man, created in your own image and likeness, was capable of doing."

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26 May 2014 Last updated at 19:02 GMT



Pope visits Jerusalem holy sites on last day in Middle East

Pope Francis visited the Western Wall and national Holocaust memorial

Pope Francis has visited the most important holy sites for Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem's Old City on the final day of his Middle East tour.

At the al-Aqsa mosque compound, the Pope urged people of all religions to "work together for justice and peace".

He then prayed at the Western Wall, which lies just beneath it, bowing his head as he touched the stones.

The pontiff has been feted by Israel and the Palestinians, and has invited their presidents to the Vatican.

Both Israel's Shimon Peres and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas have given a positive response.

'Brothers and sisters'

Pope Francis began the third day of his trip by visiting the compound, considered the third holiest site in Islam.



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The last day of the Pope's tour started at al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem's Old City



He met Muslim leaders outside the Dome of the Rock, including Jerusalem's grand mufti

Known to Muslims as the Haram al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary) and Jews as the Temple Mount, the status of the site is one of the most contentious issues in the Israel-Palestinian conflict .

Pope Francis took off his shoes to enter the Dome of the Rock, from where Islamic tradition says the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven. The Pope then walked to the nearby al-Aqsa Mosque.

Speaking to the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, the Pope deviated from his prepared remarks to call on Christians, Jews and Muslims to "love one another as brothers and sisters".

"May we learn to understand the suffering of others. May no-one abuse the name of God through violence," he said.

Afterwards, he headed to the Western Wall, one of the holiest sites in Judaism. It is part of the retaining wall of the Temple Mount dating back to a time when a Jewish temple stood there.



After praying at the Western Wall, Pope Francis embraced an imam and a rabbi

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The Pope made an unscheduled stop at a memorial for Israeli civilians killed in attacks by Palestinians



The Pope later laid a wreath at Yad Vashem's Hall of Remembrance

The Pope spent a few minutes praying at the wall, as he did on Sunday at the controversial Israeli security barrier that separates the biblical town of Bethlehem in the West Bank from Jerusalem.

He also left a written prayer in a crack in the Western Wall's ancient stones, before embracing two close friends from his native Argentina - an imam and a rabbi - who have been travelling with him.

The Pope then went to Mount Herzl cemetery, where he lay a wreath at the tomb of the founder of modern Zionism, Theodor Herzl.

The BBC's Yolande Knell in Jerusalem says the visit is now part of the protocol for official visitors, but is nevertheless an act of symbolic importance.

Afterwards, the Pope made an unscheduled stop at a memorial for Israeli civilians killed in attacks by Palestinian militants. The move was at the request of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, his office said.

'Never again'

Later, the Pope travelled to Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust memorial, where he kissed the hands of several survivors in a sign of honour.

At a solemn ceremony at the Hall of Remembrance, he spoke of the "boundless tragedy of the Holocaust", describing it as an "unfathomable abyss".



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The BBC's Jeremy Bowen spoke to Mr Gottdenker at Yad Vashem

"Never again, Lord, never again!" he said. "Here we are, Lord, shamed by what man - created in your own image and likeness - was capable of doing."

Our correspondent says the visit to the memorial holds special significance because of questions over the Vatican's position during the Holocaust.

The Pope then met Israel's two chief rabbis before attending a private audience with President Peres, whom he asked to guarantee pilgrims free access to Jerusalem's holy sites.

Shortly before departing for Rome from Ben Gurion airport, he celebrated Mass at the site known as the Cenacle, where Jesus is reputed to have taken part in the Last Supper with his Apostles on the eve of his crucifixion.

The Cenacle is located in a historic building on Mount Zion that is also sacred to both Jews and Muslims. The reputed burial place of King David is on the ground floor of the Cenacle, while a mosque is situated on the roof.



