

Pope, Jewish leaders to continue dialogue

By Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Meeting for the first time in three years, Pope John Paul II and international Jewish leaders promised to continue the dialogue begun with the Second Vatican Council and outlined areas of continuing concern.

During the Dec. 5-6 meeting, Jewish leaders asked the Vatican to establish diplomatic relations with Israel.

Meeting the 30 members of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations Dec. 6, the pope called for peace among Christians, Jews and Moslems in the Holy Land.

Seymour D. Reich, chairman of the committee, also asked the pope to continue speaking against anti-Semitism, especially in his native Poland and other East European countries.

Sponsored by the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, the meeting was a celebration of the 25th anniversary of "Nostra Aetate," the Vatican II document on relations with non-Christian religions. The document was promulgated Oct. 28, 1965.

Vatican meetings with the international Jewish group, the church's official Jewish partner in dialogue, broke off in 1987 after several incidents that Jews felt displayed Catholic insensitivity.

The incidents included the presence of a Carmelite convent at the former Nazi death camp of Auschwitz and Pope John Paul's meetings with Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat and Austrian President Kurt Waldheim, who has been accused of participating in Nazi war crimes.

At the December meeting, a Vatican official announced that Pope John Paul had approved a \$100,000 Vatican contribution to help build a new Carmelite convent and prayer center outside Auschwitz's boundaries.

Reich said Jewish leaders met with officials from the Vatican Secretariat of State and "established a mechanism for communication" about papal meetings and statements on "political matters which are sensitive to the Jewish community."

The pope said the 25th anniversary of "Nostra Aetate" is a celebration of "the divine mercy which is guiding Christians and Jews to mutual awareness, respect, cooperation and solidarity."

He prayed that the anniversary celebrations would bring "fresh results of spiritual and moral renewal" and "above all, the fruit of cooperation in promoting justice and peace."

In his only comment on Israel, the pope said the city of Jerusalem is holy to Christians, Moslems and Jews.

"I should like you to join in praying daily for peace, justice and respect for the fundamental human and religious rights of the three peoples, the three communities of faith who inhabit that beloved land."

Reich told the pope, "Now is the time for the full ripening of relations between the Holy See and the state of Israel."

He said such recognition could "advance the cause of peace" in the region by sending "a strong signal to those nations that are still committed to the destruction of Israel."

Reich said officials at the Secretariat of State reiterated the Vatican position that three issues prevent Vatican recognition of

Israel. They are:

- Israeli borders. Israel and Jordan must sign a treaty defining their common border.

- Jerusalem. The Vatican insists that it be internationally protected as a holy city for Jews, Christians and Moslems.

- Palestinians. The Vatican is concerned about Israeli treatment of Christians and Moslems and has insisted on their right to a homeland.

Rabbi Jack Bemporad, a member of the Jewish delegation and chairman of the Interreligious Affairs Committee of the Synagogue Council of America, said the church has shown it is beginning to understand the religious significance Jews give to Israel as the land promised to their ancestors.

"Why not go all the way and establish relations?" he asked during a Dec. 5 conference held in conjunction with the dialogue.

Recognition would "not imply an agreement" with all Israeli government policies, he said.

"Startling changes have taken place" in Catholic-Jewish relations since the Second Vatican Council, Rabbi Bemporad said.

The Catholic Church had a history of making "a mockery" of Jewish beliefs, of engaging in dialogue with conversion being "the hidden and often not so hidden goal" and of approaching Judaism not as a living faith, but as a precursor to Christianity, he said.

The future of Catholic-Jewish relations should include working together to meet "our common responsibility for the destiny of the earth and its population," the rabbi said. "There is out there a world that

is crying for redemption."

Retired Cardinal Franz Konig of Vienna, Austria, also speaking Dec. 5, said, "the contemporary urgency of working with all men for the promotion of justice, peace and human and religious rights" is one of the factors motivating Catholic-Jewish dialogue.

Another is the obligation to overcome the "contradictions, prejudices and persecutions" that marked Catholic-Jewish relations in the past and contributed to the Holocaust, he said.

The December meeting with the pope followed a September meeting of the Vatican and Jewish delegations in Prague, Czechoslovakia, where work was begun on a Vatican document on the Holocaust.

The pope praised the work of the September meeting, which included a statement calling anti-Semitism a sin. The statement was prompted by recent incidents of anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe.

