

# Nod to unbelievers part of pope's style

by [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#) in the [January 22, 2014](#) issue

When Pope Francis left his script Christmas morning to ad-lib an invitation to atheists to join the prayerful in “desiring peace,” it may have been the first time an *Urbi et Orbi* Christmas address—an annual message “to the city and the world”—mentioned unbelievers.

The improvised remark was a surprise to many in the media, but not to veteran pope watchers who have heard Francis reach out to atheists before. Historian and *Catholic Almanac* editor Matthew Bunson noted several examples:

- Shortly after Francis’s inaugural mass in March, meeting with representatives of Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders, he referred to those who belong to no religious tradition as “precious allies” in defending the dignity of man, working for peace and protecting creation.
- In a homily in May, he said Jesus redeemed “all of us, not just Catholics . . . even the atheists. Everyone! . . . We must meet one another doing good.” Theologically, this was a meeting on earth, not in heaven. Redemption is not the same as salvation in Catholic teaching. But meeting with anyone willing to work for the common good is a frequent Francis theme.
- In September, the pope invited himself to a conversation with Eugenio Scalfari, an atheist and well-known editor of the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*. Since there was no recording of the interview, the transcript is in question, but there’s no doubt he felt at home discussing theology with an unbeliever.

“The only thing that would surprise us about Pope Francis is if he didn’t surprise us,” said James Martin, culture editor of *America* magazine.

“He realizes that atheists and agnostics are people of good intentions and good morals with whom we want to work closely,” said Martin. “Jesus came into a world filled with believers and unbelievers and the pope lives in that same world.” —RNS

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