Pope Francis Visits the Middle East

On May 26th Pope Francis concluded his 2 day trip to the Middle East. The Vatican has from the very beginning maintained that the trip was a “pilgrimage” while the Pontiff himself characterized the trip as “purely religious”.

Of course there is little doubt that the Pope travelled to one of the most tumultuous places on the planet in order to pray for peace in the Holy Land; that is his first responsibility. His visit to the Holy Land began unconventionally in Jordan, becoming the first head of the Vatican to travel to Palestine not via Israel - a fact which is symbolically significant, where he was greeted by King Abdullah II and then moving on to visit the place where Jesus Christ was baptized in the River Jordan. The Pope proceeded to fly by helicopter to the West Bank, occupied by Israel since 1967, where he visited Bethlehem and Jerusalem (again not directly, at first flying from Bethlehem to Tel Aviv).

It was at this point in the trip that it became clearly divided into two distinct parts, both of which appeared to be more politically motivated, despite the rather loud denials coming from the Vatican. One part seemed centered on establishing and improving the relationship between the various churches, and the second part focused on the relationship between the Vatican, Palestinians and Israelis. Both parts of the trip were filled with symbols and messages that were not always understood by those not affiliated with either faith.

The most moving moment of the visit was an ecumenical prayer in the square in front of the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem. This event in particular was attended by representatives and the heads of all 13 Christian churches having missions in the Holy Land. Another salient event occurred at the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem where Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople greeted one another. (The Patriarch of Ecumenical Patriarchate - first in the list of Eastern Christian churches, but recognized by the Pope as second). The moment in particular when they both kneeled at the Holy Sepulchre was applauded by the crowd of believers who at gathered to witness the event.

Friction between the two Churches dates all the way back to the fifth century and to the Fourth Council of Chalcedon (the final split between the Catholic and Orthodox branches of Christianity occurred in 1054) and have yet to be overcome. You will recall that before the advent of the patriarchate in Russia, the Ecumenical Patriarch was the head of the church for Christians in Russia. Therefore, joint prayers by the heads of two churches who had only previously met in 1964, along with signing a statement is regarded as a significant sign to the mood of the Vatican to conduct its affairs with the goal of overcoming the historic split of the two Christian Churches. It is clear however, the main objective of the journey was to emphasize the primacy of Rome and its leadership in the process of unification of the various branches of Christianity.

Rome of course can claim such a role even though its leadership has been challenged over the past century by the process of secularization in the West, as well by the numerous scandals involving its clergy (pedophilia and corruption in the Vatican), but in spite of all that, the Catholic Church still maintains the largest fellowship with 1.8
billion believers and a rich branch of Christianity.

To a certain extent, it appears that the Pope managed to make such a historical claim. And from his perspective, it was in actual fact this very joint prayer that laid the cornerstone in the historical process of uniting Christians under his auspices.

How quickly will this process evolve? That is difficult to say as the disagreements separating the two branches of Christianity runs deep and often in different directions. They are not only undisputed, but sometimes are political in nature, associated with the struggle for supremacy over the territories that are traditionally controlled by the various churches, as well as property they control. This process is increasingly exacerbated by the persecution of Christians in recent years, most notable in the Middle East.

Christians of all denominations in the region have been experiencing intense pressure, especially since 2011-2013 and the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring, from Sunni Muslim groups as well as from the Shi’a population (although historically to a much lesser extent) The vanguard of the extremist groups such as salafi, as well as jihadists and takfiris are active in persecuting Christians and destroying their shrines. In Syria it has become a daily occurrence where dozens of temples are looted and destroyed, including the historic village of Ma’loula where Jesus preached.

To no lesser extent Christians continue to suffer from oppression in the Palestinian occupied territories. The Pontiff himself was able to witness this in Bethlehem where a 10 meter high concrete wall surrounds it and separates it from the rest of Palestine. Appearing in a London based pan-Arab newspaper Al-Sharq al-Awsat (ASHARQ AL-AWSAT) “this wall reminds one of the Nazi era and of the wall that isolated the Warsaw ghetto... In any event Palestinians really wanted that Jorge Bergoglio (Pope Francis) made such associations.”

