

'A Brother Who Enjoys My Complete Trust'

Rome (NC) -- Pope John Paul II Dec. 27 met the man convicted of shooting and wounding him in 1981, Mehmet Ali Agca, and later called him "a brother who enjoys my complete trust."

The extraordinary 20-minute private meeting took place in Agca's cell at Rome's top-security Rebibbia prison. It followed a chapel prayer service for 400 male inmates, who spoke with the pope individually and often emotionally.

A Vatican press spokesman said the pope and Agca, a Moslem, spoke "in very low voices, in an almost-confessional tone." The two met alone inside the cell, he said, while a few Vatican and prison officials waited outside the cell's open door.

Pope John Paul and Agca sat next to each other on the cell's two chairs, the spokesman said, and those outside the room did not hear what was spoken between them.

At the end of the encounter, he said, Agca knelt before the pontiff and kissed his hand. A television crew was allowed to film the end of the meeting when the pope left the room, the spokesman said.

After the meeting, the pope was asked by a reporter what took place.

"I have spoken to a brother who has my complete trust. What was said is a secret that will remain between him and me," the pope answered.

The pope had reportedly requested the meeting as a gesture of reconciliation. Before the visit, Agca had said he was eager to meet the pontiff and had much to tell him, according to prison chaplain Father Dante Mele.

The filmed part of the meeting showed the pope and Agca leaning toward each other with their heads close together as they spoke. At one point, Pope John Paul held Agca's arm while Agca whispered into the

pope's ear.

The 25-year-old Agca, wearing a sweater and blue jeans, smiled several times during the encounter.

Speaking later to a group of women inmates at the end of his three-hour prison visit, the pope called it "a historic day in my life as a man, as a Christian and as bishop of Rome."

"Today, after more than two years, I was able to meet my attacker and repeat the forgiveness that I granted him immediately after the attack," the pope said.

"The Lord made it possible for us to meet as men and as brothers," he said. He said it was "marvelous" that providence had brought about their meeting during the Holy Year of the Redemption.

Agca, a Turk once convicted in absentia of murder in his own country, is serving a life sentence in Italy for his conviction in the May 13, 1981, attack on the pope in St. Peter's Square. He is being kept in Rebibbia prison during the investigation of a possible plot in the shooting.

He has more than once described himself as a "repentant terrorist" who is sorry for his actions. Four days after Pope John Paul was shot, the pope publicly forgave Agca and called him a "brother" in a tape recording made from his hospital bed.

During the prayer service in the prison's modern brick-and-concrete chapel, the pope told a hushed audience that he had come to bring them "the certainty of being loved by God."

"Whatever the personal episodes that anyone carries behind him, whatever the disappointing experiences life may have had for him, never doubt one thing: In heaven there is a good father who knows of him and loves him," the pope said.

"What I can give you, as a man and a Christian, is above all my respect for your



Pope John Paul II talks with his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, inside the prisoner's cell at Rebibbia, Rome's maximum security prison. (NC Photo)

person," the pope said.

The true meaning of Christmas, he said, is that of interior renewal.

The church will continue to work for greater human dignity inside prisons, toward a penal system that ensures full respect of human rights, he added.

The pope was greeted by loud applause several times by the inmates, who were chosen by lottery from the prison's 2,000 prisoners.

As he entered the chapel, the pope was surrounded by the crowd of prisoners, who reached out to touch his hand or say a few words. About 100 unarmed prison guards stood watch along the chapel walls.

The pope thanked the inmates for their gifts, which included a slip, a banjo and a crucifix, all made of toothpicks and matchsticks. He also received a drawing of himself and a portrait of Christ.

The pope left chalices for the prison chapel, and brought rosaries and Christmas cakes for each of the inmates.

At the end of the service, each inmate came forward and met the pope, some speaking at length and with emotion. The pope later described some of the encounters

as "small confessions."

"Many brought me letters that explain their cases," the pope said before leaving the chapel. "All that they told me I've gathered in my heart, and, as much as possible, in my memory."

After the meeting with Agca, the pope visited the women's wing of the prison.

The chapel service was attended by inmates involved in pending judicial action. Some of them had already been convicted of other crimes.

Two of Pope John Paul's predecessors also had made Italian prison visits. Pope John XXIII visited Rome's Regina Coeli prison on Dec. 26, 1958, and Pope Paul VI celebrated Mass there on April 9, 1964.

The selection of Rebibbia prison was considered unusual because it holds some of Italy's toughest criminals, including convicted and suspected terrorists. Regina Coeli is used primarily for those involved in less serious crimes.

The pope expressed surprise when told that under Italian anti-terrorist laws suspects can be held without trial for up to 10 years, the sources said.

Pope on Peace

Continued from Page 1
itself, but stressed that "the dreadful risks of the arms of massive destruction must lead to the working out of processes of cooperation and disarmament which will make war in practice unthinkable."

"Peace must be won," he said. "All the more so, the conscience of political leaders must forbid them to allow themselves to be carried away in dangerous adventures in which passion overrides justice. They must not sacrifice uselessly the lives of their fellow-citizens in such adventures, or provoke conflicts among others, or use the pretext of the precariousness of peace in one re-

gion in order to extend their authority into new territories. These leaders must weigh all this in their minds and consciences, and exclude political opportunism. They will render account for this to their people and their God."

The pope also noted the contributions of youths and women in the peace efforts.

Youths, he said, "certainly aspire more than others to peace, and many of them are prepared to devote their generosity and their energies to peace. Let them show inventiveness at its service, without abandoning clear-sightedness, and so let them show the courage to weigh up all the aspects of long-term solutions."

He also called on women, to "advance the spirit of peace in their care to ensure the preservation of life and in their conviction that real love is the only power which can make the world livable for everyone."

In his message, the pope also emphasized that peace cannot come without justice and pointed out that while the conflict between East and West "monopolizes the attention," it "should not overshadow another more fundamental tension between North and South."

"Here," he said, "it is the question of the growing contrast between the countries that have had an opportunity to accelerate their development and increase their wealth, and countries locked in a condition of underdevelopment."

"This," he added, "is another gigantic source of opposition, bitterness... especially as it is fed by many kinds of injustices."

The pope also pointed out that peace without justice will not last.

"Peace is authentic if it is the fruit of justice," he said. "And a society is just and human if it respects the fun-

damental rights of the human person. Moreover, the spirit of war rises and grows strong where the inalienable rights of man are violated. Even if dictatorships and totalitarianism temporarily suppress the complaints of exploited and oppressed human beings,

the just person clings to the conviction that nothing can justify this violation of the rights of man."

He added, that, "however paradoxical it may appear, the person who deeply desires peace rejects any kind of pacifism which is cowardice

or the simple preservation of tranquility. In fact those who are tempted to impose their domination will always encounter the resistance of intelligent and courageous men and women, prepared to defend freedom in order to promote justice."



In the Swim

Sister Miriam Nugent principal of St. Louis Elementary School, Pittsford, accepts a \$25 check earned by 3rd grader Danielle LaBue during her 26 lap swim at the 1983 Seton Swimathon held at Nazareth College. Mary Ann Dempsey, Swimathon coordinator looks on. Danielle, with \$100 in pledges, raised the most of any parochial school student at the event to benefit St. Mary's Hospital. The Seton Branches of St. Mary's Hospital offered parochial school students a 25 percent return to their school on the funds they raised during the Swimathon.

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