

Dear Friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

As you already know, last month I returned from a week-long trip to Rome, where I attended at the Vatican, the conference: *Human: Meanings and Challenges*, organized by the Pontifical Academy for Life. The conference was meaningful and dealt especially with the intersection between artificial intelligence (AI) and ethics. The conference was attended by about 150 top academics from the entire world, and our small group of about 15 participants (among them 7 rabbis and 8 lay people). At the last minute, our small group was invited to join the main participants of the conference at a meeting with Pope Francis, through the diligence and connections of the leadership of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano in Buenos Aires.

To say that meeting the Pope and exchanging a few words with him in Spanish was a moving and meaningful experience, is an understatement. You could feel the excitement in the air, adding to the fact that the meeting took place in a palace-like room, decorated with centennial frescos and paintings. My own excitement made me ponder why was the experience so meaningful to me. I guess part of it was because we were face to face with the head of the Roman Catholic Church, the largest Christian church, with 1.4 billion Catholics worldwide. This fact has played a prominent role in the history and development of Western civilization. This is what I would call “meeting the celebrity.”

In addition, for someone born in Argentina, meeting the first Argentinian Pope holds an extra meaning. There is a sense of pride, added to the exchange of Argentinean Spanish greetings (I addressed the Pope in the formal 2nd person Spanish, but he talked to me in the more casual 2nd person). After introducing myself, the Pope asked me where I was living. I gave him a copy of my commentary to the Book of Esther in Spanish and a blessing, and while holding my hand, he asked me to pray for him. I only wish my parents were alive for me to tell them about the experience, although I believe they know, somehow.

Finally, recalling the centuries of Christian persecution and antisemitism, including the Inquisition, the crusades, and the blood libels, it made me appreciate the extraordinary fact of being welcomed and greeted by the Pope, both as rabbis and as Jews, with genuine interest, kindness, dignity, and respect. These are not easy times for Jews worldwide; and while the Vatican’s agenda is not exactly 100% aligned with the one of Israel and the Jewish people, we shouldn’t take these small tokens of dialogue and fruitful exchange for granted.

I am looking forward to seeing you soon and telling you more about this meaningful and unforgettable experience.

Wishing all of you a happy, kosher, and meaningful Pesach,

Rabbi Manes Kogan