

# At New York synagogue, pope encourages 'bridges of friendship'

NEW YORK – In a brief, movingly simple visit to a New York synagogue, Pope Benedict XVI expressed his respect for the city's Jewish community and encouraged the building of "bridges of friendship" between religions.

The encounter April 18 marked the first time a pope has visited a Jewish place of worship in the United States, and it came a day before the start of the Jewish Passover.

The pope said he felt especially close to Jews as they "prepare to celebrate the great deeds of the Almighty and to sing the praises of him who has worked such wonders for his people."

He was welcomed at the Park East Synagogue by Rabbi Arthur Schneier, 78, an Austrian-born Holocaust survivor, who called his visit historic and "a reaffirmation of your outreach, good will and commitment to enhancing Jewish-Catholic relations."

The rabbi also used the opportunity to wish the pope "mazel tov," or best wishes on his 81st birthday two days earlier.

A choir from the Park East Day School performed during the meeting, which was kept brief because the Jewish Sabbath observance was set to begin at sunset. The children sang three songs in Hebrew, including the "Shema Yisrael," the opening words of Jewish morning and evening prayer, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God. The Lord is one."

The pope addressed the delegation of synagogue and Jewish representatives as "dear friends" and began his short talk with the Hebrew word for peace, "Shalom."

He alluded to Christianity's Jewish roots when he said, "I find it moving to recall that Jesus, as a young boy, heard the words of Scripture and prayed in a place such as this."

The pope said he appreciated the contributions the Jewish community makes to the life of New York.

"I encourage all of you to continue building bridges of friendship with all the many different ethnic and religious groups present in your neighborhood," he said.

The Park East Synagogue is located a few blocks from the Vatican's nunciature, where the pope was staying. The visit was a late addition to the program of his six-day visit to Washington and New York.

It was only the third time a modern pope has visited a Jewish place of worship. Pope John Paul II made history when he visited Rome's synagogue in 1986, and Pope Benedict visited a synagogue in Cologne, Germany, in 2005.

Pope Benedict has made it clear that the church's relationship with Jews is special and important. He has visited the Auschwitz death camp, suspended the sainthood cause of a priest suspected of anti-Semitism and expressed full support for the new relationship with Judaism launched by the Second Vatican Council.

But he has encountered some Catholic-Jewish tensions during his three years as pope, most recently on the issue of conversion.

In February, the pope took the unusual step of personally rewriting a Good Friday prayer in a traditional 1962 missal. But although he removed the offensive language, the revised text's reference to the salvation of the Jews left many fearing it called for their conversion.

Rabbi Schneier, as head of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, has dedicated much of his life to promoting religious tolerance. The foundation has worked for interreligious dialogue, stating that "a crime committed in the name of religion is the greatest crime against religion."

Welcoming the pope, he said, "At a time when religion is misused and abused by some, we must intensify together our commitment to repairing our fractured world.

"Our presence together is a message that interreligious dialogue is viable and vital to the resolution of conflict. Your message of conciliation has already been heard

around the globe,” the rabbi said. “It is a message of hope for interreligious dialogue as an instrument of cooperation in the pursuit of peace, freedom, human rights and security.”

The congregation in the synagogue was not limited to members of the Park East community, but included prominent Jewish leaders, including the president of the World Jewish Congress, Ronald S. Lauder, and the former president of the World Bank, James D. Wolfensohn.

Before leaving, the pope gave the Jewish community a gift: a copy of a page taken from an illuminated 15th-century manuscript from the Vatican Library. The work of a Hebrew scribe who lived in Italy, the page depicts the scene of a traditional Jewish wedding.

The Park East Synagogue’s gifts to Pope Benedict included a bouquet of flowers and a large seder plate, which the rabbi said illustrated the journey “from slavery to freedom.”