

Pope Makes Surprise Stop To Bless Statue Of Catholic-Jewish Unity

Pope Francis made a [surprise stop](#) at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia on Sunday to bless a statue that celebrates the Vatican's ties with the Jewish community.

Dozens of students and faculty members crowded onto campus after hearing that Francis would be paying a visit to their school.

The pontiff spent a few moments in quiet contemplation in front of the statue, called "Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time," before splashing it with holy water.

The pope wanted to celebrate the 50th anniversary of [Nostra Aetate](#), a document promoting interfaith unity and dialogue, said Vatican spokesman Rev. Federico Lombardi. The 1965 statement took a strong stance against anti-Semitism and emphasized the spiritual bonds that tie Catholics and Jews together.

However, many medieval Catholic cathedrals still feature statues that demonstrate a broken relationship between the two faith communities. The Church, or Ecclesia, is [often represented](#) by a crowned female figure who is majestic and triumphant after conquering the Synagogue, or Synagoga, portrayed as another female figure, blindfolded and defeated.

In contrast, artist Joshua Koffman's statue illustrates a close relationship between Catholics and Jews. It shows the two figures sitting side by side, holding their holy scriptures and engaged in a conversation.

"This statue is exactly a demonstration of two sisters of the same dignity, the church and the synagogue," Lombardi said during a press conference before the pope's visit.

Pope Francis' [good friend Rabbi Abraham Skorka](#) also [greeted](#) the pope on the campus of the university. The Argentine rabbi met Francis before he became pope and the two [wrote a book together](#) in 2010 about their interfaith dialogue.

Saint Joseph's University is a fitting home for the piece. Soon after *Nostra Aetate* was

published, the Jesuit university [created](#) an Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations to deepen knowledge and understanding between the two faiths.

After visiting Saint Joseph's, Francis moved on to Philadelphia's Benjamin Franklin Parkway to celebrate Mass with an [expected](#) crowd of 1 million.

Follow [HuffPost's live blog of the papal visit](#):