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Four goals of the papal visit to Holy Land

by Thomas Reese

Faith and Justice

Francis in the Holy Land

Pope Francis' three-day visit to the Holy Land beginning Saturday will be full of opportunities and challenges. On one level, like any pilgrim, he comes to pray in the Holy Land where Jesus walked and lived. But as leader of the Catholic community, he also has four goals that go beyond those of a typical pilgrim.

The first is ecumenical. During the visit, the pope will meet with Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the meeting in Jerusalem of their predecessors, Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I.

It is hard for us who now take ecumenism for granted to realize how historic was that 1964 meeting, which led to the lifting of the mutual excommunications that had stood in place for over 900 years. This scandalous division included hatred and bloodshed, and the wounds are still tender.

But the meeting between Francis and Bartholomew is not just about reconciliation and healing. Both leaders realize how all Christians need to join in common cause to respond to the needs of the poor and the environment and to work for peace.

The second goal of the pope's visit is interreligious. Traveling with the pope are Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Omar Abboud of the Islamic Center of the Argentine Republic. While archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis was friends with both men, even writing a book (*Of Heaven and Earth*) with Rabbi Skorka. Pope Francis hopes that his visit will advance the cause of interreligious dialogue and cooperation. Only when these three great faiths live and work in harmony will there be peace.

The third goal of the visit will be to bring support and encouragement to the Christians in the Middle East. The presence of Christians in the Middle East goes back to the time of the Apostles, but it is threatened by extremism and violence.

Coptic Christians live in fear in Egypt. Iraq was much safer for Christians before the U.S. invasion than it is now. At one time, Bethlehem was a Christian town; now it is two-thirds Muslim. Even Christians in Israel now fear Jewish extremists who have been defiling Christian sites.

As a result, Christians, especially the young, are fleeing the Middle East as fast as they can. The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Twal, fears that the Holy Land will become a "spiritual Disneyland," a tourist/pilgrim destination without a permanent Christian presence.

Pope Francis wants to bring a message of concern and hope to these Christians whose ancestors were among the earliest followers of Jesus.

Finally, the pope wants to do whatever he can to bring about peace in the Middle East, especially a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Diplomats have given up on the peace process. The pope understands that peace will come only when there is true conversion of hearts where both sides recognize in the other a brother and sister.

These are four huge, impossible goals. The pope has shown himself to be an extraordinary leader, but he is not a miracle worker. He can bring his message and witness to its power, but in reality, he can only set a tone and nudge the players in the right direction.

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The Middle East is such a minefield that for any other world leader, getting in and out without having a disaster would be considered success. That the pope constantly surprises us and leads us to hope, but experience warns us to be realistic.

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