As a direct result of policies enacted by the different authorities controlling the territory of Palestine, Christians who were at one time, early in the twentieth century, the majority, are now after centuries of war and revolution, an absolute minority and leave the Middle East in ever increasing numbers. Very soon the region is at risk of being without any significant Christian population. And the threat is more than real. The Pope could not help noticing the proactive stance of Russia in protecting the Christian presence in the Middle East. He gave audience at the Vatican to the Russian President in November 2013 as well as to the head of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, Sergei Stepashin in February 2014. These meetings most certainly focused on the protection of Christians, especially as it relates to the Syrian and Israeli-Arab conflict. The very visit of the Pope to the Middle East can be seen as a symbolic gesture in support of the Christian population in the Holy Land. It is highly likely that it is to some extent an answer to Russia’s proactive stance in defense of Christians in the region. To this end, the Vatican has clearly lagged lately and the visit was used to symbolically close the gap, to seize the initiative from Moscow which has worked vigorously on this very issue in recent years. The Pope may try to use the fact that many Christians in the Middle East who believed recently in Russia, worry (perhaps incorrectly) that it may lose the momentum on this issue due to the ongoing crisis in the Ukraine.

On the other hand, we cannot exclude that the subject of protecting Christians and their historic presence in the Holy Land will serve as a “leaven” from which Christians hope for the bread of Christian unity and which will refract all Christians, Catholics, Orthodox, Armenians and all others who have not lost the faith in the Messiah.

Against this religious significant of the visit, the political component, the meeting of the Pope with the head of the State of Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, somehow took a backseat. Although it had its memorable moments highlighted by a silent prayer by the Pontiff before the aforementioned Israeli “security fence” and his call during prayers at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem to a negotiated settlement to the Palestinian- Israeli conflict on the basis of a two-state solution in the presence of the presidents of Israel and Palestine. He invited them both together to pray for peace. Both agreed and immediately confirmed their readiness to go to the “Catholic Mecca”. Abbas is scheduled to travel there on the 6th of June and it is confirmed by chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Oreykat (Saib Arikat). The Vatican’s website says that “prayer meeting” by the Pontiff together with the President of Palestine and Israel will be held on the 8th of June, “The day of the Descent of the Holy Spirit”.

The meetings in Jerusalem were more contested. In one debate with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Pontiff and the PM discussed language in which Jesus Christ preached. Netanyahu made the claim that as a Jew, Jesus would have spoken Hebrew, although it is well known that in the region at the time the spoken language was Aramaic, as well as Greek. The debate was more symbolic than anything else, but it was clearly about “who was more rooted” in the Holy Land. Obviously controversial was the visit of the Pope to the Cenacle where the pontiff
prayed. After all it is considered sacred and for some Jews and the tomb of King David, revered by Muslims as a prophet Daud. The situation was smoothed over with the Pontiff’s arrival in Jerusalem, as written in France’s Le Monde, he was accompanied by his old friend, the Argentine rabbi Abraham Skorki and occupying him was a Muslim intellectual Omar Abboud.

In its entirety, the Pope’s visit showed that the Catholic Church has not lost its leadership ambitions in the Christian world and intends to actively engage them, including developing an ecumenical, multi-religious and international dialogue. As was said by the Catholic (Latin) Patriarch of Jerusalem Fouad Twal, in an interview with Radio Vatican on the Pope’s visit to the Holy Land: “We certainly have not yet finished, and we are now only just beginning to plant the seeds... We need to stand with both feet on the ground because we are still divided. Yet there is mutual respect among us, there is cooperation, there is a prayer for unity and church fellowship.” On the 16th of June the Pope and the head of the Anglican Church are already scheduled to meet. The Vatican picks up speed.

There is a chance that, despite some competition between the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church, Catholics explicit claim to its “birthright”, Moscow and the Catholic world will be able to still find some common ground. After so many points of contact: the protection of traditional values, (new conservatism of the Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin) the preservation of the Christian presence in the Holy Land, actively promoting Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation, the mood on the harmonization of relations between different religions, it appears that while the path to understanding is not without its challenges, there does seem to be a basis for joint action.

Maxim Egorov, a political commentator on the Middle East and contributes regularly for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”. 