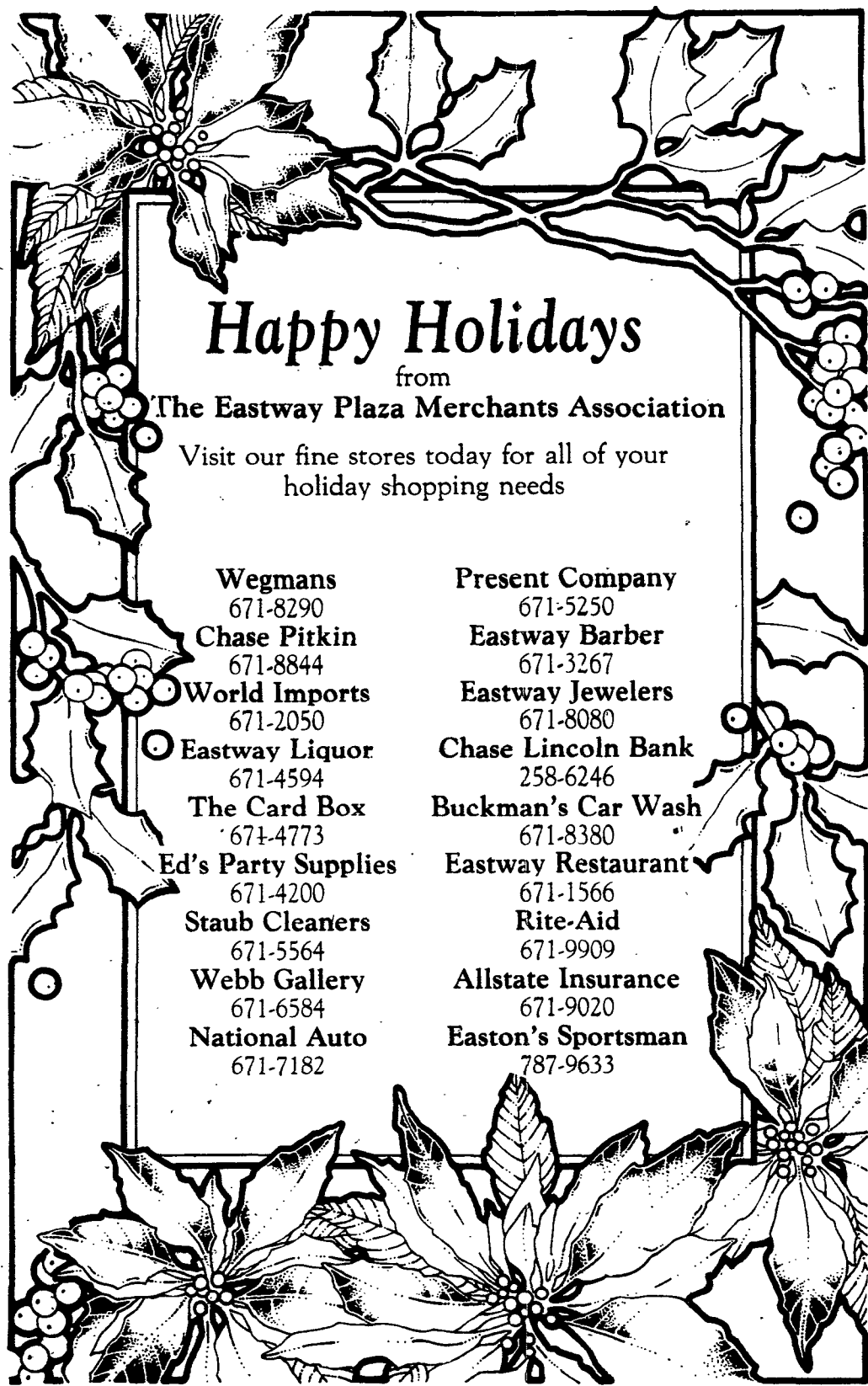
The incidents included accusations of anti-Semitism connected to the recent presidential elections in Poland and the desecration of synagogues and cemeteries in several countries.

"The Catholic Church's effort to eradicate anti-Semitism, a sinful social pathology, must increase and intensify throughout the world, and this effort is especially needed today in newly freed Eastern Europe," Reich said in his speech to the pope.

"No dialogue between Christians and Jews can overlook the painful and terrible experience of the Shoah," the Holocaust, the pope said.

He supported the statement's call for more efforts to overcome anti-Semitism, including frequent Catholic teaching and wider distribution of Catholic documents against anti-Semitism and other forms of prejudice.

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