



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

A vision of peace for Jerusalem

Rabbi Abraham Skorka: A Year after the Historic Pilgrimage to the Holy Land with Pope Francis



This year marks the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Conciliar Declaration on the Church's relationship with non-Christian Religions, which marked an important moment in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and, in particular, with the Jewish world. To celebrate this anniversary, the annual conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews was held in Rome this summer, and had the joyful opportunity of having an audience with Pope Francis, where he stated that "an authentic fraternal dialogue has been made possible since the Second Vatican Council, following the promulgation of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*. This document represents a definitive 'yes' to the Jewish roots of Christianity and an irrevocable 'no' to anti-Semitism. In celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, we are able to see the rich fruits which it has brought about and to gratefully appraise Jewish-Catholic dialogue." Among those who participated in the conference was the Argentinean Rabbi Abraham Skorka, who was first in line to greet his friend Jorge Mario Bergoglio, and who later granted us an interview.

More than a year has passed since your historical pilgrimage with Pope Francis to the Holy Land. Would you like to share with us why you chose to join him on that trip, and why it was important?

The Holy Land was one of the topics that we often analyzed together, also in our book. The main question was this: what can we do in order to promote peace in the Middle East, and specifically in the Holy Land? For me the State of Israel is a very important theme: a state which has the challenge of showing the development of Jewish culture in our present day. The Zionist Movement is not merely a movement that claims and proclaims the re-establishment of the Jews in the Land of Israel. It is

also a cultural movement, which helped to transform Hebrew into a living language, and that voices concern over the future of the Jewish culture.

With regards to “Rome” and “Jerusalem”, there is an historical antagonism between Rome and Jerusalem which is also mentioned in the Talmud. Rome destroyed the province of Yehuda during the terrible war between 67 and 70 which ended with the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem. In 73 there was the siege of Masada and then, from 132 to 135, there was the terrible war was carried out by Adrianus. What we tried to do through this pilgrimage to the Holy Land was to transmit a message of peace, and to express our hope that the gap produced by over 2,000 years of conflict may be filled with sentiments of pureness, love, thus giving the possibility to see one another as brothers in our human condition.

From another angle, the idea was to go to the place to which I direct my *tefilot* (prayers) and to the place where Jesus – who is so special to the Christian faith – was born, lived, and spread his message. It is a special common place for us, and when I saw Pope Francis after he was elected, I told him: Let us go to Israel. This is the place in which our religiosity, our vision of God, and our connection with God was established. We are the children, the descendants of the great prophets who elevated their prophecies in Jerusalem.

We had our good friend Omar Abboud with us in order to show that all Abrahamic religions must embrace each other, forming a circle of spiritual power which, according to our Holy Scriptures, will bring peace to our world. This is our challenge and this was the reason for our journey, which was not a trip, but rather a pilgrimage.

You have spoken about the importance of the place in itself, of Jerusalem, and also of the global message one should spread. You, Pope Francis and Omar Abboud you are not originally from the Holy Land, nor are you living there. What do you think that the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, which has more than 30,000 members around the world, can do in those places where it is located in order to promote encounter and peace?

One could define our pilgrimage as a proclamation for peace sent out from the very place from which Isaiah said: “For out of Zion shall go forth the Torah [instruction, in the NRSV translation] and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Is 2:3) What does the Torah mean? Peace! This verse comes from the middle of a description of a reality of peace in which one people will not lift up sword against the other, and in which swords will be transformed into plowshares.

We have received this idea, but how can we pragmatise it around the world? Every Christian community and every Jewish community ought to have interreligious programs. The first step for these interreligious programs must be an encounter between Jews and Christians of different denominations, to see and to know each other, and to analyze themes together. Of course there should not be an analysis of very sensitive topics at the very beginning, but instead daily problems should be analyzed from Jewish and Christian points of view, and then studied together, as Pope Francis suggested in *Evangelii Gaudium*. This should be the beginning: to know each other and to work together in order to solve the problems that affect our common society.

Would you like to conclude by sharing a prayer that you think can be helpful for sustaining peace in the Holy Land?

All our prayers quote different Bible verses. A few passages from the book of Isaiah come to mind. In Isaiah Chapter 2 there is the famous image of a Jerusalem of peace. Peace is what we must ask God

for: to bless us (and I mean Jews, Muslims and Christians) in order to help us accept one another with great respect, to see one another as brothers. It is then that we will surely be able to build up a Jerusalem of peace in which all of us will have the possibility to express the best sentiments, ideas and thoughts which are in each one of us.

The other passage in Isaiah, which strikes me as a *tefila*, a prayer, is at the end of Chapter 19, where there appears to come a way that connects Egypt and Assyria, and then "Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. God will bless them, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.'" (Is 19:24-25) At that time, I understood, I pray, all people will have a deep commitment to worship God and it will be a blessing for the whole world.

The third passage in Isaiah, which is very relevant for me as a prayer, is the one that says "for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Is 56:7). He will bless us, all of us, with greatness to transform all the city of Jerusalem into God's house. Not because God is living in this house, but in order that each person who comes to Jerusalem, no matter what his or her faith may be, will have the possibility of finding in Jerusalem a real dimension of spirituality. In this way we will really honor the memory of the prophets of Israel, the great masters of Israel, Jesus, and Muhammad.

Interview by Elena Dini

(August 11, 2015)