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Pope, in Mideast, Invites Leaders to Meet on Peace

By JODI RUDOREN, JIM YARDLEY and ISABEL KERSHNER MAY 25, 2014



Pope Francis greeted President Shimon Peres of Israel on Sunday while Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu looked on. Baz Ratner/Reuters

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JERUSALEM — Pope Francis inserted himself directly into the [collapsed Middle East peace process](#) on Sunday, [issuing an invitation](#) to host the Israeli and Palestinian presidents for a prayer summit meeting at his apartment in the Vatican, in an overture that has again underscored the broad ambitions of his papacy.

Francis took the unexpected step in Bethlehem, where he became the first pontiff ever to fly directly into the West Bank and to refer to the Israeli-occupied territory as the “State of Palestine.”

After describing the overall situation between Israel and the Palestinians as “increasingly unacceptable,” the pope made a dramatic, unscheduled stop at Israel’s contentious concrete barrier separating Bethlehem from Jerusalem, where he prayed and touched his head against the graffiti-covered wall.

“There is a need to intensify efforts and initiatives aimed at creating the conditions for a stable peace based on justice, on the recognition of rights for every individual, and on mutual security,” Francis said. Peace “must resolutely be pursued, even if each side has to make certain sacrifices.”

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Pope Visits the Holy Land

Osservatore Romano, via Associated Press

Presidents Shimon Peres of Israel and Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority accepted the pope's invitation to pray together; Mr. Abbas's spokesman said the meeting would take place June 6.

Though the meeting is likely to be more symbolic than substantive — Israel's presidency is ceremonial and Mr. Peres leaves office soon — it could have atmospheric significance for a peace process that has all but completely broken down.

More broadly, Pope Francis' actions on Sunday posed a striking example of how, barely a year into his papacy, he is seeking to reassert the Vatican's ancient role as an arbiter of international diplomacy.

Last September, an estimated 100,000 people took part in a four-hour peace vigil for Syria at St. Peter's Square as the United States was contemplating military strikes against the Syrian government.

The pope influenced the political debate in the United States and beyond with his outspoken denunciation of global inequality and his critique of global capitalism. During his visit to the Vatican in March, Mr. Obama lavished praise on the pope as he sought to align his own political agenda on issues such as raising the minimum wage with that of Francis, whose global popularity, for the moment, seems to transcend religion.

"If you look around the world, there are very few political leaders who are relatively untainted," said Philip Jenkins, a history professor who teaches at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University. "People want to believe there is somebody good and charismatic, and a good authority figure, out there."

But plunging into Middle East politics can be especially perilous. In a region where religious divisions overlay the political impasse, Francis' prayer summit "is taking the negotiations to another level — a meeting before God," said the Rev. Jamal Khadar, head of a West Bank seminary and a spokesman for the pope's visit. The idea, he added, is to "make religion part of trying to find a solution instead of it being seen as a negative and a complication."

Oded Ben Hur, a former Israeli ambassador to the Holy See, said by making a personal invitation for a prayer summit meeting, Francis eschewed Vatican protocol and tradition while showing atypical boldness. Most pontiffs, he said, "don't rock the boat."



Pope Francis led a papal Mass on Sunday in Manger Square in Bethlehem.
Pool photo by Fadi Arouri

“This is different,” he added. “It’s a balance, but the fact is, there is a move somewhere. He’s not conventional in that sense. When he thinks something, he expresses it.”

Sunday was the second of Francis’ three-day sojourn through the Holy Land, a trip with a carefully designed itinerary. In a delicate diplomatic dance, the pope helicoptered from Bethlehem to Tel Aviv for an official head-of-state welcome to Israel, then back to Jerusalem for an ecumenical dinner with the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople.

That meeting, commemorating the 50th anniversary of a historic Jerusalem handshake that was the first contact between the world’s two largest churches in 500 years, was the stated purpose of the trip. But it was overshadowed by the pope’s pointed wading into the tensions between Israelis and Palestinians.

