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Friendship began with soccer, led to improved Catholic-Jewish ties

David Agren Catholic News Service | Mar. 27, 2013
Pope Francis
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Rabbi Abraham Skorka recalls meeting Archbishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio at a Mass for a national holiday two decades ago.

They shook hands afterward, and "he looked deep into my eyes," Skorka recalled of the man who would be elected Pope Francis. "He told me, 'I think this year we're going to eat chicken soup.' "

The line referred to Argentine soccer. Skorka pulls for the River Plate club, whose fans are commonly called "chickens" by rivals. Francis supports the San Lorenzo club.

"I felt there was a meta-message: If you want to talk with me, the door is open. There are no protocols," said Skorka, rector of the Latin American rabbinical seminary in Buenos Aires and a leader in the country's Jewish community.

"I had the sense that this man wants to be a bridge."

Soccer formed the initial bridge between the two religious leaders, but their bond went beyond sport and helped to bring Christians and Jews closer together after some episodes of less-than-cordial relations in Argentina.

Bergoglio won wide acclaim for his sympathetic and strong reaction to the 1994 bombing of a Jewish center in his native Argentina. The suicide bombing, which killed 85 and wounded 300, was widely thought to be the work of Iranian-backed Hezbollah militants.

Bergoglio "was forthright not only in his condemnation of the act but in his solidarity with the Jewish community," said Rabbi David Rosen, international director of interreligious affairs at the American Jewish Committee in Washington, D.C.

Just two months ago, the government of Argentina announced a joint Argentinian-Iranian commission to investigate the nearly 20-year-old suicide bombing.

Francis now faces the challenge of improving relations between the two faiths on an international level, but Skorka told Catholic News Service that the experience in Argentina sets an example for both Catholics and Jews.

"We understood that only together could we make a better world," he said.

The rabbi recalled riding with Francis after an address at a synagogue on the eve of a Jewish ceremony -- one of the few occasions the prelate accepted a ride from anyone.

"The entire way, he constantly told me: Believe me, I pray deeply for [you and the Jewish community]," Skorka said.

The two leaders spoke regularly. They prayed and participated in interfaith groups and joined with an evangelical leader for a TV show.

"We didn't prepare a script," Skorka said. "We all came with this idea in our heads."

Skorka wrote the forward to Francis' book on the Jesuits. The pair co-authored another book, On Heaven and Earth. The Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina, which Francis oversaw, awarded Skorka an honorary doctorate in 2012.

The rabbi considered the award, given to mark the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, a watershed moment.

"There are people who know the Catholic University very well and who told me this act couldn't have been done 10 years ago. There would have been a revolution," he said.

"The revolution was brought by Bergoglio."

Observers in Argentina express similar sentiments about how Francis improved relations with the largest Jewish community in Latin America.

"Bergoglio was one of the most influential figures ... in interreligious initiatives," said Sergio Berensztein, independent political analyst in Buenos Aires.

Berensztein, who is Jewish, said anti-Semitic expressions had been made previously by Catholics, but "since Bergoglio became the main figure in the church, that didn't happen again."

Skorka expressed joy with his friend's elevation to the papacy, but also some sadness.

"I'd like to still work with him, but he's on the world level now," Skorka said.

"I have no doubt that the affection that I have in my heart for him, he has the same in his heart for me," he added.

[Religion News Service contributed to this report.]

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