

Pope Francis picks Ground Zero for interfaith healing

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(RNS) Much of Catholic America is excited about Pope Francis' first visit to the United States—and so are many American Muslims.

Francis' visit, said Sayyid M. Syeed, an imam who works with the Islamic Society of North America, "is even more important for Muslims than it is for Catholics."

How so?

A pope 1,000 years ago exhorted Christians to launch the First Crusade against Muslims, Syeed explained. Now, he continued, there is a pope who wants to destroy hatred the world over, a pope who named himself for a 13th-century saint who counseled Christians to cease their violence against Muslims.

"This pope," the imam said, "is our pope."

On September 25 Francis will meet with relatives of those who died in the 9/11 terrorist attacks at an interfaith service at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum. Inside, with representatives from a spectrum of religions, he will take part in an interfaith service.

The setting of the ceremony invokes multiple tragedies for many Muslim Americans: the horrific act committed against their country, but also the wave of Islamophobia that began to roll across the nation even before the dust from the demolished towers had settled.

"Through the prism of this regretful, treacherous, indefensible and barbaric act," said Abdullah Antepli, an imam, "Islam as a religion and Muslims as a people entered many people's consciousness for the first time."

But Ground Zero is a fitting place for the pope to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Muslims, continued Antepi, because he so obviously loves them.

A striking picture of Francis, taken shortly after his elevation to pope in 2013, showed him washing the feet of an imprisoned Muslim woman—an interfaith twist on a Holy Thursday tradition.

“I am a very faithful Muslim; I love my religion,” Antepi said. “But for the first time I see a faith figure from a religion other than my own, and I am filled with holy envy, for how much I admire and respect him.”

These sorts of reactions to Francis from non-Catholics do not surprise papal biographer Austen Ivereigh, who explains that the pope has little interest in conventional interfaith dialogue.

“He’s convinced that theologically, God is made present by what he calls the ‘culture of encounter,’” Ivereigh said. “It’s the way you build a relationship of deep trust with another person. You’re not trying to convert them. It is genuinely a relationship of trust.

“Then God will use that, it becomes a vehicle . . . You create space for the Holy Spirit to act. And in his conviction is that it is the Holy Spirit that unites people, whether they are of the same faith or not.”

Many Jewish people felt that way about Francis long before he became pope.

In his native Argentina, as archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis stood close by the Jewish people of that city. He was the first public figure to sign a petition calling for justice in the 1992 and 1994 bombings of the Israeli Embassy and a Jewish community center, which killed 116 and injured hundreds.

He forged a tight friendship with Argentine rabbi Abraham Skorka—the two co-authored a book and co-hosted a television program—and now the rabbi frequently visits his friend at the Vatican.

And though Skorka is Francis’ most famous rabbi friend, Ivereigh said, there are many others with whom he has shared Christmas Eve, making sure the wine was kosher.

Another rabbi, Elliot Cosgrove of New York's Park Avenue Synagogue, will stand near the pope during the 9/11 museum service, part of a small interfaith group leading the service. More rabbis, imams, priests, and representatives of other faiths will make up an audience of about 700.

The scene, said Cosgrove, will "send a powerful message that people of faith can join together in dialogue and fellowship and that religion can be an instrument of peace."

Never was there any doubt that a rabbi would share that stage with Francis.

Yet even Sikhs — a religious group little known in the U.S.—are surprised that not one but two Sikhs will also be among the few on stage with the pope during the service, said Satpal Singh, a pharmacology professor and human rights activist from Buffalo, New York.

Singh plans to offer a Sikh prayer during the service with his daughter, physician Gunisha Kaur—he in Punjabi, she in English.

Most of the world's 20 million Sikhs live in India, where Sikhism was founded 500 years ago on tenets of peace and equality, and where Sikhs have been persecuted as a religious minority. But they have also suffered—especially after 9/11—in the U.S., where they number in the hundreds of thousands. Many Sikh men wear turbans and have been mistaken for Muslims. In 2012, a gunman killed six worshippers at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

Singh, nearly killed during anti-Sikh riots in India in 1984, immigrated to the U.S.

His daughter, an anesthesiologist who leads a global health initiative at New York's Cornell Weill Medical College, was sitting in physics class at her Buffalo, New York, high school when she heard about the planes flown into the World Trade Center. Then, said Kaur, Ground Zero was a place where religion hurt and divided.

On September 25, she continued, the same land will take on new meaning, as people from different religions embrace a belief Pope Francis has so heartily proclaimed, "the power of faith to battle hate."