

Simon Wiesenthal Center delegation “electrified” by meeting with Francis



Auschwitz concentration camp

The Pope’s personal warmth continues to amaze Jewish visitors

LISA PALMIERI-BILLIG, VATICAN INSIDER, 24 OCTOBER 2013

“Unbelievable, extraordinary, electrifying! I have never seen a Pope with such warmth” said Rabbi Marvin Hier immediately following a Papal Audience of 62 members and friends of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Thursday, October 24. “Pope Francis stayed around after his remarks. He wouldn’t leave. He sat in our midst and spoke privately to every single individual. This is his great strength: when he talks to an individual nothing else exists in the world.”

Rabbi Marvin Hier is Dean and founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Center (named after the Austrian Holocaust survivor who sought to bring as many Nazi war criminals to justice as possible) and its Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, now dedicated to combatting racism, intolerance, anti-Semitism and preserving the memory of the Shoah. Though mostly Jews, in the group there were also Christians and a Muslim, from Dubai -- Muhammed Alibar, owner of the world’s largest building.

While Pope Francis’ modest style is often described as modeled on the philosophy of Francis of Assisi, Rabbi Hier compared it to that of “Abraham, the founder of monotheism.”

“Your Holiness, like millions of others I was amazed to see that after being named Pope Francis, you personally went back to your hotel to check yourself out” said Hier in his address. According to Genesis (13:3), “V’yelech Lemasov”, said the Rabbi, Abraham too “ ‘went back to his same lodgings’ ... even though he had now become a world

leader. In order to emphasize to all that his was a mission based on kindness and good deeds, not on wealth and power.”

Pope Francis, expressed appreciation for the Center’s work. He recalled that “in the past weeks I had occasion to repeatedly stress “the Church’s condemnation of every form of anti-Semitism” adding that he now wanted to focus on the problem of intolerance . “Wherever a minority of any sort is persecuted and discriminated against because of its religious or ethnic convictions, the wellbeing of an entire society is endangered and we must all feel involved” he said. He pointed to the present persecutions of Christians in “various countries of the world.”

“Let us unite our forces to favor a culture of encounter, respect, understanding and reciprocal forgiveness” said Francis. For this, he continued, education is necessary which must be “not only the transmission of knowledge, but communication of living witness that presupposes a communion of life, a ‘covenant’ with the younger generations always open to truth. We must be able to communicate to them not only knowledge of the history of the Jewish-Catholic dialogue, its past difficulties and progress of the last decades but we must know how to convey passion for encounter and knowledge of the other, promoting active and responsible involvement amongst our youth.”

Rabbi Hier told Pope Francis, “Your Holiness, we know we have you as an ally in our struggles against anti-Semitism, and we want to reiterate to you that you have an ally in the Simon Wiesenthal Center in your struggle to secure the rights of religious minorities everywhere, especially endangered historic Christian communities in Egypt, Iraq and beyond.”

The rabbi made implicit reference to the danger of Iran’s nuclear ambitions when he referred to the positive and negative aspects of memory: “Zachor” – reaching out, and “Lo Tishkach”, interpreted as “do not forget to act when you are dealing with terrorists and rogue nations whose only purpose is to obfuscate and delay, until they acquire nuclear weapons and lead our world to Armageddon.”

He said he was “delighted” that Francis would visit Israel next year. “May your presence there help all those committed to a lasting Middle East peace, to finally recognize the existence of a Jewish state alongside her twenty-three Arab neighbors.!”

The Wiesenthal Center presented Pope Francis with a Menorah bearing an inscription from Psalms: “Righteousness and justice are your throne’s foundation.”