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Pope Francis will take rabbi and Muslim leader with him to Holy Land

Josephine McKenna Religion News Service | May. 16, 2014
Francis in the Holy Land
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Pope Francis will be accompanied on his first visit to the Middle East by Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka and Muslim leader Omar Abboud -- two friends from Buenos Aires.

It is the first time a pope has made an official visit accompanied by members of other faiths, and it underscores the interfaith focus of Francis' trip to the Holy Land, the Vatican said Thursday.

"This dimension of interreligious dialogue has great significance," the Vatican's official spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, told the media.

Skorka, rector of the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary, and Abboud, president of the Institute for Interreligious Dialogue in Buenos Aires, are part of the official delegation for the May 24-26 trip, which will include Jordan, the West Bank and Israel. Both men are longtime friends and collaborators from Francis' days as archbishop of Buenos Aires.

Lombardi outlined details of the pontiff's trip, which will include celebrating Mass with 1,400 children at a stadium in Amman and meeting the children of Iraqi, Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

Pope Francis will follow in the footsteps of his immediate two predecessors, Pope John Paul II, who made the pilgrimage in 2000, and Pope Benedict XVI, who went in 2009.

During this visit the pope will meet the king and queen of Jordan, Israeli President Shimon Peres, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

Francis planned this visit to commemorate the 50th anniversary of a historic meeting between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras of the Orthodox church in 1964.

He will meet the current patriarch, Bartholomew I of Constantinople, spiritual leader of 250 million Orthodox Christians, on four different occasions during his stay.

Lombardi strongly condemned recent attacks by Jewish extremists on a church and the Notre Dame Center, a Vatican complex, in Jerusalem ahead of the pope's visit.

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