

Holy Land Christians hope Pope Francis' visit might revive peace talks

by [Evan Simko-Bednarski](#) and [Harry Stevens](#)

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BETHLEHEM, West Bank (RNS) With the last round of peace talks between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority stalled if not moribund, some are hoping that a scheduled visit by Pope Francis to the Holy Land in May will breathe new life into the peace process.

Vera Baboun, the first female mayor of this embattled city where Jesus was born, is one.

The peace process, she said, has been hampered by a lack of courageous leadership. "How many courageous hearts do we have in the world? Francis is a courageous heart."

Baboun, 50, is Roman Catholic in a city where most Christians are Orthodox and the Christian population as a whole has dropped to 15 percent from a high of 85 percent in 1947.

Bethlehem is within Israel's occupied territories. But though it lies just five miles north of Jerusalem, a 26-foot-high concrete wall separates the two cities, tracing fault lines of religion, politics and history. Travel between Israel and the territories is highly restricted.

"It's time to topple it down," Baboun said. "And I hope that not only Francis will be the one to say it, but as well, around him, people who are listening and responding."

Not all Palestinian Catholics are as sanguine as Baboun about the promise of Francis' visit.

North of Bethlehem, in Ramallah, the political capital of the Palestinian Authority, Xavier Abu Eid said a statement from the pope in support of Palestinians would

mean little.

“I don’t think we need statements here,” said Abu Eid, a Palestinian Catholic who was in charge of communications for the Palestinian negotiating team during the peace talks. “We need action. I think the church is capable of doing a lot more than it is now.”

Abu Eid decried the Israeli government’s refusal to allow him to travel the 12 miles from Ramallah, where he works, to Jerusalem to pray at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. He doubted whether the pope would take a stand on such an issue.

The Vatican has downplayed whatever political symbolism might be seen in Francis’ visit to the Holy Land.

“The Holy Father is coming to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the meeting of Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras,” said Monsignor Giuseppe Lazzarotto, the papal nuncio to Israel. “That is the main purpose of the visit and everything will be focused around this event.”

To mark the anniversary, Francis will travel to Jerusalem to meet with Patriarch Bartholomew I, head of the Eastern Orthodox Church, on May 26. The trip marks the historic 1964 meeting in Jerusalem between their two predecessors, in which the leaders lifted a mutual excommunication that had been in place for a millennium.

The excommunication of 1054 split the Catholic Church into East and West and came, gruesomely, to a head when Roman Catholic crusaders sacked Constantinople in 1204. So pivotal was the event in the annals of Christianity that in the centuries that followed it came to be known as the Great Schism.

But the meeting with Bartholomew I is just a portion of the pope’s three-day itinerary, which also includes a day in Jordan and one in Bethlehem. After saying Mass at the Church of the Nativity, where Christians believe Jesus was born, Francis is scheduled to eat lunch with Palestinian families and greet children at the Deheishe refugee camp.

Baboun remembers Pope John Paul II’s meeting with refugees when he came to Bethlehem in 2000. She said the visit brought hope to Palestinians, Christian and Muslim alike.

“John Paul II made it clear, why are we masters at building walls?” she asked. “Let us build bridges.”

Francis will stay at the Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center, a Vatican-owned hotel in the Old City where, come May 24, all 140 rooms will be reserved for the papal entourage.

From the rooftop of the hotel, the Rev. Eamon Kelly, vice chargé of the hotel, gestured toward the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where Jesus is said to have died on the cross. Today, the church is controlled by six separate Christian denominations whose relationship is so fraught with mutual suspicion that a local Muslim family holds the key to the front door. It is often the butt of jokes about divisions within Christianity. Kelly feels differently.

“For me, the Holy Sepulchre is a model of peace,” he said. “The Old City is a model of peace. It’s live and let live.”

Kelly quipped that his role during the pope’s visit would be to “get out of the way while the Israelis put up their security barriers.”

Kelly brushed aside security concerns surrounding the papal visit.

“Pope Francis is not interested in niceties,” he said. “Pope Francis is interested in looking people in the eye.”

*Columbia University students Evan Simko-Bednarski and Harry Stevens traveled to Israel and the occupied territories as part of a grant from the Scripps Howard Foundation.*