

Pontiff, Golda Meir Confer on Mid-East

Vatican City (RNS) — Pope Paul held an unprecedented meeting here with Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir at which he made it clear that he would do all he could to help settle the tense situation in the Middle East.

But the leader of the Roman Catholic Church stressed to his visitor that the first step in the direction of a just peace must be to relieve the plight of the Palestine refugees.

Nor did the Pope offer any indication that the Holy See has changed its long-time demand that the Holy Places in Jerusalem be placed under a special internationally-guaranteed statute to protect the Holy Places of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

A statement issued by the Vatican after the more than hour-long meeting between the Pope and Mrs. Meir seemed to dampen pre-meeting speculation that the historic parley would launch a new Vatican-Israel relationship.

Many times since the Jewish state was established in 1948 the relationship has been, seriously strained.

The Vatican insisted on playing down any political significance of the meeting in the private papal chambers. It was the first meeting between the pontiff and Mrs. Meir and the first meeting Pope Paul has had with an Israel Premier at the Vatican.

After the meeting, the Vatican issued a terse statement in which it said the Pope and the Israeli leader discussed "the situation in the Middle East and in particular the problems concerning the Holy Land."

Federico Alessandrini, Vatican press spokesman, emphasized that, contrary to some interpretations of the meeting, it did not signify a "gesture of preference or exclusivity." "The audience was requested by Mrs. Golda Meir," the spokesman explained, "and it does not mean or imply the least change in the attitude of the Holy See concerning the problems of the Holy Land."

The visit of Mrs. Meir to the pontiff came as a surprise to the world. The plans for the meeting with the Pope were announced only shortly before Mrs. Meir left Paris for Rome on the evening of Jan. 14.

Speaking of the religious places in Jerusalem, Alessandrini said: "As to the defense and care of the religious interests, it is not necessary to recall that in this specific case one is dealing with the native and inalienable rights of three monotheistic religions, connected with the universal and pluralistic character of Jerusalem."

He also stressed that the Pope had met some time ago with Arab leaders, including King Hussein of Jordan.



The Vatican does not have diplomatic relations with Israel but it does exchange ambassadors with several Arab nations.

During his visit to the Holy Land more than three years ago

Pope Paul met in Jerusalem with Israel's president.

The visit of Mrs. Meir to Rome, during which she met with Italian officials, was surrounded with some of the tightest security measures on record here.

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A good many members of Arab terrorist groups are believed to be living in Rome. For this reason security designed to guard Mrs. Meir was at its tightest.



Vatican Statement Had Unusual Tone

Vatican City (RNS) — The statement issued by the Vatican at the close of the meeting of Pope Paul with Prime Minister Golda Meir, was of unusually blunt tone and deviated considerably from the normally "diplomatic" statements given on such occasions by the Holy See.

Some experts saw the Vatican statement as being "relatively cold."

However, others maintained that even though it was a straightforward statement, it was not "in the least insulting and would be respected by the Israelis as the kind of honest statement that had to be made."

Here is the text of the written statement issued by the Holy See on the meeting.

"This morning, Jan. 15, 1973, at 12:15 p.m., His Holiness Pope Paul VI received in audience Her Excellency Mrs. Golda Meir, Prime Minister of Israel, who was accompanied by the Israeli Ambassador to Italy, His Excellency, Mr. Amiel E. Najjar.

"The talk, which lasted more than an hour, dealt with the situation in the Middle East and the particular problems concerning the Holy Land.

"His Holiness, after recalling the history and sufferings of the Jewish people outlined the point of view of the Holy See on questions most closely connected with its humanitarian mission, which is the problem of the refugees and the situation of the various communities living in the Holy Land and on those questions connected with its more specifically religious mission as regards the Holy Places and the sacred and universal character of Jerusalem.

"The Prime Minister underlined Israel's desire for peace and illustrated at length the Israel position on chances of achieving a peaceful settlement of the Middle East conflict through negotiations between the parties and on the questions listed above, and also mentioned the phenomenon of terrorism as well as particular situations concerning Jewish communities in certain parts of the world.

"His Holiness, finally, in expressing his fervent prayers that justice and legality may be the basis for peace and co-existence among all the people of the Middle East, again voiced the Holy See's intention to do whatever is within its possibilities for achieving this goal."

Goodbye, Fred!

Vatican City (RNS) — The head of the Vatican press office strenuously declined to take any of the blame or responsibility for a statement he issued about the meeting of Pope Paul VI with Israeli Premier Golda Meir.

Federico Alessandrini told Vatican correspondents that what he had reported to the news media at a press conference on the papal audience was not of his own making.

The lay head of the Vatican's Office of Official News Dissemination was called upon by the press corps to explain why he had made remarks about the meeting that were taken as "insults" in certain Israeli and Jewish quarters.

"Anyone who knows how the Vatican works," Alessandrini said, "also knows I could hardly have thought up that statement myself."

He said he heads an office which merely serves to release statements, and instructions "from above."

The incident served, according to some newsmen, to undermine the credibility of Mr. Alessandrini in the eyes of the news media since it is to him reporters must run for spot comment on top level, fast-breaking Catholic Church news.

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