

For the first time, the Holy Land will witness a fearless pope

Unlike his predecessors, Pope Francis won't hide his sympathies for the Palestinians on his Middle East visit this weekend

Paul Vallely, *The Guardian*, 23 May 2014



Workers at a stadium in Amman, Jordan, prepare for the visit of Pope Francis on 24 May. Photograph: Muhammad Hamed/Reuters

Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, had better brace himself: Pope Francis arrives in the Middle East on Saturday. The pontiff's words, of course, will be of the need to improve relations between Christians, Jews and Muslims. But the **visit's semiotics will send out an altogether tougher message.**

When the previous two popes went on pilgrimage to the region, they **went first to Jordan, then to Israel, and then to the Occupied Territories. Francis has altered the order.** He arrives in Jordan tomorrow but is insisting on then crossing into the occupied territories before visiting Israel. Francis, a man known for the potency of his symbolism and gestures, is making a point.

You see that point more clearly if you look at the official itinerary issued by the Vatican. The **first thing the pope will do when he enters the Israeli-occupied West Bank is to call on "the president of the state of Palestine"**. The wording is significant: **Francis is announcing that he is visiting an entity that Israel, like the United States, insists does not exist.**

Pope Francis arrives at a time when **peace talks have broken down and the Palestinian leadership has been taking unilateral steps in the international arena.** Most significantly, a pact was signed a month ago between **Fatah and Hamas to repair the rift** between the rival factions. There is talk of a Palestinian unity government being formed within weeks. Many in the Vatican see the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation as having been **carefully timed to come to fruition just as the pope visits.**

Previous popes have trodden gingerly in the Holy Land. But **Francis seems determined to back up the Vatican's agreement with the UN declaration in 2012 that Palestine is a member state.** He will be based in the residence of the papal nuncio in annexed East Jerusalem; and, though he will venture into Israel to pay his respects at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial and visit Israel's president and two chief rabbis, he will meet Netanyahu at the Vatican-owned Notre Dame complex that lies "on the seam line" between East and West Jerusalem.

The nearest Pope Benedict got to politics on his trip in 2009 was to describe the 26ft-high Israeli security wall, which cuts through the West Bank like a concrete scar, as one of the "saddest sights" of his visit. But **Francis, known for his off-the-cuff remarks and vivid turns of phrase, could well say something explosive** when, after saying mass at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, he has lunch with Palestinian children from the Aida and Dheisheh refugee camps.

The Vatican is publicly insisting that **the main point of the trip is to mend fences between Catholic and Orthodox Christianity.** The official theme – "So that they may be one" – is timed to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the meeting between a previous pope and the Orthodox patriarch, which lifted mutual decrees of excommunication that had split the churches in 1054, causing a thousand years of Great Schism.

Francis has other concerns. Christianity is in rapid decline throughout the Middle East. A century ago 20% of the population were Christians; today just 4%. Things have got much worse in the last decade with the invasion of Iraq, the Arab spring, and civil war in Syria.

Attacks on Christians are happening in Israel too, with firebombings and murders by Muslims and Jewish extremists spraying "Death to Arabs and Christians" and "Jesus is garbage" graffiti on Christian sites. **In Bethlehem the Christian population has plummeted from about 60% in 1990 to 15%.** Catholic leaders fear that, if the trend continues, the Holy Land will become a spiritual Disneyland, full of tourist pilgrim attractions but devoid of local believers.

But it will be **Francis's stance on the Israeli-Palestinian issue that could have the greatest political ramifications. For decades the Vatican has favoured a two-state solution** featuring security guarantees for Israel, sovereignty for the Palestinians, and a special status for Jerusalem and holy sites.

Inside Israel there has been increasing frustration, from some Israelis and even a few Palestinians, over whether agreement can ever be reached on two separate states. But the Palestinians must be given a proper state of their own – a single state would become a mere apartheid-style parody of democracy with two classes of citizen.

Pope Francis understands that. **To emphasise two-state inevitability he will lay a wreath on the grave of Theodor Herzl, the Hungarian founder of modern political Zionism.** He was told by a previous pope, when asking for help in establishing a Jewish state, that "the Jews have not recognised Our Lord, therefore we cannot recognise the Jewish people". The wreath will **lay to rest that institutional antisemitism.**

In all this the pope will be preaching **a powerful message about "co-existence without fear".** Francis is breaking precedent by **including a Jew and a Muslim in the official**

Vatican delegation: a rabbi and imam who worked with him on interfaith dialogue in Argentina will incarnate the call for "co-existence". And to emphasise his "without fear" line, the pope **has rejected the armoured car provided to previous popes and heads of state.**

Whether any of this will shame the intransigents into making concessions that might at least allow the resumption of peace talks is another matter. But it will not be for lack of clarity from the visitor from Rome.