

International Interreligious Affairs , May highlights

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The visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Israel was more than a monthly highlight and had, I believe, lasting significance and import . I was heavily involved in both preparations and the visit itself. In addition to some fifty interviews to print and electronic media; and in addition to being part of the audience at the events at Bet HaNassi (President Peres' residence) and Notre Dame; as the Chief Rabbinate of Israel's honorary interfaith advisor, I had a special role at the meetings at Hechal Shlomo with the Chief Rabbis and the Chief Rabbinate Council; and at the interfaith event in Nazareth, I was the official Jewish speaker.

The visit was viewed by Israel's state, political and religious leadership as well as by the Pope himself as having been a great success, even if the media reports did not always present it as such.

In addition this visit actually gave even greater significance to the visit of Pope John Paul II in the year 2000. As historic as that groundbreaking pilgrimage to Israel of Pope John Paul II was; one could have viewed it as a one time event, peculiar to that pope and his own unique personal history. The fact that his successor followed in his footsteps and in certain respects - for example, in his interfaith focus – even went beyond John Paul II; demonstrated that the latter's visit was not idiosyncratic.

In fact one may say that John Paul II's example of the Catholic Church's new respect for Jewish tradition, history and the self-definition of the Jewish people as reflected in the State of Israel, was confirmed and perhaps in a way even institutionalized, by his successor, Pope Benedict XVI.

Even before the Pope left Israel, I traveled to Jordan to participate in the World Economic Forum's annual Middle East summit. There I featured on two panels – one on "religious literacy" and the other on "promoting values in a post-economic crisis world".

From Jordan I went on to Istanbul for my last meeting with the Orthodox Patriarchate in my capacity as chairman on IJCIC. This was a planning meeting for the next bilateral consultation, postponed until next November. That conference will also explore ethics in the two traditions in relation to the economic meltdown and is entitled "The moral challenge for religious teaching in the wake of the crisis."