

Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Abraham Skorka,  
*On Heaven and Earth: Pope Francis on Faith,  
Family, and the Church in the Twenty-First  
Century.* New York: Image, 2013.

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**T**his book is an English translation of the Spanish *Sobre el cielo y la tierra*, originally published in Argentina by Mondadori in 2010. It involves a conversation-style dialogue between the then Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, who is now Pope Francis, and Rabbi Abraham Skorka.

The book includes an introductory discussion of the meaning of dialogue and twenty-nine chapters covering a wide range of topics. Although Bergoglio and Skorka touch on a few topics related to Argentina's history, most of the topics are of universal interest including, among others: God, the devil, atheism, prayer,

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religious leaders and formation, fundamentalism, euthanasia, the elderly, women, abortion, divorce, same-sex marriage, science, education, politics and power, communism and capitalism, globalization, poverty, the Holocaust, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the future of religion. Bergoglio and Skorka always show a profound respect for each other and thus provide an excellent model of interreligious dialogue. Of interest is that while they never explicitly contradict what the other says, they both often add another perspective to what the other has said. They each share openly and frankly without compromising their identity, faith, and personal views.

Bergoglio and Skorka often explicitly express their agreement with something the other has said. Some values they hold in common are virtues such as humility and faith in God, having a personal relationship with God, profoundly respecting the great dignity of all people, and concretely responding to their real needs. Both are compassionate and sensitive men who appreciate the full range of human needs—physical, economic, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual.

Since most people outside Argentina never heard of Bergoglio before he became pope, this book can serve as an excellent way to become more familiar with some of his thinking on a wide range of important contemporary issues. It can also serve as an introduction to his partner in dialogue, a learned rabbi, who often shares insights and stories from the Jewish tradition including the Talmud. Both men are very learned: Bergoglio was trained as a chemical technician before earning a doctorate in theology. He was a professor not only of pastoral theology but also of literature and psychology. Skorka, besides receiving a doctorate from the Jewish Seminary of America, also has a doctorate in chemistry.

They are both very intelligent and have pastoral experience and real wisdom.

Let us consider here only a few examples of what they say in this book. “True dialogue,” according to Skorka, “demands that each person tries to get to know and understand the person with whom they are conversing. . . . In its most profound sense, to have a conversation is to bring one’s soul nearer to another’s in order to reveal and illuminate his or her core” (viii). Bergoglio notes some barriers to dialogue such as attitudes of “domination, not knowing how to listen . . . preconceived judgments . . . misinformation, gossip, prejudices, defamation, and slander” (xiv). He adds: “Dialogue is born from a respectful attitude toward the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say” (xiv). Their own “dialogue during quite a bit of time” has been “a rich experience that consolidated a friendship and that would give testimony of our walk together from our distinct religious identities” (xiv).

In Chapter 1, Skorka says he believes that God “caused our paths to cross and allowed us to open our hearts to each other.” Bergoglio speaks of one encountering “God walking, moving, seeking Him and allowing oneself to be sought by Him.” In Chapter 3, Bergoglio says he does not approach his relationship with an atheist “in order to proselytize, or convert the atheist; I respect him and I show myself as I am.” Skorka adds that, “I need to live the same humility that I demand of the atheist.”

In Chapter 12, concerning the elderly, Skorka says that in our present culture they “are treated as disposable material.” He emphasizes that they are not just things but “human beings who deserve our care.” We should try to understand how they often live in solitude. They need “love, affection and conversation.” Bergoglio

agrees that in our consumerist, hedonist, and narcissistic society one can get “accustomed to the idea that there are people that are disposable,” including the elderly. Concerning many who abandon those who fed and educated them, he says, “It hurts me; it makes me weep inside.” He speaks of the importance of realizing that each of us is only “one more link” in history that does not begin with us. We need to honor those who preceded us and “transmit the inheritance” to those who follow us.

In Chapter 23, both agree on the need to create a just society “where everyone can live with dignity.” Among other things, Skorka says: “Various parts of the Torah contain rules telling us that it is imperative to help the needy.” He speaks of the Jewish communities’ “history of providing assistance to both Jews and non-Jews.” Concerning the poor, Bergoglio refers to the parables of the Final Judgment and the Good Samaritan, as well as the Social Doctrine of the Church. Among other things, he says help for the poor should not be done simply to make ourselves feel good or mediated only through institutions. We must establish “personal contact with the needy,” looking them in the eye with profound respect. “The poor must not be perpetually marginalized.” We need to “help them earn a living . . . with dignity” and to be integrated “into our community as soon as possible.”

In Chapter 27, with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Skorka says, “Of course there has to be a Palestinian state” since “there are people who identify with the Palestinian nation. Whenever this does happen, it means that Israel will have found a genuine partner . . .” He asks, “Why not transform the Gaza Strip . . . into a place where its people can really live very well? What matters is the life of each individual,” whether Jew or Palestinian. With regard to conflicts and human relationships, Bergoglio wisely points out

that, “The mistake of the other person does not need to be emphasized too much because I have my own mistakes and both of us have failures. The harmony between people is made by searching for ways . . . to resolve animosities” (214). He notes that, “During Jesus’ life, his disciples created tension all the time. This means that in religious life conflict is to be anticipated. . . . The issue is how conflict can be resolved according to the Word of God. I believe that war must never be the path to resolution, because that would imply that one of the two poles of tension absorbed the other . . . The two poles of tension are resolved at a higher level . . . not in a synthesis, but in a new unity, in a new pole that maintains the virtues of both . . .” (217).

In this review, I have only touched on a few of the things Bergoglio and Skorka discuss in their very engaging and enlightening book. I highly recommend it for anyone interested in what they and their religions think about the real issues of today’s world.