A packed agenda for Pope Francis' Middle East visit

Stakes are high but much could be accomplished

Pope Francis leaves next Saturday for a brief but intense three-day outing to Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, and Israel, a region Christians traditionally call the “Holy Land.” He’ll become the fourth pope to make the trip, which is always a religious and political high-wire act.

Four challenges await him, beginning with the situation facing the region’s small Christian minority.

Across the Middle East, Christians have declined from 20 percent of the population in the early 20th century to roughly 4 percent, and that decline is palpable in the Holy Land. The city of Bethlehem in the Palestinian Territories, where Francis will say an open-air Mass on Sunday, was almost entirely Christian a century ago, but today it’s more than two-thirds Muslim.

The Catholic patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Twal, warns that the Holy Land, if the trend continues, could become a “spiritual Disneyland” — full of glittering attractions, but empty of flesh-and-blood believers.

Though Israel’s Christian population is actually inching up, things are hardly rosy. They’re reeling from a series of attacks by Jewish extremists, including graffiti left on Christian sites reading “Death to Arabs and Christians” and “Jesus is Garbage.”

Life is hardly a picnic on the Palestinian side either. In 2007, the only Christian bookstore in the Gaza Strip was firebombed and its owner murdered by Islamic radicals. In 2010, the lone Christian orphanage on the West Bank was closed under pressure from the Palestinian Authority.

In that context, Francis' trip represents a chance to urge believers to hold on, and to persuade them that the world's most important Christian leader has their back.

The second challenge of the visit is its ecumenical dimension, meaning the church's ongoing effort to foster unity within the divided Christian family. Nowhere are those divisions more apparent than the Holy Land, where virtually every form of Christianity has a toehold which it defends tenaciously.

For example, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which Francis will visit, is traditionally regarded as the burial site of Christ and one of the holiest spots on the Christian map. It's under the joint jurisdiction of Greek Orthodox, Armenians, and Catholics, and their relations are notoriously fractious. A brawl broke out among Greek and Armenian monks in 2008, with police having to pull the combatants apart as they traded kicks and punches.

Francis will meet the patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, regarded as the "first among equals" in the Orthodox world, and for the first time in the Holy Land the two leaders will preside together over a public prayer. The encounter recalls a famous 1964 meeting between Paul Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople, which led to lifting excommunications born of the feud between Eastern and Western Christianity and that date to 1054.

It remains to be seen whether the tête-à-tête between Francis and Bartholomew can overcome mutual suspicions centuries in the making.

Third is the inter-faith level of the journey, meaning relations between Christianity and the other two great monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam.

Pope Francis is setting the right tone, inviting both a Jew and a Muslim to be part of his official delegation. They're old friends: Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Buenos Aires, with whom the future pope coauthored a 2010 book, and Omar Abboud of the Islamic Center of the Argentine Republic. A Vatican spokesman defined the choice to include leaders of other faiths in the papal party as an "absolute novelty."

In terms of inter-faith relations, Francis may carry less baggage than any pope who has ever visited the Holy Land.

As a non-European, Francis isn't associated by most Jews with anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, while most Muslims don't tie him to the Crusades or the "clash of civilizations." They know the pope's record of outreach in Argentina, including having a private Christmas dinner every year with the director of the Latin American Jewish Congress, visiting a mosque and an Arabic school, and inviting Jewish and Muslim leaders to join him for celebrations of Argentina's Independence Day.

As popes have done in the past, Francis will visit the Dome of the Rock to meet Muslim leaders, and will pray at the Western Wall followed by a session with the chief rabbis of Israel.

Francis is not expected to deliver a breathtaking new vision for inter-faith relations, though Skorka made an interesting point in a recent lecture in Rome about the pope's approach. When Europeans set the agenda, Skorka said, talk is usually about the burdens of the past. With Francis, the focus is on what religions can do together right now, especially for the poor.

Fourth and finally, there's the political subtext.

For decades, the Vatican's diplomatic line on the Middle East has favored a two-state solution with security guarantees for Israel, sovereignty for the Palestinians, and a special status for Jerusalem and holy sites. The question is not whether the new pontiff will uphold that position (he will), and certainly not whether he'll be energetic about promoting peace. It couldn't be otherwise for the first pope named Francis.

The drama is instead whether this popular pope can spend some of his political capital to shame each side into making concessions that will at least allow them to resume talking.

By themselves, papal trips rarely change the world. If Francis accomplishes even a fraction of his ambitious agenda, however, this one could go down as among the most memorable chapters of his

papacy.

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