In Bethlehem, where Francis spent six hours, he met Mr. Abbas as a peer, giving the Palestinians the kind of high-profile boost they had been seeking, and spotlighting the Vatican’s support for the 2012 United Nations resolution that upgraded their status to observer state.

He led a spirited Mass in a crowded Manger Square, which was bedecked with photomontages blending Christian iconography with images of Palestinians’ difficult daily reality. Then he had lunch with families suffering particular hardships under Israel’s occupation, and was serenaded by scores of children from the nearby Dheisheh refugee camp, home to some 12,000 people exiled from former family homes since the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.

But perhaps the defining image of the trip was the pope’s surprise exit from his open-topped vehicle to pray at a section of the concrete barrier that snakes along and through the West Bank. Palestinians loathe the barrier — Mr. Abbas has called it “monstrous” — and Israel insists it is essential to its security. Francis touched his forehead to the wall near where someone had spray-painted, “Pope, we need some 1 to speak about justice.”

Welcomed to Tel Aviv by President Peres and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Francis reiterated his call for a “sovereign homeland” for Palestinians “with freedom of movement.”

“I implore those in positions of responsibility to leave no stone unturned in the search for equitable solutions to complex problems,” he said. “The path of dialogue, reconciliation and peace must constantly be taken up anew, courageously and tirelessly.”



Francis made his first visit to the Holy Land, making strong symbolic gestures to promote the Pool photo by Andrew Medichini Perspectives of the Palestinian and Israeli leaderships.

Mr. Netanyahu said at the ceremony, “Our hand is outstretched in peace to whoever wants to live with us in peace,” but also referred to Jerusalem as Israel’s “eternal capital, the heart of our faith,” anathema to Palestinians’ aspirations to have East Jerusalem as the capital of their future state.

The prime minister’s spokesman declined to say whether Mr. Netanyahu was aware of negotiations underway for the Vatican prayer summit, or whether he approved.

The pope’s symbolic gestures on Sunday sketched an implicit indictment of international peacemaking efforts by the so-called Quartet and, most recently, Secretary of State John Kerry.

The State Department was not involved in arranging the prayer summit, but its spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, said on Sunday that Mr. Kerry “is a great admirer of Pope Francis’ leadership, and welcomes his spiritual initiative to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace through prayer and his call for courageous efforts to achieve a two-state solution.”

Mr. Peres, a former prime minister who ends his presidential term in July, has been an outspoken advocate for peace. But while he is popular among Israelis and respected around the world, Mr. Peres has little influence on Israeli policy.

“The pope wants to play a constructive role, and maybe he thinks gathering them together he can do that, but he doesn’t know Peres doesn’t make political decisions at all,” said Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization’s executive committee. “Peres has been saying the same thing for years, and nobody listened. The political establishment is going one way and he just tries to give it a clean bill of health for public relations.”

Other experts on the peace process agreed that the joint prayer could not substitute for political negotiations and would not prompt a breakthrough, but said it might change public perceptions in a conflict increasingly defined by deep mutual distrust.

Daniel Levy of the European Council on Foreign Relations said the meeting would “mean nothing in big-picture terms” but “in the margins” would belie the widely held Israeli belief that Mr. Abbas is not a willing peace partner and could “drive more of a wedge” between centrist and right-wing components of Mr. Netanyahu’s governing coalition.

David Horowitz, a longtime Israeli journalist who described himself as “cynical about everything,” said the summit could challenge many Israelis’ concern that “the Palestinian public has not come to terms

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with the legitimacy of a Jewish state.”

“It would be naïve to think that the sight of Peres, Abbas and the pope doing anything together is going to change the world,” said Mr. Horowitz, editor of the Times of Israel news site. “If you look at it in political terms, O.K., insignificant, but if you look at it as an effort to foster a different mind-set among Israelis and Palestinians, psychologically, I think this is very positive.”

A version of this article appears in print on May 26, 2014, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Pope, in Mideast, Invites Leaders to Meet on Peace. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

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