

Pope's visit to synagogue 'clear message' of good will, rabbi says

NEW YORK – Pope Benedict XVI's April 18 visit to a synagogue during the New York leg of his U.S. visit is a "clear message of good will to the Jewish community," said the rabbi hosting the pope.

Rabbi Arthur Schneier, senior rabbi of Park East Synagogue, said his own commitment to interreligious dialogue prompted him to invite the pope to visit his house of worship. He extended the invitation while visiting the Vatican in March.

"I have worked for 46 years for religious freedom, human rights and interreligious dialogue from my pulpit," he said in an interview with Catholic News Service in the days leading up to the papal visit.

"Our synagogue has been the scene of interreligious dialogue on many occasions," he said. It has hosted Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow, Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and the chief rabbi of Israel.

Rabbi Schneier also is founder and president of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, which he said "concerns itself with the situations involving oppressed Catholics, Jews and people of other religions."

On his way to an ecumenical prayer service at St. Joseph's Church in the Yorkville section of Manhattan, Pope Benedict was to make a 20-minute visit to the Park East Synagogue. The synagogue is near where the pope is residing at the residence of the Vatican's U.N. nuncio.

On his last day in Washington, after meeting with 200 interreligious leaders, the pope met briefly with Jewish leaders.

The two meetings with Jews were announced April 3 as additions to his April 15-20 U.S. itinerary so the pope could extend "cordial greetings for the imminent feast of Passover," which begins April 19.

Though it may have seemed as if the inclusion of the stop at the synagogue was last minute, the truth is it wasn't, according to the rabbi.

"We've actually had discussions for several months before the trip but the plans were simply not mentioned until very late in the planning process," he explained.

Rabbi Schneier said he personally extended his congregation's invitation when he was last at the Vatican and met with the secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, in March.

He noted that he first met Pope John Paul II before he was elected pope and was archbishop of Krakow, Poland. The rabbi also was close friend to the late Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, secretary of state from 1979 until his retirement in 1990.

"And I stood with Pope John Paul II in Assisi," the rabbi said, referring to the Interreligious Prayer Meeting for Peace in Assisi, Italy, first convened by Pope John Paul in 1986.

"Despite the centuries that separated us, we will travel together in our respective communities for the benefit of all mankind," the rabbi said.

"It's important to show this solidarity when religion is being criticized as causing conflict," he said. "This is clearly not the case. Violence is perpetrated by those who abuse and misuse religion. ... We have to bear the responsibility to change this."

He said the pontiff's presence in his synagogue will have a positive effect, drawing the Catholic Church and the worldwide Jewish community "closer together."

"By showing this progress to the world, it will send a message to other faith communities which will heal a very fractured world," he said.

Interreligious dialogue is integral to Rabbi Schneier's spirituality.

"I'm a Holocaust survivor and have witnessed true human tragedy," he said.

"I've seen the consequences of the man's inhumanity to man, and therefore having survived, I have devoted my life to reaching out, to broadening the alliance between believers and developing tolerance and mutual respect between the world's

religions,” the rabbi said.

Born in Vienna, Austria, Rabbi Schneier was relocated to a ghetto in Budapest, Hungary, in 1938. He escaped the Holocaust and later emigrated to the United States in 1947 and has led the Park East Synagogue congregation since 1962.

He believes the three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Catholicism and Islam – and indeed all religions must become messengers and protectors of peace, tolerance and mutual respect.

“Pope Benedict’s visit here is a reaffirmation of his commitment to interreligious dialogue and, particularly, outreach to the Jewish community,” said Rabbi Schneier.

In 2001 Rabbi Schneier was awarded the Presidential Citizens Medal by the President Bill Clinton “for exemplary deeds of service to the nation.” He was the first rabbi to receive the honor.