

The embrace: Pope Francis and his friends, Omar and Abraham

Rachael Kohn, 17 July 2015

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Image: Pope Francis walks with Rabbi Abraham Skorka (second on left) and Omar Abboud (right) after the pontiff prayed at the Wailing Wall on May 26, 2014 in Jerusalem, Israel. (Lior Mizrahi/Getty Images)

*When Pope Francis embraced Rabbi Abraham Skorka and Argentinean Muslim leader Omar Abboud in front of Jerusalem's Wailing Wall last year, it was an iconic scene. But as **Rachael Kohn** reports, the trio's relationship goes much deeper than a photo op.*

When Pope Francis, Omar Abboud and Abraham Skorka embraced in front of the Kotel, or Wailing Wall, in Jerusalem, it might have looked like the photo op of the decade, but for the three Argentinian friends it was an emotional turning point in a relationship with deep roots.

Both Abboud and Skorka are proud Argentineans, a Muslim politician and a rabbi and rector of the Seminario Rabbinico of Latin America, respectively. They both have stories to tell about their friendship with Pope Francis, whom they speak about with a sense of intimacy and love. They all met at Argentina's annual Te-Deum service at Buenos Aires' Metropolitan Cathedral, which is held on the Independence Days of May 25 and July 9.

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RABBI ABRAHAM SKORKA

'One opportunity he pulled my leg about football,' remembers Skorka. 'He's a fan of one team and I'm a fan of another team. Through this joke he closed this gap, put me very close to him, so we began walking and doing [things] together.'

The relationship between the cardinal and the rabbi would grow into a fruitful interfaith dialogue, and more than 30 conversations between the two men about matters of faith, ethics

and morality were recorded and shown on Catholic television, and later published as the bestselling 2010 book, *On Heaven and Earth*.

'Interfaith dialogue could be a subject of the intellect, merely an intellectual subject,' explains Skorka. 'Of course, intellect has a very important role in our dialogue. But our dialogue is based on a very deep feeling of affection and of love from one regarding the other.'

There is also a meeting of minds on theological matters, nowhere more obviously than on the big question of where God can be found in a secular age. Both Francis and Skorka originally trained as scientists, and they opt for a more existential approach to the question, preferring to speak about God as a subtle presence that is felt, a path to choose, a task we are given, rather than going down the dubious road of 'proving God's existence'.

'It's our answer,' says Skorka. 'It's an answer based on our own experiences. It's a different answer from the answers we can find in Middle Ages philosophy. It's an existential answer belonging to existential philosophy.'

OMAR ABOUD

The importance of the acts of faith is also something that Omar Abboud, the director of the Institute for Inter-religious Dialogue in Buenos Aires, believes needs more attention when it comes to interfaith relations. Francis, then Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio, was an early supporter—making the unprecedented step of praying at the wake of the Muslim community's beloved sheikh, Adel Made, himself a visionary leader.

Taking opportunities to foster co-existence is what matters most to Abboud, which is why he organised Argentina's first interfaith Middle East and Rome pilgrimage with 45 representatives from the Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities.

'We had gone to many congresses of inter-religious dialogue,' he says. 'And maybe we felt that too many people want to hear themselves talk, to talk about rhetoric. They love it! But in inter-religious dialogue I think we need more silence.'

Abboud takes his lead from the pope, who he says communicates things with simple gestures and images that would take a million words to express. And so it was that when Abboud arrived in Rome to visit Francis, he readily accepted the pope's invitation to be part of a special pilgrimage along with Skorka to Jerusalem, Jordan and the West Bank in 2014.

There were many high points for Abboud, who believes that Jerusalem is a very special city. Buildings made of stone, however, are not what make it special, he says.

'The mosque is of stone, the Wall of Buraq, or the Kotel, are stones, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is made of stones. But when the mosque lives in your heart, when the Kotel lives in your heart, when the church lives in your heart, it's different. It's a vision. It's human contact.'

When the three of them visited the wall and the pope inserted a prayer between the stones, as is customary Jewish practice, before spontaneously turning to his friends and embracing them, it was an unforgettable moment for Abboud.

'For me for this moment... my life is not the same after this. I live this like a believer. I believe I understand the vision of Abraham. Religion is a revelation for every day, and you

must discover. And discover is not only when you read a scholar. This vision is [discovered] when you read yourself from the inside.'

For Skorka, 'the hug', as he refers to it, was a demonstration of understanding and of peace in the Middle East. But there was another high point for Skorka on that trip, Francis' unprecedented act of laying a wreath of flowers on the tomb of Theodore Herzl, the founder of Zionism. No other pope had done that, and in acknowledging Herzl, Skorka felt Francis really understood the meaning of Israel for the Jewish people.

It could have been viewed as a political act but Skorka, who previously penned an extensive article in Vatican newspaper Osservatore Romano about the meaning of Zionism for Jews, knows differently.

'The difference between Bergoglio and the other Catholic leaders or leaders from other religions is that he is very open minded,' he says. 'This is the point. He listens, he analyses, he understands, and he tries to do the utmost and best that he can.'

Abboud puts it more succinctly: 'The pope is the spiritual authority of the modern world.'