

## Pope Francis as a Maker and Mover of World History – Cummins Institute

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Professor Hisham Ahmed, Professor in the Politics Department and Chair of the Academic Senate of Saint Mary's College, offers a reflection on the present pontiff following Pope Francis' Urbi et Orbi speech on Christmas Day.

([http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151225\\_urbi-et-orbi-natale.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20151225_urbi-et-orbi-natale.html))



### Pope Francis as a Maker and Mover of World History

by

Professor Hisham Ahmed

Few are the leaders whom historians will recognize as makers and movers of world history.

Undoubtedly the kind of leadership His Holiness Pope Francis has been exhibiting on the world stage makes him one of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century's more renowned statesmen, in addition to being the leader of the Roman Catholic world.

Grounded in pragmatism and with an astute knowledge of world affairs, the most central theme in all his speeches has been the compelling need to achieve peace in troubled regions and

between warring groups and peoples. The Pope's "Urbi Et Orbi" Christmas message is but one example of having a worldly vision for mercy and reconciliation between all peoples, especially those who are in conflict, like Palestinians and Israelis.

Another historic speech by Pope Francis is the one he delivered last year at the UN General Assembly: more than any other world leader, Pope Francis championed the question of justice and human rights. In the most emphatic terms, he reminded world leaders of the need to fight against poverty, disease, discrimination and war everywhere and for all. Brilliantly and skillfully he addressed questions of troubled North-South relations more than anybody else has done at this UN annual meeting. Unquestionably, the Pope stood out as an effective statesman with a most respectable international vision.

Notwithstanding the invocation of the symbolism of the birth and life of Jesus as the embodiment of peace in the land of peace, Pope Francis has effectively and practically lent his role and stature to the arduous process of achieving peace in a number of troubled situations. Almost immediately upon assuming the office of the Papacy, Pope Francis visited the Holy Land and tirelessly tried to get Palestinians and Israelis to work out their differences. While in the Holy Land, following in the footsteps of Pope Saint John Paul II, Pope Francis made history as he visited a Palestinian refugee camp near Bethlehem, Deheisheh, which happens to be the camp where I was born, and prayed for peace in the troubled Holy Land. He made an historic move as he, at one point, unexpectedly stopped his motorcade and got out of his car alone and walked towards the Israeli-built wall of separation and annexation and solemnly prayed for its removal.



Pope Francis waving for the people after the mass in Bethlehem

In addition to meeting with leaders on both sides during his visit, Pope Francis also invited the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to visit the Vatican and pray for and work towards peace.

In so doing, Pope Francis complemented the historic work of Pope Saint John Paul II, who visited the Holy Land and the Deheisheh refugee camp in 1996. Personally, I was deeply touched as I was honored to write the welcoming speech for Pope Saint John Paul II as he visited the camp where I was born. Also on a personal note, it was one of the most memorable moments in my life to shake hands with the most modest and yet most powerful Pope. In spite of his ailing health, Pope Saint John Paul II insisted on making a tour through the narrow alleys of Deheisheh to get a first glance at the extent of human suffering and injustice there. He will also be remembered for his unwavering charisma: as he was delivering a message to the world around noon one day from the square in front of the Nativity Church in Bethlehem, he stopped talking for a few minutes until the call for prayer was finished in the mosque which is located exactly across the way from the Nativity Church in the same square.

For Pope Francis, however, the most significant achievement historians will continue to write about is related to the leading diplomatic role he played in bridging gaps between Cuba and the United States and in building bridges of dialogue and communications between these two neighbors who have been at odds for more than a half-century. Pope Francis is credited for having both countries normalize relations after they have been in a state of conflict, hostility and tensions. Today's generation might take for granted the resumption of diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba. However, one would more appropriately appreciate the importance of this move by Pope Francis when remembering that both countries were on the verge of nuclear catastrophe at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

Indeed, as I had the distinct honor to meet Pope Saint John Paul II in person in 1996, may my dream of meeting Pope Francis in person come true in 2016.

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Photo credits:

Portrait of Pope Francis by Brother Patrick Martin, F.S.C.

Mustafa Bader, *Pope Francis waving for the people after mass in Bethlehem*, Wikimedia Commons